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Tools for Community Self-determination

Snapshots of the Southwest Indiana farm & food economy



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All photos by Jill Tuley — Welborn Baptist Foundation

Southwest Indiana

As one walks along the bank of the Ohio River where it makes the great bend at downtown Evansville, it is easy to imagine the proud history of agriculture that once fueled the growth of this river town — oxcarts pulling barges laden with hogs that were shipped downstream to urban areas along the Ohio and Mississippi, and wheat that was sent upstream toward Eastern markets.

The lush corn and soybean fields that now surround the city attest to the fact that this heritage lives on in very new forms. Grains are still shipped up and downriver, but these days from massive elevators that feed barges, parades of semi trucks, or lengthy unit trains. Indeed, the metro region hosts several thousand farms that sell \$656 million of products each year.¹ About 30 food manufacturing firms make the Evansville metro area their home, hiring more than 3,800 employees, and paying more than \$142 million in payroll each year.² Another 29 firms carry wholesale foods.

The metro area also hosts 84 grocery stores, which hire 2,270 people who earn an annual payroll of \$40 million, and 650 dining establishments, hiring 13,000 employees with a payroll of \$161 million. The Evansville metro area is even renowned for serving as one of the favored markets in the Midwest for testing new restaurant concepts.

Given this largesse in food and farming, and its presence at the Southern tip of the tenth largest farm state in the U.S. (by sales), in a nation that proudly boasts that it “feeds the world” by selling the output of a massively productive farming economy, it is rather surprising to realize that so few Southwest Indiana farms are raising food for their neighbors. Most experts estimate that Indiana imports well over 90% of what it eats; the figure for Evansville metro is likely to be even higher.

Indeed, during interviews conducted in late June, 2013, several hardy pioneers of an emerging local food movement invited this researcher to their farms³ to discuss the issues they face as they grow food for their community. Almost universally, they said something like, “We have to educate our customers about the foods we grow. We need to teach more of our neighbors how to grow for themselves, also. So many people don’t know how to cook. So many people don’t know what vegetables are for sale. Our kids no longer know how to work, or don’t care to work.”

Moreover, health concerns are perhaps even more problematic for the future of Southwest Indiana. Hundreds of local residents, these farmers said, are turning to organic foods in a

¹ For consistency in data for this particular report, this figure covers the Evansville metro region, including Henderson (KY), Vanderburgh, and Warrick Counties. See <http://www.bea.gov>. See also Meter, Ken (2013). “Southwest Indiana Local Farm & Food Economy.” Compiled by Crossroads Resource Center for the Welborn Baptist Foundation (Evansville), March 28. This more detailed report covers Dubois, Gibson, Pike, Posey, Spencer, Vanderburgh, & Warrick Counties in Indiana. Available at <http://www.crcworks.org/crcdocs/inswsum13.pdf>

² Federal Census (2013). County Business Patterns for Evansville Metro area. Available at: <http://censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/msanaic/msasect.pl>

³ Interviewees were selected, and scheduled, by the Welborn Baptist Foundation.

dogged effort to remediate disease. Many believe organic foods will help them prevent or overcome cancer. Others have found that drinking raw milk is important to their health and sense of well-being. Others wrestle with allergies to gluten, lactose, or sweeteners.

In other words, it would seem that the nation that “feeds the world” is discovering it has a great deal to learn about how to feed itself. Even farmers who make their living selling food locally say that until people learn how to grow food in their own gardens, it will be very difficult for them to know how to eat well, or to know how to select the foods they wish to eat.

It would seem that Southwest Indiana residents are discovering that they must shift from being merely *consumers* of food, to a becoming a population that also knows how to *produce* food.

Joe Schalasky — Seton Harvest Farm (Vanderburgh County)

One vibrant symbol of this slow cultural transformation is Seton Harvest Farm, a farm run by the Daughters of Charity on New Harmony Road northwest of Evansville. Farm manager Joe Schalasky described how, over the past eight years, Seton Harvest has slowly transformed a small plot of land that had once been considered “unsuitable for agriculture” by experts because its topsoil had been removed during highway construction years ago.



Joe Schalasky

Yet suitable it is, after years of dedicated applications of compost from horse and turkey manure, with careful management to build the soil by rotating crops, and rejecting chemical applications. Today, Seton Harvest supports 163 customers who buy CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) shares early in the season, thereby sharing financial risk with the farm, in exchange for weekly fresh produce. Another 15 shares are bought by the Daughters of Charity and another 20% of the weekly harvest is donated to local organizations that serve the poor on a rotating basis.

In the drought-plagued year of 2012, Joe says with visible pride, “We had the best year we have ever had. We raised 60,000 pounds of food, and gave away one quarter of it (15,000 pounds).” The secret to this success? The farm had installed drip irrigation lines (underground plastic tubes that divert irrigation water directly onto the roots of plants in the field). This plus the organic matter that Joe and others had built up through careful manuring allowed the soil to retain the water it received.

On a weekly basis, Seton Harvest’s shareholders travel to the farm to pick-up the produce they will take home (customers tend to live in West Evansville or Newburgh, though some drive all the way from Kentucky). If they volunteer at the farm, they can reduce the cost of their produce share. The farm is so popular that even by relying on word-of-mouth to spread the word, Seton Harvest maintains a waiting list, which now names 30 people who hope to join the farm.

Seton Harvest builds a sense of community around itself by inviting its shareholders to join them for annual garden party each year, where members can meet each other, see how the farm is faring, and learn more about the foods they will procure from the harvest. Joe says that “hundreds” came to the most recent party.

Joe finds that “one of the big reasons people join our farm is healthy food.” One of the reasons the farm is essential, he adds, is that people are subjected to so much advertising for food that is less healthy: “They bombard us with ads every hour, every day, 365 days a year. It’s relentless.”

There is enough demand for healthier food today that the city of Evansville “could support four or five farms like ours easily,” Joe adds. Not every one is able or willing to invest money at the beginning of the season, he adds, even though they might pay as much at the store. Yet he is convinced the demand is there — and he is willing to be flexible in his terms, up to a point.

