"What'd Life Be Without Home Grown Tomatoes?"

Iowa Women Farmers' Motivations, Beliefs, and Practices Within the Local Foods Movement

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ANT 499: Women Farmers, Food, and Community

Summer 2008 MAP final paper

INTRODUCTION

"I never heard the word 'food' my entire college education. It had nothing to do with food," was not something I anticipated hearing three minutes into the first interview of my summer project on women farmers and local food. Laura was telling me about her college experience as a woman majoring in agronomy in the late 1970s, describing how the focus of her Iowa State program had been maximizing yields of corn and soybeans and soil conservation; the idea of growing plants for human consumption was not something widely considered by mainstream agriculture until much later. Given that I trace my entire interest in agriculture to learning how to cook, Laura's answer left me dumbfounded.

Cooking was a skill I picked up relatively recently, something originally rooted more in necessity than desire. The beginning of my third year of college was the first year I lived off campus, and thus the first year I had much of a choice about which dining hall plan I would purchase. Realizing I could save over a thousand dollars by cutting my plan down, I dove into grocery shopping and meal planning. Since I've been a vegetarian since childhood and gluten free since high school, reading ingredient labels is an old habit, but buying groceries to make several meals a week exposed me to more ingredient labels than I had ever encountered. I went through the almost-cliché experience of wondering what soy lecithin was doing in cookies, what xanthan gum was doing in coconut milk, what partially hydrogenated soybean oil was doing in corn chips, and what high fructose corn syrup was doing in (just about) everything. None of these words sounded especially food-like to me, and I started thinking more about what I ate. It helped that I was sharing a kitchen with an amateur gourmet chef, whose lemon-polenta cakes and herb soufflés put my scrambled eggs and grilled cheese to shame, and motivated me to step it up a bit. Somewhere during that semester, cooking changed from a way to save money into a

genuine hobby, something I looked forward to as a way to relax, procrastinate, spend time with friends or entertain myself on weekends. I started to care about where all this food came from.

Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was the beginning of my food education, but I continued by keeping up with the surfeit of newspaper and magazine articles I found online about the American food system. What I learned – that our food system is founded on unsustainable, sometimes immoral, practices that will fail within the coming decades, important issues to which I will return shortly – disturbed me. By then I was a regular at the Grinnell Farmers Market, so I knew there was another choice besides the industrial agriculture I was reading about, and my curiosity about the people within this smaller, alternative movement piqued at the same time I decided to pursue a Mentored Advanced Project for summer 2008. I am lucky enough to go to school in Iowa, one of the most important agricultural states in the country, and it was an intuitive step to go from an interest in food origins to a project where I could meet the real people choosing to farm outside the mainstream. When my advisor suggested I focus on women farmers, the final piece fell into place. I had an impression that agriculture was something of a boy's club (an idea with which some of my consultants agreed), something almost impossible for me to access. The potential of talking only with women eased that discomfort. Speaking exclusively with women was logical from other standpoints as well: academically, women's history in agriculture has long been ignored or minimized. Practically, this is a short project (ten weeks), and limiting myself to women helped keep my focus narrow within an extremely broad area. Since I am a woman looking forward to some sort of food-related career, I was eager to learn from women and meet real-life role models. I also had basic background coursework in Gender & Women's Studies that I felt prepared me to study the gender angle introduced by a women-only sample.

If my research this summer has convinced me of one thing, it is that the mainstream American food system is rooted in (and reliant on) severely unsustainable practices. In his recent book, The End of Food, Paul Roberts addresses many of the most alarming facts: as early as the 1970s, agriculture was identified as the single largest source of nonpoint water pollution (28) and grain production continues to consume 1000 tons of water per ton of grain produced (227), our cost-obsessed food system has likely contributed to the upswing in American obesity by privileging cheap, nutritionally deficient food-stuffs and snacks over more expensive "whole" foods – carrots cost ten times more than potato chips (95), many facets of American agriculture are entirely dependent on the $20 billion in subsidies that keeps us the "world's lowest cost producer" (122), the emergence of our high volume, low cost food system with a focus on rapid, global distribution shows definite parallels to the increase in food-borne illnesses such as the avian flu and E. coli in the last decades (178), and on, and on, and on. It is obvious that in the coming years America will need to change the way it feeds itself, and the question of "how?" is one I attempt to address in this paper. One of the most popular substitutes to the conventional model is the movement known as "alternative agriculture," to which the majority of my consultants belonged. Beus and Dunlap (590) identified six fundamental dimensions of the competing paradigms between conventional and alternative agriculture: centralization/ decentralization, dependence/independence, competition/community, domination of nature/harmony with nature, specialization/diversity, and exploitation/restraint. Throughout my interviews, I was interested in determining whether the type of agriculture the small-scale women farmers were participating in was a viable alternative to the dominant model. For the reasons I have addressed in this paper, I determine that it is not only a viable alternative, but indeed a version of the only alternative, which naturally led me to the big question of "How do

