

Why aren't there any turkeys at the Danville Turkey Festival?

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Twenty-five years ago, my in-laws came to visit us in central Ohio. They were city folks from Philadelphia who couldn't understand why my wife, Judy, and I had moved to the country.

We timed their visit to coincide with Knox County's Heart of Ohio tour. Each fall, this self-guided driving tour along the area's scenic back roads features stops at farms, grange halls, and other sites that offer a glimpse into local rural life. This particular tour included a local turkey farm outside the town of Danville. Danville was well known for its many turkey operations; we were always thankful that it was easy to get a fresh bird for the Thanksgiving table.

It remains a family story to this day of how Grandpop Irv felt compelled to let out a gobble

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during our visit, only to generate a vocal response from what seemed like thousands of birds in the adjacent field.

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A quarter century later there's barely a gobble to be heard around Danville, and the only talk of turkeys is at the annual Danville Turkey Festival. Why aren't there any turkeys at the Danville Turkey Festival? The answer is simple enough. The local processing plant moved 200 miles north into Michigan, in keeping with the trend toward centralization so characteristic of the current global food system. For local farmers, 200 extra miles was the difference between profit and loss, and so turkey farming disappeared.

The story of Danville's turkeys can be told about any number of farm products in hundreds of agricultural communities throughout Ohio and the Midwest. The general pattern evident in Knox County is commonplace. Farmers have shifted from diversified operations producing for regional distribution to a few cash crops for a global market. To justify the increasing use of technology and other farm inputs, farm size has increased, and the number of farms has decreased. Family farmers find it difficult to compete with highly integrated industrial agriculture, and most take off-farm jobs just to make ends meet. Young people can't afford to get into farming in the first place; today, the average farmer in Knox County is 58 years old.

These changes raise serious concerns about the future of our food supply nationwide, as fewer farmers must provide food for a growing population. We increasingly put our faith in new technologies that promise ever-increasing yields and in global food sources affected by an unstable political climate. But the globalization of our food supply has profound implications as well for the communities that have long supported agricultural life.

In the broadest sense, we can think of this effect as involving the loss of rural character. Rural character permeates every aspect of our agricultural communities. We can see it plainly on the landscape. Drive along any township road in Knox County, and you are surrounded by green space — rolling fields and pastures, punctuated by the occasional farmhouse and unique cluster of outbuildings. Sitting on the front porch of my

farmhouse at night, I'm surrounded by absolute silence, save the occasional sound of nature, and absolute darkness, save the heavenly bodies in the evening sky.

But along the next road west of my place, the fields have been split into five-acre lots, and the lights from modular homes and starter mansions now obscure the stars at night. The new inhabitants don't think much of the scent of farm life, or the way machinery runs day and night at harvest time.

Even now, much of the county economy relies on agriculture. The grain silo at the farmers' co-op remains the tallest building in the county seat; for the moment, corn prices are high with the demand for ethanol. Implement dealers still sell and repair tractors, hay elevators, and bush hogs. But here in Ohio's sheep capital, hundreds of animals are now sold at a livestock auction that once sold thousands every Wednesday.

Rural character also denotes a certain kind of sociability, an intimacy rooted in connection to place. Old-time farmers speak of knowing the inside of everyone else's kitchens a generation ago, when neighbors would take dinner together as they moved from farm to farm in collective labor to bring in the harvest. Neighbors still gather at the grange hall, located just a half mile up the road. But like the farm population generally, grange membership is aging and in rapid decline.

Knox County's agricultural heritage also embodies a distinctive set of cultural values: neighborliness, hard work, and independence. When Judy and I first moved onto the farm, a neighbor came up to the house to introduce himself. "Folks in these parts believe that what you do on your farm is pretty much your own business," he said. "But if you ever need help, don't hesitate to call me." Today, longtime residents don't quite trust newcomers who won't bother to get to know their neighbors and treat the area as a bedroom community or weekend retreat. For their part, new residents often find their older neighbors a bit standoffish.

It's easy to romanticize the physical beauty, honest labor, intimacy, and solid values associated with rural character. We can see nostalgia for that way of life in the village festivals that glorify farm life even as it's disappearing — Danville's Turkey Festival, Fredericktown's Tomato Festival, and the Centerburg Old Time Farming Festival. Cynics in our midst argue that family farmers fail because they're just bad at business, or that the centralization of agriculture is no different than the economic forces that replaced the family hardware store on Main Street with the big box store on the outskirts of town.