Meanwhile, Joe is responding to demand from his own shareholders who would like to be able to buy fresh greens year-round, rather than relying upon California or Mexican produce. The farm obtained a small federal conservation grant that allows them to be reimbursed for purchasing a “high tunnel” growing structure (this is similar to a greenhouse but simpler to build, relying upon plastic sheeting and a metal tubular frame) to extend the season.

Always the educator, Joe smiles as he recalls that he has lost customers because he taught them what he knew. “I had this one shareholder who came to the farm one year and asked me a lot of questions. He said he had a 100-foot-by-100-foot plot of land, and he wanted to

grow more of his own food. The next year, he was no longer a shareholder. He told me, ‘I’ve got five families signed up to raise vegetables with me.’ ”

Rev. Larry Rascoe — Joshua Academy (City of Evansville)

In a very different setting a few miles away, a similar set of processes is underway at Joshua Academy, a K-6 charter school on East Illinois Street in Evansville. Here the Rev. Larry Rascoe, a minister with the Nazarene Missionary Baptist Church, runs an urban garden in a dogged effort to teach youth essential skills. Rascoe also started the Joshua Teaching Farm northeast of Evansville in Stendhal.

Outside the low-lying building at Joshua Academy, students have built 36 small raised-beds where tomatoes, greens, and cucumbers sprout lush green leaves. By watering the plants, weeding the plots, and harvesting, students learn the essentials of producing their own food — and then they learn how to market what they have grown by selling at their own farmers’ market. In addition to tending the raised beds, the students have hatched and raised a few Columbia Rock chickens. They will harvest eggs from these hens as they mature.

As part of a boy-to-adult mentoring program, older youth may head to the rural teaching farm to learn to raise animals. A breeding farm, two varieties of goats are raised there — Savanna and Kiko. Rev. Rascoe adds, “We run tests on the animals, weigh them, trim their hooves, insert microchips in them, give shots, and have even assisted a few at birth.” All these tasks are shouldered by the students, who gain both skills and confidence through their accomplishments.

Rascoe considers the educational payoff to be critical: “The kids need to have the experience of being producers, not just consumers. A lot of kids in our community are not eating fresh vegetables. Many do not even know how to identify many common plants.” Moreover, he adds, “They don’t know how to cook.” Although many of their parents are not cooking meals, “Their grandparents do.” So Rev. Rascoe asks grandparents and grandchildren to cook together.

Many parents feel that they just don’t have the time to cook. Rev. Rascoe cautions, “We’re not going to change kids’ lives with exercise alone. We have to change what we eat. Our children are enjoying producing their own food as well as the discovery of how good fresh vegetables can be.”

Gwen McTaggart — Off the Fence Farms (Vanderburgh County)

One person who decided to change her life by eating differently is Gwen McTaggart, who now runs Off the Fence Farms with her husband Kenneth. Their decision to farm was informed by much the same logic that a student at Joshua Academy might pursue: “Eating organically was too expensive, so we started growing food for ourselves.”

Yet the McTaggarts also held deeper convictions that led them to venture into farming. “We want to get away from Monsanto,” she stated — the multinational firm that has pursued industrial agriculture, genetic engineering and seed patenting. “We grow a few

vegetables, mostly heirloom varieties [traditional strains that can re-seed themselves], a few hybrids [adapted varieties that developed commercially desirable traits on their own, as scientists harvested plants with those traits and nurtured them over several generations], but we refuse to plant GMOs” — [genetically modified organisms, in which scientists alter genetic material to force commercially desirable traits externally].



Kenneth and Gwen McTaggart

McTaggart was particularly critical of the fact that Monsanto had purchased the patent to a very popular hybrid tomato, Big Beef. “We stopped purchasing the seed” after the couple learned the variety was now owned by the firm, and say they will not grow them in the future. “It’s sad, because that’s what my dad has grown his entire life,” McTaggart laments. “They are a nice tomato that sells really well but I don’t want to support Monsanto even in this small way.”

Even carrying this conviction is difficult, she adds. “It takes so much time to thoroughly investigate each and every variety, and we slip up. We inadvertently ordered onion seed this year that is owned by Monsanto, but we do not knowingly purchase Monsanto varieties.”

Six years later, the McTaggarts have built a small (16-acre) farm operation in suburban Evansville that is nestled into a shallow valley. She is surprised by the fact that “most of our customers are people who just moved to the area from out of state. They are looking for healthier food.” Her immediate neighbors hold less interest, in general. Still, she adds,

“We’re seeing more like-minded people all the time.”

The couple heads out to farmers’ markets in downtown Evansville, at Deaconess Hospital, Newburgh, and New Harmony to sell their products. At these markets, they accept WIC coupons, to make it easier for lower-income consumers to have access to their produce. The couple has also sold fresh produce a few times to Elbert’s Natural Food Market and River City Co-op. Now they are setting up a CSA, but moving slowly. “We would hate for people to be disappointed.”

All this from only three-quarters of an acre of tilled land. To graze the pastures and build soil fertility, the couple relies on several cows, chickens, goats, and horses. While the couple refuses to use artificial chemicals, they have not sought organic certification. Yet they do endeavor to feed organic grains to their chickens, reporting that they mostly buy from Oregon since local supplies are so scarce. “Our egg prices would be lower if we could get organic grain without all the shipping costs,” Gwen adds.

The farm has also become an important source of milk for 27 families. Each purchases a share in one of the two cows the farm tends, and pays a boarding fee each month that covers the labor and feeding costs for each animal. Many of these owners also come to the farm to assist with chores. In exchange, each family receives a certain portion of the milk from their animal. In the near future, the McTaggarts hope to add fruit trees and berries to the mix.

They believe a huge educational thrust is needed to help consumers eat healthier food. Kenneth tells a story about a troupe of girl scouts who visited an eco-awareness event where he manned a display. He showed the girls a red bell pepper. Many had never seen one. One girl asked, “Is that a tomato?”