we get there?" I see two possible paths leading the American food system towards a version of alternative agriculture, which are roughly aligned with the classical debate in anthropological theory between idealists and materialists. I will explore this fully in my conclusion, but suffice it to say here that the women I interviewed fell into two general groups when I asked them about the future of agriculture: those generally optimistic, who told me that people were already starting to change the way they thought of food because of better education and media attention, and a more pessimistic group, who thought major global changes will be needed before consumers give up the convenience of Wal-Mart produce. I see the former group as idealists, who believe that as people's beliefs and values change, the system will change to meet their demands, and the latter group as materialists, who believe that people will not change until serious disruptive changes in the system force a re-evaluation of values.

METHODS AND MAIN QUESTIONS

My ten-week project actually started in December 2007, when I contacted Denise O'Brien, then executive director of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN). She generously agreed to help me with my project, and at the start of summer my first interview was with Leigh Adcock, the current executive director of WFAN. She gave me the names of two other women farmers, both of whom I contacted and interviewed. Taking Leigh's advice, after each interview I asked the farmer if she had any suggestions for other women who might be willing to talk with me. Gathering names this way, and by going through the *Directory of Grinnell Area Food Producers Who Market Locally*, I eventually interviewed thirteen women: ten small, independent farmers who consider themselves part of the local foods movement, one who farms conventional corn and soybeans on a large farm with her husband and family, Leigh, and Denise. The women's ages ranged from 25 to 72, with the mode being 47 and the mean

49.1. I have included an appendix with background information on all the women I interviewed; it may help readers to look through it before reading the paper to familiarize themselves with the women and their farms.

With the exception of Leigh, Jan, and Donna, I drove to every woman's farm to meet her in person. Donna lives in Grinnell, so we met at a local coffee shop, I met Leigh at her office, and I interviewed Jan over the telephone due to scheduling conflicts. Ten of the farmers I interviewed sold to customers directly, at local farmers markets or through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) system. Ten women grew a variety of produce and vegetables on land ranging from ½ an acre to 80 acres; Lois raises goats to make cheese, and Donna grows corn and soybeans on 800 acres. The typical interview started with a tour of the farm so I could see how the farmer had laid out her land and get a sense of what scale she was farming, then we would sit down for a more formal interview. I asked every woman to sign a consent form and offered them the option of a pseudonym, which all refused. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed in outline form; including the farm tour, interviews ranged from an hour and fifteen minutes to two and a half hours.

Before I began conducting interviews, I expected my results to be heavily influenced by gender. I anticipated women having significantly different experiences from their male peers, but as my interviews progressed, gender started to take a backseat to what I learned about food, farming, and the local/alternative food movements. Not only did I find my own interests shifting towards the food and production aspects, but relatively few of the women with whom I spoke attributed their farming practices to their gender. Of course, since I still spoke with exclusively women farmers, gender remains an important pillar, and I do not think I could have done this project without the original gender focus. My main questions are now best summarized as:

- What is the role of alternative practices within the broader term "agriculture"?
- What problems do women see in our current food system, and what changes do they think are needed to address these problems?
- How do spirituality and family relate to farming for women?
- How do women perceive the ideas of local, sustainable, and organic?
- Finally, how important a factor is gender in shaping the women's views?

My paper is broadly organized around these questions; every section illustrates a different aspect of why the alternative agriculture movement is the most viable alternative to the current conventional system. By tackling these issues, my paper contributes to the public dialogue currently taking place over the future of American agriculture.