The reality, of course, lies somewhere in between the romantic and the cynic. The globalization of our economy is a powerful force, though the outcome of that force is not as inevitable as the cynic would have us believe. And the romantic ideal speaks to a deeply experienced world, one that provides a critical perspective against which we can assess current realities.

The truth is that Knox County is engaged in a struggle between a century old way of life and profound changes associated with the globalization of our food system. The reality is further complicated by exurban sprawl associated with the expansion of metropolitan Columbus. Land developers now offer farmers five-to-ten times the agricultural use value of their land. It's little wonder that an aging farmer, land rich and money poor, whose children have moved away for better economic opportunities, responds to such an offer by deciding it's time to retire in town.

To their credit, Knox Countians have not taken this situation lying down. In the late 1990s, some forward-looking citizens saw the changes coming our way, and they decided to do something about it. They convened a series of public discussions on the future of our community; focus groups replaced conversations in the grange hall or after church. What did we value in our community and wish to preserve? How might we direct the changes that seemed inevitable in such a way as to improve things?

This discussion built upon an earlier initiative of Kenyon College's Rural Life Center, which I direct. In the Family Farm Project, students visited farms, livestock auctions, and implement dealerships, interviewed dozens of farm families, and took hundreds of photographs that documented agricultural life. We fashioned these materials into a series of public projects — radio series, school curricula, and articles in the local newspaper — to stimulate a broad discussion about the place of family farming in community life.

Overwhelmingly, Knox Countians affirmed the need to preserve rural character, and they asserted the importance of family farming to achieving that goal. More than a romantic vision, maintaining a vital agricultural community was now officially endorsed as part of the county's long-range plan.

The question, of course, is how to do it. Communities have employed several tactics; the first involves the use of protective zoning. The idea is to pass zoning regulations that reserve rural farmland exclusively for agricultural use, prohibiting residential development or other uses that would compromise family farm operations.

I served as chair of my township zoning commission for five years, and I still have the scars to prove it. While your intentions might be noble, there's no faster way to alienate your neighbors. The reason is clear: However much rural residents want to preserve community character, most are strongly opposed to any assault on their private property rights.

Interestingly, some of the most vocal resistance to protective zoning comes from farmers themselves. Let's say you have a 200-acre operation, which is the typical farm size in Knox County. The agricultural use value of the land is \$2,000 per acre — that's what it's worth as productive farmland. A developer comes along and offers you \$10,000 an acre for your farm; that's \$2 million, a handsome retirement fund. So the farmer at the zoning meeting asks: "If we pass this new zoning regulation, I can't sell my land to the developer. But my neighbor just down the road, who happens to live in the

next township, can sell out and make all that money. Is that fair?" It's a reasonable question.

A second approach to preserving farmland involves the purchase of development rights. Continuing with our example, if the difference between the agricultural use value and the market value for development is \$8,000 per acre, we'll pay the farmer that difference in exchange for the rights to develop that land. These development rights will be kept, presumably in perpetuity, by a community land trust like Knox County's Owl Creek Conservancy.

This approach certainly overcomes a major objection to protective zoning. Farmers get that development value for their land up front. They can continue to farm as long as they want, and then they can sell their land for agricultural use. But a problem exists with this strategy as well. If the development rights for our hypothetical farm amount to \$8,000 per acre, it would cost \$1.2 million to protect that single 200-acre operation. There are over 1,200 farms in Knox County. Where would the money come from to protect so many family farms? As any public official will tell you, if there's one thing rural residents like even less than restrictions on their private property rights, it's new taxes.

Despite the difficulties, these strategies have been put to good use on a limited basis. Protective zoning efforts often target prime farmland, and land conservancies focus on farms that lie along an important waterway or that have special historical significance. But there's another problem: Both approaches focus on preserving farmland, rather than on supporting the farming operation. If family farming is not economically viable, nobody will farm; and land preservation efforts will only result in a lot of abandoned, overgrown pastures and fields.

The Rural Life Center offered a third approach. The easiest way to preserve family farming is to enable farmers to make a decent living. From our continuing field research, we've learned that farmers want to farm. In interviews they'll go on at

length about the many difficulties involved in farming — the long hours, the dangers, the economic uncertainties. But ask them why they do it, and they'll tell you it's "in my blood." They value the independence of being self employed and the fulfillment that comes from making things grow. Their children often want to stay close to the farm as well. Some get degrees in veterinary medicine or high-tech applications for agriculture so they can return to the communities in which they were raised.