For this very reason — the need each consumer has to be informed about the choices one makes — the McTaggarts spend much of their time showing others how to farm. To an outsider, it might appear that they are undermining their own farm operation. Yet this training promotes their overall goal: “We would rather that people had their own gardens and supplemented that with our produce.”

Bud Vogt — Bud’s Farm Market (Vanderburgh County)

Bud Vogt may be a long-standing farmer in the Evansville community, but he, too sees incredible growth in the market for locally raised foods. “Our target market has changed drastically over the past few years,” Vogt says.

He farms land his father tilled, primarily in a corn and soybean rotation. Seeking to diversify one year, the family added a tomato plot, and constructed a farm stand at the end of their driveway on South Weinbach Avenue. “We have a race track less than two miles away. After each race was over, cars would be all backed up on Weinbach. We’d have five or six thousand cars come by each race day. Yet no one stopped. At that time, you could not give the stuff away.”

Working in collaboration with his cousin, Vogt built up the business slowly, gaining customers primarily by word of mouth. “Somewhere along the line,” Vogt says, “we began selling to grocery stores. In fact, we sold to every store in town.” Then new forms of ownership settled in to the grocery business. As more and more firms consolidated, “the grocers stopped being independently owned.” Managers could no longer make a decision in Evansville to buy from local farms, since store policies were set in a distant corporate headquarters. “Little by little we lost business.”

Yet Vogt persisted until new interest in local foods was sparked. Lately, “Little by little, we have found our way back into some of the smaller stores. Now we sell to Elbert’s, Paradise Organics, and River City Co-op.”



Bud Vogt

“Now we sell about 60% of our tomatoes through our farm stand, 35% through farmers’ markets, and 5% to grocers,” Vogt says. The remaining half is largely sold through farmers’ markets. And interest has certainly picked up: “Now people drive from far away to buy tomatoes.” It certainly is a change from the early days of the tomato operation.

Once, in an effort to explore larger markets, Vogt traveled to Bentonville, Arkansas, at the invitation of Wal-Mart. What he learned there was that “Wal-Mart considers anything they can truck for 24 hours or less to be ‘local.’ ” That means Mexican tomatoes could be counted as “local” products. He also learned that if he had wanted to sell to Wal-Mart, he would have to invest at least \$3,600 up front to establish bar codes that would allow his

product to be traced through the system. “It just was not worth it to us,” he says, especially since he believes that in trading with a distant owner, he could never gain a stable market like he could build with locally owned grocers. Larger firms would have no reason to stay loyal to his tomatoes, since they could draw from so many growers in so many distant places.

Even today, Vogt is keenly aware that his tomatoes compete for shelf space with tomatoes grown in Kentucky. Growers there benefited from state policies that funneled tobacco settlement money⁴ into sustainable agriculture. Yet on the marketing side, he says, the Kentucky approach caused some difficulties. “People in Kentucky began selling produce the same way they had sold tobacco. That is, they would drop it off at an auction, and buyers would bid for it. This same idea became the model for produce. Soon, everyone who had a pickup truck would come to the market to buy produce, but only to sell at their own stand somewhere else. Semi trucks would come from Florida and Georgia, and dump lots of produce into the auction.” Prices plummeted, and one did not know where the product was sourced.

Vogt knew from hard experience that “there has always been an element of the underworld in the produce industry.”⁵ So this experience of seeing the difficulties inherent in the auction system in Kentucky helped fuel his determination to make sure a similar thing would not occur again.

“If you want to help make this better,” Vogt adds, “local regulations have to step in.” As a seasoned seller at the Evansville farmers’ market, he doggedly pursued a policy that would keep resellers (those who purchase fresh produce from one market only to resell it elsewhere) out of the farmers’ market. “We went to the Evansville market manager, and said, ‘You can’t let the resellers dominate here. They will push us out of business.’” It took many years, but Vogt and his allies pressed the board to adopt a policy that required resellers to abandon the market over a three-year period. “Now, with limited exceptions, you can be banned from the market, for a week, a season, or a year, at the market manager’s discretion, if you sell product that is not your own.” The contract requires each grower who sells at the market to allow an on-farm visit to ensure they are selling only their own produce.

Vogt recalls, that in retribution, “The resellers pulled out [of the market] right away. I think they were trying to show they could hurt us by not showing up.” Indeed, it was a huge adjustment for the other farmers, who now had to produce significantly larger quantities to meet demand. “We had to learn how to get enough produce to the market to make up the difference.” The growers succeeded. “Now it is back to what it was, if not better,” Vogt continues.

Having won that initiative, Vogt is moving on to extend his growing season from eight months to year-round, installing LED lights in a greenhouse so he can bring earlier tomatoes to the market. Vogt adds, “the market keeps shifting; we have to keep nimble.” Yet these changes in the market have also taught Vogt the value of mobilizing a unified force. “The culture is not the same as it was. Now you have to convince people to value locally

⁴ Money the state received in a lawsuit that resulted in large fines against tobacco companies for selling a product they knew caused cancer.

⁵ For example, in many major metro areas the mafia once controlled produce distribution.

produced.” To do that, he adds, “More than anything else, we need a voice behind us: a voice to explain that we are a legitimate industry segment that contributes to the local economy and that deserves recognition, standing, and protection.”

Dona Bergman — City of Evansville Department of Sustainability, Energy & Environmental Quality (Evansville)

One more local food leader in the Evansville region is Dona Bergman, former director for the local Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office. She is also a master gardener and maser naturalist who specializes in growing native plants & wildflowers.

Bergman says that a “silo” mentality limits the ability for Southwest Indiana residents to build the type of unified force that Vogt and other farmers built in their effort to improve the Evansville farmers’ market. “It’s a small enough community that most of the people who have the desire to be change agents know each other,” she adds. Yet without a unified voice, and with limited resources, it is difficult to make concerted progress.