I begin by examining the dominant American food system today; of the myriad problems inherent in the industrialization of agriculture, I only discuss those issues about which my consultants voiced concerns. After mapping out some of the problems with the dominant system, I examine the alternative farming movement, looking specifically at the benefits to both consumers and producers of locally grown food. My fourth section deals with the more personal components of women's lives that alternative agriculture has touched: spirituality and family life. I then move on to look at women's views on the relationships between organic, local, and sustainable, and end with a discussion of the role one's gender plays in determining these opinions. In my conclusion, I use women's opinions on agriculture's future to outline a set of two theoretical paths. Both posit that alternative practices will eventually take precedence, but the idealist and materialist theories behind the two methods of "getting there" suggest opposite causations. I rely primarily on the words of the women with whom I talked, drawing secondarily on research to fill in gaps or provide additional support.

INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE TODAY

The influx of technology during the first half of the 20th century had more far reaching, and much more dire, consequences for farms than anyone anticipated. The mechanical revolution of the early 20th century, marked by the introduction of tractors and similar farm machinery, was the first of three agricultural revolutions identified by Thomas Lyson (19,20) that transformed the dominant agricultural model from mainly small, independent family farms into a complicated system of huge corporations. "Big agriculture," characterized by "a trend toward mass production, standardization, and homogenization of agricultural commodities," had its second revolution in the years after World War II, when the chemical breakthroughs that had been developed during the war were turned onto American fields in the forms of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides; between 1945 and 1980, synthetic fertilizer use increased over 700 percent (Lyson 22,20). Most recently, the 1980s saw the beginning of the "biotechnology revolution," where scientifically manipulating plants' genes produced "transgenic" crops. There are many significant, often unseen, problems with the food system produced by these three revolutions, from its foundational inability to deal with climate change to the rising levels of American obesity tied to the quest for cheaper ingredients, regardless of health issues. In the interest of space, I have limited my discussion to the problems about which my consultants voiced the strongest concerns.

Linda had an interesting perspective on the most recent agricultural revolution. After completing a major in biology at University of Minnesota, she came to Iowa to pursue a graduate degree in molecular, cellular, and developmental biology: genetic engineering. She told me that while at first she was intrigued by DNA and the manipulation of genomes, "Halfway through I questioned what my research was going to be used for. I was funded by Sandos pharmaceuticals,

and that bothered me. I felt really uncomfortable as a biologist putting pollen [that had pharmaceuticals in it] into the atmosphere. I knew how far it could travel, and I didn't think we had done the right amount of research to know what the impact was, and then I wanted out."

Linda's concern about genetically engineered pollen spreading into other crops is a serious one. Singer (210-214) discusses how pollen from genetically modified plants has been proven to travel beyond the border of the GM field and fertilize wild plants. It is easy to imagine a situation where GM pollen, such as that from Bt corn, spreads to a wild or a non-GMO crop and wreaks ecological damage. Bt corn has been bred to produce its own insecticide against corn borers; if the wild population suddenly was immune to natural predators, it could grow without control and dramatically alter its environment by choking out other species.

Transgenic crops also have the distinct disadvantage of less genetic diversity than would occur naturally. Once scientists determine the genetic twist that gives the result they want – such as increased yield, chemical resistance, or sterility – every single plant gets that identical gene. Given the system in which conventional crops are grown, where these essentially inbred plants are packed as close together as possible, the risk is even more serious; if a disease found a way to take advantage of this quirk, the entire field would be at risk. Of course, growing only corn or only soybeans together is a risky undertaking even without genetic modification. Specialized monocultures are not only more at risk from diseases or insects, they also take a harder toll on the earth and leave farmers more susceptible to inclement weather and market dips.

Small, alternative farmers aim for the other end of the spectrum: a high degree of diversity. Certainly it is possible to have a small, sustainable farm that specializes in one product – U-pick apple orchards and autumn's ubiquitous pumpkin stands come to mind – but as a movement, alternative agriculture, as identified by Beus (606), has chosen to value diversity.

This was one of the most important, and most consistent trends I saw among the farms I visited. With the exception of Donna, all the women I talked with had an impressive diversity of vegetables, such as tomatoes, radishes, kohlrabi, lettuce, kale, cabbage, snap peas, potatoes, onions, garlic, turnips, zucchini, and squash, often planting several varieties, and often including honey, berries, herbs, and/or flowers. When I asked Ann to list the vegetables she grows, the list took her a full ninety seconds to get through. She ended by saying definitively, "There's no monoculture going on at all." All of the small farmers I spoke with valued this diversity and repeatedly told me it was a crucial part of their farm.

