

# Great Lakes CSA Conference

## November 2008

By Dan Wiens

The last conference I attended that was totally dedicated to CSA farming was in Winnipeg in 1993. With virtually no CSA history or experience to draw on, that gathering was looking excitedly and with anticipation to the future. Today, at this place, we look to the future with the same excitement, but we also have an amazing depth of history and experience at our disposal.

This is a lovely group of people. There are few places where a guest speaker could safely do the following: Please stand up and find someone to hug.

[A rousing course of hugs ensues.]

Normally when farmers describe their farms they talk about acres, types of crops grown and yields. At the mini school yesterday and in the halls of this facility this morning, I noticed that CSA farmers first talk about the number of people involved with their farms. It's a good thing, I think, for CSA farmers to first talk about people when comparing notes with each other. People are, after all, the core of this movement.

The person I have on my mind this morning is Coral Maloney. Coral was seven years old when she and her parents joined our CSA farm in the spring of 1992. Her parents had just bought a "share" in the summer harvest of our farm. They were on the farm to help their new farmers plant some spring garlic.

Perhaps my thoughts drift to Coral on this day because she is part of a new generation of CSA kids who grew up with the notion of having their own farm, and knowing their farmer. As a child she understood that in some years the lettuce is great and in others it's bitter. She remembers when there was so much kale in her family's weekly veggie box that her parents ended up giving some to neighbors (who, by-the-way, had no idea what to do with it). She's a city girl who knows that broccoli doesn't grow on trees, onions grow in the dirt and tomatoes ripen best in brown paper bags. For Coral, going to "the farm" for a potluck or a square dance was just as natural as visiting a relative. She was spared the indignity of growing up with an industrial food system that offers little for the human soul.

Coral is now part of a "collective" of young people that has evolved together with our farm over the last several years. It thrills me to know that some of the young people who grew up with our farm are now leading a new generation of food activists making their living from farming. I fully anticipate that Coral and her cohorts will take the food revolution (of which CSA is only a part) to new and exciting places, well beyond the capacity of my imagination. In fact, Coral and

her friends are now planning a new venture that includes using public land in the city to grow food. Thinking about Coral and young people like her – like many of you in this room - gives me a lot of hope for the future of community farming.

If it were not for Community Shared Agriculture and other forms of farming that directly connect farmers with eaters, I could stand here in this auditorium and legitimately declare to you that, in North America, the family farm is dead.

But the family farm is not quite dead. The heartbeat of human-scale agriculture on this continent has been kept alive by the likes of you. Agri-culture, as opposed to agri-business, may still be on life support, but there is plenty of room for hope. From my vantage point, standing up here looking at this room full of people, I see a unique and amazing collection of people who are bringing agriculture back from the brink of death. This room is oozing with hope. And what a pleasure and honor it is for me to be here.

Over the years some people have suggested that CSA is just a flash in the pan - another fad that will soon fade like the hippies of the 60s, or the hair on my head. Indeed one of the most critical times of any movement is the season of transfer from the first generation to the second. I think we are in that season right now.

At this critical time, all of us will need to work together to build, or perhaps more accurately stated, re-build, a food system not on the strength of a bankrupt industrial model that has desperately failed our humanity, but on the strength of healthy community. And let me tell you, I believe in community.

But before I say another word I have the following proviso on what I have to say about CSA farming:

**Don't listen to the CSA experts (myself included), because there are none.**

Just like snowflakes, no two CSAs are created the same. They are, by definition, unique expressions of the communities and localities from which they arise. In my view, CSA defies standardization. So I can stand here and happily *describe* our farm to you, but I can not *prescribe* what any of you should be doing on your farms. Sure there are some general principles that are common to all CSAs, but there is a lot of room for variation on the theme. Our farm, for example, has been operated as a worker's collective for several years, other farms are sole proprietorships. Some CSAs use various marketing schemes, others use only the pre sold share model. This diversity is something to which I ascribe a lot of value. This is, in my opinion, one of the strengths of the CSA movement.