What we proposed was the creation of a sustainable local food system, one that would offer a dependable alternative to the uncertainties of a global market. This system would put a greater share of the food-buying dollar into the hands of the farmer. These dollars would, in turn, recirculate in the local economy, benefiting all businesses. Consumers would receive a greater variety of safe, fresh, nutritious foods. Everybody wins, and it doesn't require new regulations or taxes.

A local food system offers great economic potential. Last year, Knox County residents spent over \$130 million dollars on food and beverages. But most of those dollars quickly left the local economy for the corporate headquarters of major supermarket chains. And most the food came from sources far removed from the local foodshed. Capturing just ten percent of these food dollars would represent a new \$13 million industry — that's significant economic growth in a rural community. And unlike other industries, a local food system requires no new tax abatements. Rooted as it is in the land, this industry won't move to Mexico or China in ten years.

The idea of creating a local food system has been warmly received throughout the local community, in part, because of current events that demonstrate the vulnerability of our global food system. A decade ago, terms like "E. coli" and "mad cow disease" weren't part of our everyday vocabulary. Few of us feared that global terrorism might disrupt our food supply. And high-priced oil has resulted in rapidly escalating food prices. As a result, more and more people are asking where

their food comes from and finding added value in locally sourced products.

The challenge to building a local food system lies less in gaining enthusiasm for the project than in building the *infrastructure* necessary to link the producer and consumer. To give but one example, Knox County is the largest sheep producer in the state, and one of the very largest east of the Mississippi River. There's a growing demand for lamb among many ethnic populations in nearby Columbus. But the lamb you find in area supermarkets is imported from New Zealand. The development of a global food system has enabled businesses to acquire food from across the planet more easily and more cheaply than it can from the farmer just down the road.

Our effort to change this situation began by forging a direct link between individual producers and consumers. Building on our ongoing work with area farmers, we compiled information on producers who were willing to sell directly to consumers. To this list we added information on the seasonal availability of local foods and the many reasons to buy local. The resulting publication, called *HomeGrown*, is now in its second print edition, with 12,000 copies in circulation. The county extension office maintains a version on the internet.

Convenience is a significant factor affecting consumer food purchases. *HomeGrown* enables people to see what foods might be available in their immediate locale. But we know that consumers are less willing to drive across the county to get a gallon of maple syrup or an organic chicken. So as a next step, we organized a farmers' market on Mount Vernon's Public Square. We selected this location for several reasons. Public Square is a lovely area in the historic downtown district, with a well-kept lawn and plenty of shade trees to guard against the hot summer sun. Like many rural county seats, downtown Mount Vernon has lost much of its economic vitality to those big box stores. Placing the farmers market here gave people a new reason to come into town.

For the first day of the market, some six years ago, we found nine brave farmers who would give it a try. We had no idea what level of interest we would find. To our delight, the farmers sold everything they had in the first twenty minutes, and when they returned with more goods, they sold all of those, too. Today, the market features 45 farmers and a wide variety of products; and three additional markets have opened in smaller villages throughout the county.

I often send my students to the farmers market to observe what goes on there. They consistently report that while consumers spend about twenty minutes purchasing food, they often remain as much as an hour. Parents play on the lawn with their children, and people visit with friends they don't see at other times during the week. It's just this kind of casual exchange that strengthens community bonds, a sociality that's fundamental to rural character. You're less likely to find this kind of interaction in the cold, fluorescent-lit isles of a mega-supermarket.

Local food guides and farmers' markets enable many individuals to buy locally, and they provide a lucrative market for small-scale producers with specialty items. But to capture more of that \$130 million food economy and provide incentives for mainstream farmers to produce for a regional market, institutional buyers must be brought into the system as well.

Getting restaurants, hospitals, and school cafeterias to buy local raises significant new challenges. For example, Kenyon College's food service prepares 2,500 meals each day when school is in session. When the food service director needs 40 bushels of tomatoes, she just brings up a national food distributor on her computer and clicks on a few boxes to place her order. The shipment arrives just when she needs it, and the billing and paperwork are handled automatically. Order after order, she's assured of a dependable supply and a consistent level of quality. And if there's ever a problem, the food distributor carries several million dollars of liability insurance to protect the dining service.