Even in the first conversations Jeni had with her father about the prospect of her farming, the different ways the two thought about growing vegetables was obvious. While they both liked tomatoes and agreed tomatoes would be good to grow, he imagined growing exclusively Beefsteak tomatoes. Jeni, on the other hand, said, "I was looking into heirloom varieties and trying to get some biodiversity out there, different varieties to see what grows best here." Besides her thirteen varieties of tomatoes, she also planted "three-sisters" gardens, which bring together sweet corn, a variety of beans, and either cucumber, zucchini, or fall squashes.

Similar to Jeni's desire to "see what grows best here," is Linda's philosophy of "if you don't do well on my farm, you can't stay…I'm always trying new things. What really does well, I keep, and what doesn't, I don't worry about!" By trying new varieties of vegetables and only continuing types that naturally prosper, Linda encourages diversity and avoids going to extremes to keep an ill-suited type alive. Diversity also shows up on Linda's farm in the multiple roles she requires every part to play: she said everything on her farm must serve at least three purposes. For example, chickens provide eggs and manure, eat bugs, and can be eaten or sold as meat.

Of the women I talked to, all who farmed small acreages displayed a similar sort of crop diversity; it is hard for me to imagine them growing any other way on the land they have and with the values they expressed. They embody alternative agriculture's paradigm of choosing diversity over specialization. In the 19th century, Karl Marx offered a different take on the benefits of diversity in his essay, "Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook" when he writes,

> For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic (78).

I will return to materialist theory later when discussing possible solutions to industrial agriculture's problems, but I feel it is fruitful to situate Marx within my discussion of agriculture now. I see Marx's critical view of specialization as parallel to alternative agriculture's criticism of industrial agriculture's specialization, both in the perceived damage caused by a specialized system, and in the potential good created by a system which allows for more diversity. Just as Marx sees happier, more productive citizens living in a communist society where they are allowed to pursue different interests at different times of day, without being locked into one defining path, alternative farmers raise healthier, "happier" crops in a diverse garden rather than in nearly identical rows. In his classic, *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry (19) wrote, "The disease of the modern character is specialization;" although he was describing the trend in contemporary society to funnel people into a single career, specialization, whose extreme is huge corn and soybean monocultures, is equally a disease of modern agriculture.

Due to their increased vulnerability to pests, weather, and disease, monocultures require more chemical treatments to prosper. The pesticides and herbicides applied to conventional crops pose heath risks to both field workers and customers who digest them. Atrazine, for example, remains one of the most common herbicides in the Unites States despite its links to heart and lung congestion, muscle spasms, retina damage, and cancer (Roberts 217). Insecticides and fungicides, which work by disrupting pests' central nervous systems, are based on organophosphate molecules, which were incidentally tested by the German military in the 1920s as a human nerve agent (Roberts 218). Although only one of the small farmers I spoke with, Angela, was certified organic, all the women used few or no chemicals and were consciously trying to avoid spraying.

Dawn grew up visiting her uncles' small farm operation and learning sustainability from their practices. She told me it had been her dream to get back to her agricultural roots – even when she was selling insurance, she was always gardening. Now that she's working part time and has more time for gardening, she can put her uncles' practices to use on a slightly bigger scale. "I'm not organic," she told me, "but I grow as close to organic as I can because if I'm going to eat it, I'm going to want it to be good and healthy, and I don't want to sell something that isn't." Later in the interview, Dawn told me how she seeks out alternative methods for pest control, like using human hair to deter deer. Dawn's acreage is surrounded on three sides by a conventional farm growing corn – in my field notes from that day, I wrote that the stalks on all sides made me feel "claustrophobic," but such close proximity to a conventional operation can have much worse consequences for a small farm trying to use organic methods, as Jill found out.