So what are the non negotiables that make a CSA as CSA? I've always thought there are two fundamental elements that set CSAs apart from other forms of farming. They are: 1) a very intentional direct connection between farmers and eaters and 2) a formalized sharing of risks and benefits. The risk-sharing element

almost always includes an upfront financial or work-in-kind commitment on the part of the eater.

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I don't want to stand here and do a monologue this whole session. So to get you involved I have prepared a series of questions. Here's the first one:

How many of you were born after 1980? Raise your hand.

[50-60% of the audience raise their hands.]

Wow, that's amazing. There are few agricultural gatherings these days with so many young people (The average farmer in Canada today is approaching 60 years old). I learnt the other day that you young folks are part of the millennial generation. Quite a bit is being written about you these days. Apparently you are more generous than Gen Xers. You're less concerned about career and money. You have virtually no allegiance to formal institutions. You have very short attention spans (hello - are you still listening). And you're attracted to the CSA movement!

The narrative of Wiens farm includes many stories of young folks (millennialists) who drifted on to the land, some staying for just a few hours, others for weeks, months or even years. A few, like Coral, have made farming their livelihood.

Something else I can say about you millennials is I put my first organic crop into the ground before you were born.

I grew my first organic crop in 1980. That was a time when the word organic did not have much cache. Organic certification in our area did not yet exist. I remember bringing my very first harvest (a half-ton load of sweat corn) to the market. My very first customer picked up a cob of corn, peeled away the husk and screamed "Worm!" as she threw the cob back onto the pile and walked away disgusted. That was my not-so-great start at marketing organic produce.

The farmer's market was not a very busy in those days, so I sold my produce (corn, some vegetables and raspberries) to a sympathetic grocery store manager. I enjoyed gardening organically, but I got no satisfaction selling into the wholesale market. Organics for me only answered production questions; it didn't address the vexation in my spirit that was created by the vast separation between me, the farmer, and the people eating my food. I couldn't articulate it back then, but I was sensing the soulless nature of the industrial food system. A system that is stronger and more dominant today than ever. It's to the point now where 5 or 6 transnational corporations control the vast majority of food traded on this planet. How did we end up in such a dehumanized state of affairs?

Up until about 200 years ago economies were thought of as subsets of society. Economies were natural outcomes of people trading goods and services with each other. They functioned, at least ostensibly, to serve the needs of people. Today, after a long slow erosion of our humanity at the hands of industrialization, people now exist to serve the needs of the economy. We are no longer citizens, we are tax payers and consumers. Fear, not cooperation, dominates much of our interaction and discourse with each other.

What do you think of when you hear the phrase; “the bottom line”? Virtually everyone thinks of this financial metaphor as the most important aspect of any business. Sure, finances are important, but how did we fall into the trap of believing that money is more important than people? Or culture? Or the environment? Today, fiscal rationality reigns supreme.

Our food system, from field to plate, reflects this dominant worldview. In Manitoba this means; if a penny can be saved by shipping locally grown wheat to Ontario for milling, only to ship the flour back to Manitoba for consumption, then that is precisely what will happen. The last commercial flour mill in Manitoba closed some time ago. With the exception of the micro scale mills that can be found on some CSA farms, eaters in Manitoba have no choice but to purchase Ontario milled flour that may contain Manitoba wheat. Not that we can really know where the wheat comes, mind you. There’s generally no fiscal rationality in maintaining source identity, so it is simply not done.

Perhaps the epitome of this “source schizophrenia” is seen in a study that found that the beef in your average McDonalds hamburger patty (not that any of you would eat one of those things) comes from over 300 different beef cows. We see these kinds of “fiscal rationalities” all over our food system. I’m sure you are all aware of the fact that in Canada, on average, food travels over 2,000 kilometers from field to plate.

The vast majority of farmers in North America, and to a growing extent the rest of the world, no longer grow food for people, they grow commodities for an industrial system that is oblivious to the needs of people. The dominant food system has no soul.