What if she wants to buy local tomatoes? In Knox County, she can now go to a local produce auction, about 25 miles away. Assuming farmers have brought the product she needs, she can spend the morning waiting to bid. Of course, she may have to buy several lots with different varieties of tomatoes, only some of which will be suited to the slicing or dicing required for whatever dish is on the menu. It will be her responsibility to load the product into a vehicle she provides and deliver it to the dining hall. She'll likely have to pay cash, and she'll have to do the paperwork later. And there aren't any locally grown tomatoes in central Ohio after October 1, just four weeks into the semester.

Multiply these difficulties by a hundred food products each week, and you begin to appreciate the challenges of institutional buying in a local food system. But I'm happy to report that after three years, 36% of Kenyon's food purchases are locally sourced, most within the county. The college's new dining hall, set to open this summer, is designed throughout to maximize the use of local foods — the first facility of its kind in the country. The building includes a variable-height loading dock to accommodate farmers' pickup trucks, a flash freezer to quick freeze summer fruits and vegetables for winter use, expanded washing and preparation space for fresh ingredients, and a servery featuring several locations for cooking individual dishes to maximize the value of fresh, local foods.

Kenyon's dining service initiative has served as an important case study, teaching us lessons that we can use to enable other institutions to buy local. To address the growing demand for local foods, we're developing a local food center that will include a licensed commercial kitchen to create value-added products that are sought as specialty items by neighborhood grocery stores. A flash freezer will extend the seasonal availability of many products, and cold storage will enable farmers who need sufficient inventory to sell direct to individual or institutional buyers. We hope to share this facility with organizations that serve the neediest members of our community. Through an arrangement between these groups and local farmers, foods that

go unsold on the retail or wholesale market could be purchased at or near cost by these service organizations, providing quality fresh food for the hungry and establishing an economic floor for area farmers.

We're also in the process of converting a warehouse in the historic downtown into a year-round local food market, in response to the growing popularity of the summer market. Central Ohio Technical College has opened a new campus just one block north of the warehouse, and the Mount Vernon Nazarene University will open facilities for its art department, with a public gallery space, just across the street. These institutions will bring 1,000 people downtown each day, and they'll get hungry.

Education continues to play a significant role in all our activities. Unless people think about where their food comes from and why it matters, whether or not their food is locally sourced will be of no concern. Working with students and faculty throughout Kenyon College, we've created a wide variety of public projects that educate the community about local foods as we educate our students into the community. *Foodways* featured a series of essays and accompanying material about the many ways food touches local life, from hunting to ethnic foods, eating out to feeding the hungry. The series ran throughout the summer in the county newspaper to complement the weekly farmers market. A promotional film — *Where Does Our Food Come From?* — explores the value of buying local; it's shown in schools, to civic organizations, and on the local cable channel. And an extensive exhibit by the same name, that traces food from farm to table, has traveled across Knox County to community events like the Danville Turkey Festival.

Efforts like these require broad collaboration among civic groups, farm organizations, businesses, and educational institutions. Knox County's Local Food Council provides an effective forum to address the many issues we encounter in furthering this initiative. Perhaps as importantly, by bringing together individuals representing every part of the food system — farmers, processors, institutional

buyers, and consumers — we’ve begun to reintegrate a food system that has become increasingly fragmented and opaque to everyone.

I think educational institutions like Kenyon College have a pivotal role to play in such efforts. Ohio is blessed with many small colleges and universities, situated in or near rural areas. They constitute a valuable resource for addressing the needs and interests of our agricultural communities in ways that simultaneously further their educational mission. For too long, agriculture has been understood as a subject suitable for study only in agricultural programs at large land grant universities. Until very recently, these programs relied exclusively on technological innovations and new economic models to address the challenges facing today’s farmers.

In contrast, liberal arts colleges, dedicated as they are to holistic education, appreciate the inextricable link between healthy agriculture and healthy com-

munities — of the necessity of putting “culture” back in “agriculture.” Today at Kenyon, students examine rural land use policies in a course on practical issues in ethics, explore the significance of food to Asian cultures in a course called “Rice,” and examine the dynamics of rural ecosystems through farm internships as part of a course on sustainable agriculture.

Evidence already exists that the next generation of farmers may be drawn from these students and others like them. More broadly, any education that seeks to prepare young people for life must engage the many issues surrounding food, which is the source of life itself. All of us must recognize that the decisions we make each day about what we eat represent an important civic act, one that profoundly affects us as individuals and as a community. If we become more thoughtful consumers, places like Danville stand to retain their economic and cultural heritage. 