As a master gardener, she tallied up land inside city limits and found there were over 300 small inner-city lots that could potentially be gardened. She would like to see more people farm those plots. Coincidentally, the city also has 300 master gardeners. Yet she realizes this will not be easy for everyone, since people face multiple obstacles. “Even if people grow their own vegetables, they still cannot get bread. You can raise a few chickens, but if you really want to do this over time, you need capital to get going. Food is available, but you need a car to get it. Everything is difficult in Evansville if you don’t have a vehicle.”

Ultimately, she adds, “Public transport needs to be overhauled. It falls victim to high staff turnover, and to a perception that it is intended only for poor people.” To help bring food to inner-city Evansville residents, she would like to see mobile food trucks that bring fresh produce to housing towers. Primarily, however, she would like to see Evansville create a year-round farmers’ market with good access to public transport.

Finally, she echoed a concern that was raised by many others: “We need to show people how to cook.”

Grant Hartman — Hartman Arboretum (Vanderburgh County)

Very few people own a private arboretum, but Grant Hartman is one who does. Hartman says he almost backed into the operation. About 12 years ago, when he stopped raising bull calves, he had 20 acres, minus a few acres of woodlands, of idle agricultural land. His son Brian helped decide that the family would plant trees on the land, and an arboretum was born.

Hartman is also chairman of the Emergency Food Pantry Consortium — seven urban pantries that served 45,000 low-income people last year. Many low-income residents do not have access to fresh vegetables, so Hartman dedicated himself to helping fill that need. Hartman is also a Master Gardener, so when some land became available to the Southwest

Indiana Master Gardeners' Association, he was able to use one-third of an acre for raising vegetables for the food pantries and soup kitchens in town. This last year the gardeners produced and delivered 12,000 pounds of vegetables to the Tri-State Food Bank for distribution.



Gwen McTaggart feeds a calf at Off the Fence Farm

Although the Master Gardeners became an excellent source of fresh produce for some of the low-income families in Evansville, Hartman does not view this as a long-term answer to hunger. Yet he adds, “This fine garden can serve as a model for additional urban gardening. People need to learn how to grow and store their own vegetables.”

As a first step Hartman would “like to see experienced gardeners visit the food bank to see how fast the food disappears, and then visit a food pantry, or a soup kitchen.” This experience, he feels would help gardeners better understand what low-income residents need. Then, he says, gardeners would develop greater interest in helping people have enough to eat.

Hartman adds that “The Emergency Food Pantry Consortium has created a list of foods that is designed to provide nutritious food for meal preparation.” Yet he finds that this list is often not used at independent food pantries. Even when families have access to healthy foods, he says, they may not prepare these foods for themselves: “In-home cooking is out of favor with young families.”

So Hartman sees a strong and long-term need for “education: How to raise food, how to prepare meals, and what to eat.” Purdue Home Extension Specialists have visited several Consortium pantries to offer such training.

“The bottom line is improving health,” Hartman concludes. Many of our urban poor have food-related health problems. Obesity and Evansville seem to go together. “These eating habit patterns appear to change when people raise food for themselves.” Hartman recalls learning that a group of teens were hired to take care of an inner-city garden. “They did a great job and were proud of their garden. They even put in some non-paying overtime. They gave out food to the needy and even sold some.”

Hartman would like to see urban Evansville follow the example set by those teens and by the Master Gardeners: to raise vegetables and fruits for the food-challenged people in Evansville. I don’t think that anybody has ever asked: how many vacant lots would it take to provide locally raised vegetables and fruits to those in need?”

Cristine Dawson — Urban Seeds (Vanderburgh County)

When we interviewed the Executive Director of Urban Seeds, a nonprofit that is also directing its efforts to consider how Southwest Indiana could create a broader regional food effort, her kitchen table featured a quart of blueberries that she had picked locally the day before. Their dense, tangy flavor spoke of an earlier era, before sweet varieties became preferred by the commercial food trade. The presence of an heirloom fruit from a local farm suggested the community networks that food leaders have built, and the ways food can foster a conversation about what Southwest Indiana needs to do to exert more power over its food supply.

Cristine Dawson believes that Evansville should launch an indoor farmers’ market. She says this from a position of some experience, having managed River City Co-op for a number of years, starting in 2007, and as a manager of a large co-op in Tallahassee, Florida. Dawson is also the author of a local food blog for Southwest Indiana.

Urban Seeds has supported community gardens in Evansville, and is planning on introducing urban orchards into the city. But the lion’s share of Dawson’s attention right now is devoted to building “something like a food hub” at a year-round farmers’ market. The concept of a “food hub” has diverse meanings to diverse communities, but in general the USDA considers a food hub to be a facility that aggregates the production from a cluster of smaller farms into larger shipments that would be more attractive to larger food services and wholesale buyers. Many food hubs also take on a distribution role. That being said, the initial purpose of the Urban Seeds’ project is to create a space that can be utilized by all the sustainable farmers in the area to get their goods to the general public.

In Dawson’s view, having a year-round market at the core of the food hub would respond well to two needs: it would provide an indoor space to sell greens and other items that local farms are starting to produce through the winter months, and it would also encourage more farmers to aim for meeting this winter market. An indoor market may also serve as a community gathering place that fosters ongoing communication, and commercial trade, among emerging food businesses such as those highlighted in this report.

The City of Evansville has been supportive of the effort, Dawson reports, even offering several potential sites for its location, and offering to hold one site for this future use.

Dawson's vision goes beyond that of a building. She would also like this year-round center to compile a data base listing all of the farmers in the area who grow for local markets, so that both household and wholesale consumers will know how to access foods that are grown in Southwest Indiana. She also envisions a center with meeting spaces where farmers might share new techniques with each other, production facilities where grain might be milled, and a gathering point where consumers and farmers could meet with ease. A group of retired executives, SCORE, is helping Dawson construct a formal business plan around this vision.