Of course you’ve heard rants like this about the industrial food system before. And of course much more could be said. But I will stop my rant here. This actually leads me another suggestion:

**Stay informed about the world around you, which can be quite negative, but act on and speak mostly about what you believe in.**

On our farm, over the years, we have tried not to moralize about what we are doing. It’s best to let your actions speak for themselves. Sometimes we fail and end up sounding a little preachy, but we know this is generally not a good

posture. For the most part we have very good relationships with our neighbors. It is my hope that CSA farms will continue to be beacons of light in an otherwise pretty dark and fragile world.

I'm reminded of the story of the hurricane that hit Homestead, Florida in the early 80s. There were curious pictures of whole neighborhoods where virtually every house was totally destroyed by the wind. Scattered randomly in this scene of destruction were a few houses that seemed untouched by the storm. Someone investigated this phenomenon and found out that the houses that withstood the storm were built by Habitat for Humanity. Most houses in Homestead were built by developers who had "the bottom line" in mind when they built. They cut corners and built houses that were not resilient against hurricane-force winds. Habitat, on the other hand, built houses on the strength of community participation and ownership. At its core, the notion of community is metaphysical, it's about how we organize ourselves socially. But healthy community obviously leads to physical strength and resiliency. Habitat for Humanity builds strong houses and CSA builds strong farms. The CSA movement is rebuilding agriculture on the strength of community. Even as an economic hurricane is currently raging, I believe CSA farms will stand resilient and strong.

Back to the story of Wiens Farm After growing a garden for a few years in the early 80s, Wilma and I moved to Africa with our then one year old son. We went to do agricultural development work. We went to save the poor, helpless African farmers. To make a long story short, what happened there is we were the ones who got saved. We learnt from our African friends the importance of relationship. Back then the majority of Africans acquired most of their food by either growing it themselves or purchasing it from their neighbours. Their food system was very relationally based. It was human scaled and we liked it a lot. We also learnt from the Apartheid system in South Africa that separation of people is at the root of many social ills. So when we came back to Canada we observed anew what looked to us like a form of apartheid in our food system. The wide chasm between eaters and farmers seemed wider to us than ever.

We wanted to farm, so we pooled our resources and purchased some land in the Red River flood plain just south of Winnipeg. Interestingly, farming on a flood plain is a kind of blessing. This is because land is valued at agricultural prices, not at inflated development prices. This has allowed us to affordably farm within 10 kilometers of the city. To a significant extent location has shaped the character of our CSA. On any given summer day our farm will have dozens of people on it, many of whom get there by cycling from the city. I've noticed that farms, further away from their markets, evolve differently. Being so close to the city has been a good thing for us, but I know of thriving CSA farms in Saskatchewan that are three and half hours from their market.

Question: For how many of you is access to appropriate land a barrier to your CSA dreams?

[One third of the audience indicates the land is an issue. Land trusts are discussed by several people as a viable alternative to the market economy]

We farmed for a couple years and then, in the fall of 1991, everything changed. I attended a farm rally at the Manitoba legislature with about 10,000 other farmers. That rally was called to protest the fact that the cost of production for farmers was higher than the price they were getting for their food. The farmers were asking the Government for more handouts. I remember standing there thinking that the system needed more than tweaking, or more government money, what was needed was a total shift in thinking, a new paradigm. This new paradigm could not continue to be solely based on Adam Smith's invisible hand (the market economy). What we needed, I thought, was a farm economy based on the strength of community. Perhaps a form of capitalism, but it would have to have a strong social conscience. I dreamt about a food system that would achieve social, environmental and economic justice.