Through her years with the two co-ops, Dawson has noticed increasing interest from consumers looking for foods that are organically raised, or at least not sprayed with chemical applications. "People are getting more diseases and allergies than ever before," she continues. As they explore alternatives, consumers are increasingly looking for opportunities to buy food from farms they know. "The interest in local foods has just gotten so much bigger [since the co-op opened]," she adds.

She hopes the indoor market and food hub will take this search to a far deeper and more effective level.

Gina Robinson Unger — Rose Hill Dairy (Warrick County)

One of the mothers who has taken a rather strong interest in her family's food supply is Gina Robinson Ungar, owner of Rose Hill Dairy in Warrick County. She lives on this 16-acre farm with her husband Garnet Ungar, and is devoted to supplying raw milk to her family and to a small group of Indiana customers.

Motivated by her enjoyment of cows and a desire to provide the best possible milk for her family and community, Robinson has hand-selected small dairy herd of six milking cows, testing each to make sure they have the proper genetic structure that yields the most easily digestible milk.

Robinson distributes this milk on a share basis, as mentioned above — consumers purchase one or more shares of the herd and are then entitled to a share of the milk the herd produces. The farm officially operates as a "cow boarding service" and derives its income from monthly boarding fees paid by shareholders, rather than from sales of milk. Some of Robinson's 100 or so shareholders drive to the farm in Boonville to pick up their milk, while many prefer to retrieve it from a location in Evansville. "Several of our shareholders use their milk to make cheese," she adds. She considers her prices somewhat high, but sets them at a level that allows her to barely cover the costs of raising her animals. During the economic recession that started in 2008-2009, Robinson says, she lost several customers who felt they could no longer afford her product.

The herd grazes outdoors as much as possible from March to November on the 12 acres of pasture that Rose Hill Dairy owns. Robinson also tends a herd of three milking goats,

purchased when one of her sons was found not to tolerate cow's milk, and has a flock of 30 chickens that produce eggs she can sell. Rose Hill Dairy also sells grass-fed beef, pork, and chicken.

Robinson has dedicated herself to farming for over a decade, having started in Hardwick, Massachusetts, as the sixth generation engaged in milking cows on her family's dairy farm there. Her family had modernized in order to gain more production per cow, and as an astute young 4-H member, she paid close attention to the herd. As she worked with the animals she noticed that the cows were getting ill more often than earlier generations of cows had done, and their useful life as milking animals was declining over time. She also encountered research that suggested that this new approach to milking was also having bad health consequences for consumers.

After working on other farms to gain more experience, Robinson persuaded her family to allow her to start a small dairy herd with Brown Swiss, Jersey, and Normande cows that she would raise solely on grass. Her parents agreed she could pasture her animals on a rise they called "Rose Hill." While her parents were skeptical, they became persuaded when her daughter began attracting customers from Boston who drove several hours to the farm to pick up their milk, paying about six times more for her raw milk than the parents received from bulk buyers for their conventional milk. State inspection documented that the milk met state health standards, she adds.



Hogs at Jennifer and Stephen Head's farm

In 2006, Robinson moved to Boonville, where Ungar, a music professor, lives. She constructed a small milking parlor, found a network of customers, and launched Rose Hill Dairy in a new state. “As you can see,” she says, gesturing with her head as she works, our scale is not large enough. And our price is higher than many can afford. My dream would be to have 20-30 cows, and to make cheese. I would love to do that on a farm closer to Evansville, where most of our customers are — though I am not at all sure we would move away from this land. My vision would be to become part of a group of farmers, with a community kitchen nearby, a vegetable CSA farm, and a place for people to work in close proximity and gather. People could come there to learn cooking skills, but also how to avoid or cure disease.”

It is a vision that holds considerable resonance with Dawson’s and Bergman’s visions of a food hub, although each vision has distinct elements.

Jennifer & Stephen Head — (Spencer County)

A very different vision of farmer-to-farmer collaboration is being pursued by Jennifer and Stephen Head, who farm in Spencer County. Recently married in mid-life, the couple operate two farms consisting of scattered plots in both fertile river bottoms and rolling higher ground.

With her brother Bill, Jennifer farms 600 acres, while Stephen farms 800 acres with his brother Donald. The two farms mostly raise corn and soybeans, but also grow cows and calves, host a small hog operation, and tend a goat herd. “We would be an organic meat business, except that we feed conventional grain,” Jennifer says. The couple has also joined a statewide producers’ network.

To improve their production practices and enhance ethical values, the couple “joined the Indiana Certified Livestock Producer Program,” Jennifer says. “Perhaps we will go into organic pork. Once we complete the program, we will receive certification from ISDA. We will also get a discount on farm liability insurance, because we are drawing up a contingency plan, approved by the fire chief in case of an emergency.”

John Nagle, Livestock Program Manager for the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, met us in the farm office. He runs the certified livestock program, and is also helping them draw up their farm contingency plan. Nagle explained that his network includes “86 producers who farm across the state, raising a variety of livestock. Twenty raise cows, several are engaged in aquaculture (fish farming), and we have a total of 7.5 million layer chickens under certification.” The program also arranged for the insurance reduction, he adds.

Primarily, this is a marketing program. The state uses each farm’s certification as a way of showing that the farm goes above and beyond what is required to have a healthy herd. Farms that gain certification then have access to a “Certified Livestock” label they can put on their products. Some counties also offer their own incentives.

Jennifer Head adds that as the couple establishes their business, they must attract loyalty from consumers by offering a product that will stand out from others. “We’re not just selling meat, we’re selling the flavor. Part of the process is to be transparent, certified, with an environmental plan in place.” They hope that will encourage consumers to reward them by paying more for the product, and stay loyal to the farm’s product because they feel connected to the couple and their business.



Jennifer & Stephen Head

The biggest obstacle to expanding the program, Nagle adds, is the lack of supportive infrastructure. There are not enough quality meat processing plants, in part because “few people have the talent to do meat cutting. It’s difficult to find someone who wants to be in the business. The good ones do it naturally.”

This situation is compounded by the fact that the state of Indiana, in an effort to trim budgets due to popular demand for a leaner government, has reduced the number of inspectors. This has caused some livestock producers to halt production, reports show.⁶

A third complication, Nagle adds, is that “local counties have control over local farmers’ markets. The state has guidelines, but the counties can go above those. You have farmers who can sell in one county but not in the one next to them. We have to rationalize these health policies. Otherwise farmers in one county will have a competitive advantage over others.”

Farmers also face difficulty finding good labor, Nagle says. “Now you don’t have the help you used to have — people don’t know how to work, and don’t want to work. Home economics used to be mandated, but is no longer taught.”

Helping farmers learn more about the complications they face, and to develop responses to these constraints, is one of the best reasons for farmers to join the certified livestock network, Jennifer Head concludes. “Collaboration is the only way I can get things done.”

Mike and Sandy Mumford — Mumford Hills Livestock (Posey County)

At the end of a long, tree-lined gravel road that roams through rolling hills in Posey County, a cozy house is nestled into a shady grove next to an open pond. Sitting in the house, one gets a remarkably serene view of verdant corn fields, dense pasture, woods, and wildlife.

The Mumford family has owned a large spread of 4,000 acres here since early settlement days. When Mike Mumford had an opportunity to rent a 160-acre parcel from the estate four years ago, his foremost concern was how to take careful stewardship of the property. While he and his wife Sandy are slightly further down the path than the Head family in building up a livestock operation, Mike says he does not yet consider himself a true farmer. New lessons are thrust upon him every day.

Mumford says he began to pasture cattle primarily out of a sense of duty to the land. “I wanted to get back into beef, but there was no epiphany for me about going grass-fed.” It was primarily a question of management. “We have these steep valleys with a lot of grass on the property, and it is Kentucky 31 fescue. Without grazing it just gradually turns to brush. Our goal was to find a profitable way to utilize this forage.”

In addition to his family’s legacy in land, Mumford also had a rare advantage, since professionally he is a pilot flying international flights. It is work that pays well, but equally

⁶ See Meter, Ken (2012). *Hoosier Farmer? Emerging Food Systems in Indiana*. Crossroads Resource Center. Available at <http://www.crcworks.org/infood.pdf>

importantly, leaves him some free time that he can devote to the farm operation. It also forces him to manage the land in ways that require less daily attention — although Sandy, as a partner in the farm, is able to handle anything that comes up when Mike is at work.

The Mumfords began to learn by attending grazing classes at extension, and found two nearby farmers who serve as mentors. Ultimately they connected with a breeder in Kentucky who grows a line of cattle that is well suited to fattening on fescue pasture. A French variety, *tarantaise*, it is crossed with Lowline Angus. These crossbreds are not readily available on the market, so the Mumfords are partnering with the breeder to produce their own animals — the breeder owns this special breeding herd of 30, but the Mumfords raise them to maturity on their pasture, and the two partners divide ownership of the calves that are born on the farm.



Mike and Sandy Mumford

One of their challenges is to create more value for each animal, since a grass-fed steer takes longer to mature than one fed on corn. This engages their land about four months longer for each herd. After arranging with Dewig Meats, only 20 minutes away in Haubstadt, to do their processing, the Mumfords deliver the final product to the store themselves, and even stock the shelves for the store manager.

“We do a lot of business with Dewig Meats. They are a fourth-generation meat processor, and serve as a regional packing house with USDA inspection.⁷ They will do anything for you — they want you to succeed.”

The Mumfords began their marketing by heading to the farmers’ market, “every single weekend,” as Mike puts it. As they gained more visibility, they were able to place their meat in Elbert’s Natural Food Market, and River City Co-op. They now make regular deliveries to these grocery stores, where they sell about half of their beef. Another 25% of sales are to customers who buy a half or quarter animal, and pick up this custom order directly from the processor. The farmers’ market, which once was their main outlet, has subsided in importance, but the Mumfords still enjoy going to the market for other reasons. “The farmers’ market is limited as an income source. People don’t really come to the market to buy frozen meat. They are mostly there for other foods. Still, the farmers’ market is the world’s best advertising.”

Although he did not start to raise grass-fed cattle out of strict principle, he is happy to learn that the market is growing fast. “Grass-fed is much more mainstream this year,” Mike adds. “It is being picked up in the body-building magazines, in diabetic recipes, and by weight watchers. A wellness center in Morganfield, Kentucky, has even become a client of ours,” since they are encouraging their customers to move toward grass-fed. Mike says it is critical to “educate the consumer to know there is really a connection between what you eat, and your health and well being.”

In the future, Mike adds, he would “like to see grass-fed in the schools and supermarkets where it has the most effect on people’s diet. The challenge is to scale up to a larger operation with the type cattle that do best for grass fed beef. To have access to these larger markets it has to be a steady deal, someone who can supply a large quantity. A regional collaborative marketed under one label would probably be the best way to achieve this. A specialty item like grass-fed beef is a realistic way for a smaller operator to make a good income with a modest acreage — we just need to develop the market.”

Irma Hasenour — Hasenour’s Organic Produce (Dubois County)

Irma Hasenour and her late husband began farming in 1964, dedicating themselves to a very careful regimen that ensured their animals were high quality. One distinctive niche of their operation was that they fed their livestock grain they had grown themselves. “We raised our own seed, planted, harvested, and then saved seed” for the following year, she says. “We extruded soybean meal ourselves so we could feed our animals.”

In recent years, as new, genetically modified grains became available, the Hasenours continued to follow their traditional practices, raising cattle and hogs that they could ensure

⁷ USDA inspection is required for sales to many institutional food services, and also to sell outside of Indiana.

were fed with non-GMO⁸ grain. This was decades before mainstream attention was focused on genetic modification.

Hasenour now markets her hogs directly to nearby consumers, selling six to ten hogs each month. “I take them to Sander Processing in Celestine. They have been real good to work with. I sell them by the pound.”

In about 2003, Hasenour’s husband decided to diversify his farm income. He explored producing tomatoes in a greenhouse. Attended training seminars, he found an Ohio company that could set up a greenhouse for them. This meant the Hasenours were the first farm in the state to sell organic tomatoes.