That winter some farming friends and I pulled together a group of city folks and came up with the idea of Shared Farming. The fundamentals were quite simple; we would ask city folks to purchase a share in the summer harvest in order to share both the risks and joys of farming with the farmer. We later learnt about Community Supported Agriculture in the US and eventually renamed our scheme Community Shared Agriculture. That phrase as later popularized across Canada by Brewster Kneen in his publication *The Ram's Horn*. We also learnt about at least two other CSA farms in Canada that were already operating at that time, one in Ontario and the other in Nova Scotia

On February 9, 1992 an article was published in the Winnipeg Free press about our Shared Farming idea. By the end of that day over 200 people had called, most of whom were wondering where to send their cheques. We had clearly struck a cord with this idea. We sold about 215 shares in what ended up being a crazy, but wonderful summer.

I have another question for you. How many of you CSA farmers are from the city?

[About half the people raise their hands]

The high number of city people in this audience doesn't really surprise me. I grew up in the city and I think it took a certain amount of city naivety to get involved with something so out of the box as CSA. Not that farm-raised folks are disqualified from this type of thinking, mind you.

We got a lot of media coverage during in our first years of CSA farming. I would suggest that the media, especially the local media, is still a very useful tool for sharer recruitment.

I'm going to use the rest of my as a sort of CSA farmers confessional. The following are some thorny issues we have dealt with in the course of life on our farm.

## **Thorny Issues:**

### **1. Relationships are messy, so get used to it.**

The last five or six years on our farm have seen the development of a workers collective. The collective consisted of 7 or 8 people, including my wife and I, who worked on and made decisions about the farm on a more or less equal basis. Last year a divergence of opinion developed on an issue related to collective farming. In fact, some of us began to questioning the value of collective farming altogether. Relationships were increasingly strained and life on the farm was not happy. Fortunately, we were all mature enough to accept our need for third party mediation to help us walk through this rough patch. Things eventually worked out OK. I would highly recommend third party mediation when relationships get messy on your farms.

### **2. We are no longer certified organic.**

This is perhaps the elephant in the room. We discontinued our certification 3 years ago, mostly because our sharers trust us and don't care about third party verification of our production practices. Of course we still use "organic" principles on our farm and that remains very important to our sharers. However, last year we stopped using the word organic to describe our production practices. Another big reason we dropped our organic certification is the insanely large amount of paper work involved in the process that doesn't seem to have much to do with good farming practices. The system seems to be geared toward the export of food.

I have to admit that I have also grown increasingly uncomfortable with being associated with the same word that Walmart now uses to describe products they sell. And there are now 10,000 acre "organic" farms in the US. Frankly speaking, I lost my interest in organic when the movement became an industry. At times the notion of organic seems to be more about marketing than about social and environmental sustainability.

But this remains a very painful and emotive subject for me, and I'm guessing the same is true for many of you. It pains me to hear that some organic farms in Manitoba are dropping their certification because, as they say. "the Wiens farm is

no longer certified, so why should we be.” I do not want to be that kind of role model. So I’m involved with a group of farmers and other food activists in Manitoba who are actively working with the Government and the organic certification Boards to come up with a solution to this dilemma. This may mean we come up with some sort of parallel system that certifies “local and organic” production.

Ultimately what I am suggesting is we need to be openly talking about this issue. If we leave manure sitting in a pile in the corner, it will eventually stink. But if we put it into the middle of the room and stir it occasionally, it will eventually smell sweet and be great for the garden.

### **3. We have undervalued our food.**

Folks, why is it that farmers are supposed to accept wages lower than almost any other profession? On our farm we have been complicit in this by pricing our shares far too low. Somehow we believed the lie that our farm should be subsidizing the immorally low price of food in Canada. This has to stop. I think the CSA movement is now mature enough to begin challenging the status quo on pricing. We are in a position to do some serious renegotiating on how food is priced. This is a type of social organizing that won’t happen over night, but I think we are up for the task.

### **4. Some people can not afford our food (Good Food Club).**

If CSA has a dark side, it may be that the system can skew itself in favour of the well healed in our communities. Many people simply can not afford to pay the asking price for our shares. I’m not a great believer in the so called charitable approach to this situation. It shouldn’t be a situation were people in our communities are dependent on the largess of farmers for their food baskets. Somehow we need to organize ourselves so that farmers get paid a fair wage *and* our food is accessible to everyone in the community.