Irma Hasenour

They use a fish emulsion as their primary fertilizer, which they apply to the soil inside their greenhouse. Today, they sell an average of 400 pounds of tomatoes per week to Bloomingfoods Co-op in Bloomington. “That is our largest customer,” Hasenour says — “They actually came out to visit our farm.”

⁸ GMO stands for “genetically modified organism” — into which genetic material has been altered (often by splicing genetic sequences that foster specific qualities that are valued commercially) by laboratory technicians.

Hasenour continues to diversify, selling cucumbers (grown in soil), and lettuce (raised in a hydroponic⁹ nutrient solution). When she has a surplus, she will sell to Buehler's IGA, Holiday Foods, and other local stores. "My prices are a bit high," she adds. Her family also sells to the Lost River Co-op in Paoli, a health foods store, and two restaurants: the Farmer's Daughter in Princeton, and Grounded in Jasper. They also sell at weekly farmers' markets in Newburgh and Jasper.

Irma's husband died in 2005. Irma continues to farm. Now, at 72, she says, "it gives me something to do. Sometimes I complain that my husband got me into this, but I'm glad he did." Still, she adds, "I don't have enough help. We have four people here, all told."

Yet Hasenour says she has to drive some distance to find buyers. "I go to Bloomington with most of my tomatoes. They're different up there than around here." Few of her immediate neighbors want to buy what Hasenour raises. Many have their own gardens, but she points to deeper resistance. "People are so *contrary* here. They have got to wake up."

She thinks there is little one can do except wait for her neighbors to come to their own realization that fresh foods would be better. "People have to make up their own minds," she says. Yet she adds that only a few have seen the light. "It usually happens when someone in the family gets sick."

Hasenour also finds that the farmers who live near her "won't listen" to the notion that there might be a better way to farm. Most farmers primary concern is that they "want to have a really clean field," even though this requires them to depend on expensive inputs. "The big companies are making money — they push the little ones out," she laments.

⁹ Hydroponic produce is raised in a bed filled with nutrient solution, rather than in soil. The family's lettuce is not certified organic.



Greenhouse at Hasenour's Organic Produce

Conclusions from field interviews:

Southwest Indiana is rich with assets that give it great potential for developing stronger local food trade. Among these assets are:

Southwest Indiana holds significant assets:

- A strong tradition of agriculture.
- Rich, underutilized arable farmland in both urban and rural areas.
- Rainfall that is often adequate.
- A core of experienced and emerging farmers who have developed considerable expertise in growing, marketing, and selling foods to local markets.
- Several restaurants or independent grocers that are interested in buying food from local farms.
- 300 certified Master Gardeners.
- An expanding farmers' market network that allows farmers and consumers to meet each other.
- A nascent food policy council that works across all seven counties and has begun to form the relationships of trust required to form practical policy for the Southwest Indiana region.
- The institutional presence of the Welborn Baptist Foundation helps these food initiatives to gain a stronger voice, especially through their ability to raise funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other sources, and by integrating the food issue with attention to smoking cessation and exercise initiatives.
- The Evansville metro region also won a substantial Sustainable Communities Grant from HUD; this allows more holistic planning around several issues, including food to take root in the broader region.
- Residents of the seven-county region spend nearly \$1 billion each year buying food. While more than 90% of this money is spent purchasing food sourced outside the region, this consumer power means that there is a market for locally produced food if production can be organized, and new local distribution channels created.

At the same time, the field interviews summarized above also highlighted some lasting issues that need to be addressed. Although these field interviews constitute a limited sample of Southwest Indiana farmers and food businesses, their special status as pioneers makes them an interesting group to interview. This group makes up a high percentage of food businesses that are making a conscious shift to local trade. As business people who help form a creative edge of local foods activity, each one is in touch with a broader group of customers, and each one is deeply knowledgeable about the dynamics that move local food trade. Even from this limited sample, then, some useful conclusions may be drawn:

Southwest Indiana also faces important challenges:

1. **Significant unmet demand.** Most farmers who are growing for local markets say that there is more demand for their foods than they can fulfill.

2. **Newer residents are taking the lead.** Yet these farmers also report that most of the demand for local foods comes from wealthier customers, many of whom are recent transplants to the region —typically not the long-standing residents of Southwest Indiana.
3. **Farmers report sabotage.** Several farmers cite specific examples (which could not be verified given the scope of this study) of resistance to their new methods, in the form of sabotage from someone they suspect is a neighbor. This has involved property damage or damage to livestock, they say.
4. **The average Southwest Indiana resident holds limited knowledge about food.** Farmers report that they are selling to customers who (a) cannot recognize basic vegetables; (b) have little to no experience in preparing these foods; (c) may have limited interest in, or experience with, cooking in general; (d) have little understanding of what is involved in growing common foods; and (e) have limited grasp of seasonal harvest cycles. Ironically, this is happening in the middle of farm country.
5. **Health conditions have been a primary motivator for eating better.** Growers report that residents of inner-city, rural, and suburban regions alike have switched to organic, or sustainably raised foods, principally because they developed cancer (or some other condition or illness) that prompted them to eat better foods, or because they were taking proactive steps to avoid illness.
6. **Growing food together has helped Southwest Indiana residents form closer interpersonal connections.** Indeed working together to build a new food system seems to be effective in breaking down “silos.”
7. **Small steps are of great value in a risky environment.** Farmers report that they value keeping their farms small and resilient to changing markets; many feel that the inherent uncertainties of farming, along with a relatively limited amount of supportive policy promoting local foods, makes taking on credit too risky for them to contemplate unless they have an independent source of wealth or income.
8. **Supportive civic leadership is lacking.** Farmers selling to local markets universally felt they lacked supportive policy, economic infrastructure, marketing messages, or civic leadership supporting their efforts.

This leads to several recommendations for future action:

1. **Marketing campaign.** Welborn Baptist Foundation, the food policy council, and their partners should launch extensive marketing campaigns that feature the potential for local foods. One example is a “Buy Five Eat Five” campaign that was launched by a local foods initiative in Southwest Colorado; this encourages residents to eat five fruits or vegetables each day, and to buy \$5 of food direct from local farmers each week. The potential impact of such a campaign in Southwest Indiana is immense: if every resident purchased \$5 of food each week directly from local farms, this would yield \$98 million of revenue for farmers, and if every resident ate five fruits and

vegetables each day, studies suggest, cancer could be reduced. This concept could be adapted to Southwest Indiana in whatever way would get through to local residents; incentives for residents who attain these goals should be devised, and success stories should be reported to the public. The overall goal of such a marketing effort in Southwest Indiana should be to create a climate of public opinion that fosters local foods activity. Workplaces should adapt Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) membership for their employees; neighborhoods and communities should adopt similar approaches.

2. **Engage residents in learning farm and food production skills.** Even for someone who does not intend to farm, it is important to learn how foods are produced, what their seasons are, and how to prepare them into nutritious and tasty meals. School garden programs report that once a student knows how to grow a certain food, that student is more likely to eat the food if it is served in the school cafeteria, or at home. Adults who do not know which crops are coming ripe at various stages of the farming season cannot be informed consumers. Consumers who know how to prepare food safely are more likely to eat well. School classes in growing, processing, nutritional content, eating for health, and marketing are essential to cultivate at all educational levels. Home economics classes should be revitalized, as should agricultural training programs. Some of these may best be implemented at the high school, trade school, or college level.
3. **Form at least one farm cluster.** Several farmers reported a sense of isolation or distance from the mainstream culture. The marketing campaign above might help reduce this sense of separation. One farmer also had a very specific vision for creating a cluster of farms on land near Evansville that would allow farmers to work in closer proximity to each other, and to urban food markets. This might also be a site where common storage/cooler/washing/packing/light processing facilities could be maintained, complementary clusters of activity could be formed (for example, complementary food products, raising livestock so their manure will build fertility, composting organic wastes from the city of Evansville into rich fertilizer, etc.). Over time, the Southwest Indiana region may be able to support several such clusters. Each one might bring in local partners (high schools, technical schools, chefs, churches, and more) that create stronger engagement among the population in each community where a food production cluster is located.¹⁰
4. **Encourage season extension,** especially for leafy greens, by building high tunnels, hoop houses, or greenhouses in or near towns and urban centers. USDA National Resource Conservation Service has grant moneys available for building high tunnels; however, this funding source requires the grower to put up money to buy the high tunnel up front. This may pose a barrier to entry for emerging farmers; other

¹⁰ For an introduction to the concept of farm clusters, see the recent local-foods investment plan written for the State of South Carolina, which introduces the concept of a “food production node” (a cluster of farms), part of the network of support required to sustain a food hub. The report also includes prototype designs for a shared packing facility. *See* Meter, Ken (2013). *Making Small Farms Big Business*. Crossroads Resource Center for the State of South Carolina, September 15. <http://www.crcworks.org/scfood.pdf>.

philanthropic sources may be able to help fill this gap. Clusters of season-extending farms could obviously serve as the basis for farm clusters recommended above. The more these season-extension strategies are fueled by renewable energy the more a competitive advantage is created for the region as fossil fuel prices rise.

5. **Work with economic development officials to make certain that community-based food is made a priority for economic revitalization strategies.** Both the City of Evansville and regional development authorities could allocate development funds towards building a cluster of local foods businesses in Southwest Indiana — and the farm production cluster will be the launching point for this strategy. More proactive planning by development officials would help farmers identify how much food they need to grow to meet local residents' needs.
6. **Lay the foundation for a future “food hub.”** Several groups are already starting to form stronger marketing mechanisms toward a larger permanent facility that would take on a larger role in aggregating products from local farms and selling them to larger buyers, such as schools, colleges, hospitals, and larger distribution firms. The region is currently a long way from having the local food production to support such a “hub,” although if an interesting space were made available it may be important to seize that opportunity and run such a hub on a subsidized basis for a number of years. The feasibility of both an indoor farmers' market and mobile market should be explored. The steps advocated above (marketing campaigns and food production clusters) will also help build the foundation for a larger hub. The obvious step that is already being pursued is to create an on-line tool that allows farmers who have products to sell to quickly identify buyers who are looking for local products. As long as this software is responsive to growers' and buyers' needs, and is not prohibitively expensive, this step should be taken.
7. **Build closer cooperation across the region.** The food policy council has an important role to play in building the social connectivity, and a common vision, that will strengthen local food trade and make it possible to expand in a way that is both resilient and solid over time. Building stronger social networks that support local foods activity is more important than specific physical facilities at this point in time, although physical infrastructure will also play a critical role in the future.
8. **Over the long haul, build physical, knowledge, and social infrastructure that create local efficiencies in food trade.** Farmers will not reliably make a substantial living farming local foods (unless they have independent sources of income or wealth) until supportive infrastructure (storage facilities, cooler space, local food distribution channels, processing, data bases showing local food production, and social networks) has created local efficiencies in trade. Over the past century, Southwest Indiana has invested heavily in infrastructure that promotes long-distance food transport; only when similar advances are made in local efficiency will the local food system gain great presence. Until this infrastructure is in place, promising food businesses may require subsidy.
9. **Explore harmonization of county and state health regulations.** When state and local health regulations interfere with the ability of farmers to produce and sell a safe

product to nearby consumers, local food trade is squelched. Some current regulations appear intrusive, and either go beyond the goal of promoting health, or unfairly limit farmers' choices. There is considerable inconsistency among county regulatory regimes. Moreover, the state has adopted new regulations without having the budget to implement them. While this discussion cannot be solved entirely within the Southwest Indiana region, local stakeholders (presumably the Foundation and the food policy council) should explore what can be done at the regional level to reduce the regulatory burden while keeping food safe.



Tomatoes for sale at Bud Vogt's farm stand