I have a wonderful story to tell about something positive that is happening on our farm in this regard. Through the Good Food Club, inner-city folk, many of who are on social assistance, are provided the opportunity to come out to our farm once, if not twice a week to work in the gardens, hang out on the farm and take good food home with them at the end of the day. They also take home vegetables that are sold at their own weekly farmers market. The market is open to the public and Good Food Club members are able to purchase vegetables at about half the price that it would normally sell for. About 400 families pay \$5 annually for Club membership. The money made at the market and from memberships goes back into the program to help fund community meals, purchase of good food during the winter months for monthly food boxes and other projects.

As our relationship with the Good Food Club has matured over the past several years we have gotten to know and develop meaningful relationships with wonderful people who otherwise we may never meet. People whose starting places in life and ongoing, often difficult journeys are so very different from ours that the likelihood of our paths crossing is slim to none; our only awareness of them coming from the labels and stereotypes that we might subtly be tempted to support, such as 'the poor', 'the unemployed', 'the uneducated.' Through the ordinary, simple, often mundane tasks of growing and harvesting food we come together – our lives intersect as we weed carrots and onions, as we eat lunch together, as we pull our weighted bodies through muddy gardens carrying buckets of zucchini and beets, as we thank them at the end of the day for coming and sharing in the work and they go home with boxes of good food and a variety of other things such as grasshoppers, acorns, wildflowers, rose-hips, thanking us for the chance to be part of our farm.

“Nothing is more natural than for people to break bread together,” writes Cathy Campbell, rector of St Matthew Anglican Church in Winnipeg. “Sharing food at table is one of the universal ways that relationships are created. There is no “us” and “them,” up and down, in and out, greater or lesser distinctions, neither by faith, race, class, age, or gender. It’s not that differences are erased or become meaningless. It is the meaning that we make of them that matters.” Inclusion regardless of our differences is not at the expense of difference. Inclusion is necessary to build up the integrity of the whole, *with* our differences, not *in spite* of them.

On our farm where food is what we’re all about, we strive to embody acceptance of and love for all people. In a sense the garden becomes an equal playing field where we all work together and learn from each other. Food brings us together. Our differences of unemployed or employed, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, rural or urban, highly educated or less educated, wealthy or poor, simply exist as reflections of the lives we live, not as boundaries or walls that divide and separate us. It is very difficult to maintain stereotypes or prejudices towards people who have real names, real lives, and who have become partners with us in our work.

For the Good Food Club folk who come out, eating lunch together after a couple of hours of garden work, helps to bring the group together, nurturing relationships between those who are actively and energetically engaged and those who remain more on the periphery. “Food and peace are two of the essentials in life,” says Tammy Klos, co-ordinator for the Good Food Club. “We need both in order to live well. Coming together and breaking bread together is a peaceful act that helps to unite our group.”

This is not about charity; this program actually ends up being financially beneficial for our farm. The labour force on Fridays has meant we can pick and prepare more veggies for the Saturday market. This has increased our income by

at least \$1,000 per week during the summer. I would strongly recommend this type of community involvement to all CSA farms.

## **Conclusion**

After 17 years of CSA farming, I can still say with enthusiasm that I would not farm any other way. For us, CSA farming has been fantastic. Local community ownership of our food system is a trust that must be nurtured and protected for the sake of both food security and our humanity. When I think about what we've accomplished on our farm over the last 17 years I think about relationships – the unseen fiber that binds people together. This is the real stuff of our humanity, it's invisible, yet it's the thing that gives life meaning. The true ledger sheet of any CSA farm is a calculus of relationships. Although it's not really about mathematics, it's more about art. Indeed, CSA farmers are artists of the invisible. Our canvas is the food system and our paint is the unseen fiber between people. The artwork is unseen, yet very knowable and deeply felt.

Good farming, good people.

*The author wouldn't mind feedback. Email Dan at [danwiens@mennonitecc.ca](mailto:danwiens@mennonitecc.ca)*