Jill and her husband, Sean, chose to move to Iowa and start farming vegetables after deciding they wanted to "work on something that has such lasting repercussions." They were

lucky to get some help from family with obtaining land, but unlucky in that they were directly next to a large, conventional operation. Last year they were hit with three herbicide oversprays that rendered a majority of their produce illegal to sell as food. They could not sell any of that produce at the farmers market, and they chose to give their CSA members the option of being reimbursed for the remainder of the season. Even when farmers choose not to use chemicals in their own gardens, irresponsible use by others or accidents can seriously hurt their crops and income. Jeni is struggling with preventing a similar problem from happening to her. While her gardens are thirty feet from the edge of where her father sprays, (the minimum distance for organic certification), she does not think thirty feet is sufficient to prevent cross-pollination or keep chemicals out of her gardens. When we were talking in her living room, she gestured out the window to the driveway and said, "You may have seen, just now, a chemical truck drive in, which drives me nuts…This is the second time they're spraying the fields, and the first time I was in my gardens working, and all of a sudden I smell moldy clothes….I'm trying to get my dad to not spray the part of his field that's the closest [to her gardens]." Jeni fears what Jill experienced: a small farms' status as chemical-free is not just dependent on the desires of the individual farmer, but also on choices of neighboring farmers.

Similar to monoculture's necessity for pesticides to stave off the metaphorical diseases of specialization, antibiotics stave off diseases in specialized factory farms and CAFOS. The problems with industrially farming animals span a frighteningly large spectrum, including ethical issues (searing off live chickens' beaks), practical issues (toxic "poop lagoons" contaminating nearby water), and health issues (animals denied the privilege of movement or exercise are more susceptible to disease, and have a higher fat content). Conversely, the women I talked with were extremely concerned with animal welfare, and often considered it an ethical issue. Jill explained,

> How we handle our animals, I think that's a huge part of ethics in farms. We are big proponents of what a friend of ours calls 'happy meat'….We raise chickens, when the chickens are done laying, what are you going to do with them? You either make them a part of the farm system, or you don't. Our chickens live very happy, healthy lives. We encourage their nature as chickens and let them do their chicken-y thing in the best way we can, and when their productive life is over, in the most humane way we can, we have them butchered and we eat them. They're a part of our farm system.

Most of the women I spoke with raised chickens in a way similar to Jill; these chickens not only lead vastly happier lives than factory chickens, the food they eventually become is healthier (and tastier) for humans.

Lois was the only woman with whom I spoke whose main operation was livestock. A textbook example of the advantages small animal operations have over large ones, she raises fifteen goats and makes goat cheese to sell at farmers markets. Her goats were obviously happy animals – when we walked into the barn, many of them rushed to the gate to affectionately push their heads against Lois' hands. The kids, in a separate area, actually started climbing over each other in their eagerness to get to us. The barn and outdoor yard were clean and gave the goats ample room to move around and climb. Lois, who refers to all the goats by name, also told me that once or twice a week she takes the goats through the surrounding woods so they can diversify their diet with wild plants. Perhaps most impressively, Lois said she uses antibiotics extremely rarely, only if a goat is sick or suffering. By contrast, a large-scale cattle operation typically feed its animals antibiotics routinely once a day – the drugs are needed to keep "feedlot bloat" in check. "Feedlot bloat," which can kill cows, is caused by the unnatural diet of grain fed to animals that evolved to eat grass (Singer 61,2). Lois' small-scale operation lets her keep track of individual animals' health and take action before they are at risk. Her common-sense reasoning was, "If you keep them healthy and keep good nutrition, then you very rarely have to use antibiotics. Just like in people." Her methods work: her goat cheese, which I bought at the

Des Moines Farmers Market, was notably fresher tasting than the mass-produced goat cheese I usually buy at the grocery store.

Small-scale agriculture, often with an emphasis on diversity, is the backbone of the alternative agriculture movement. The women I spoke with valued the diversity of their gardens and worked hard to maintain it; while they spoke more about the positives of having a range of vegetables and products than the potential negative consequences of specialization, I believe they would agree with my critiques of a specialized system. My consultants did voice direct opposition to chemical use and inhumane treatment of animals, most often citing health and ethical concerns. As vehement as their objections are, however, I think the actual way they have chosen to farm – minimal to no chemical usage and responsible treatment of animals – voices their opinions even louder.

CONSUMER AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE

Of course, it is not sufficient only to point out the problems in the dominant system of American agriculture; one should offer a better option. I have argued that the diversity of produce, wariness of chemicals and suspicion of transgenic crops demonstrated by the women I spoke with make their alternative methods a more attractive alternative from sustainability and health perspectives, but if my argument ended there, small, local systems would remain exactly that: an alternative. Small agriculture offers A, industrial agriculture offers B. Same spectrum, different choices. The soul of the alternative movement lies in the benefits it offers, both for producers and consumers, for which industrial agriculture has no counter. Small agriculture offers A, industrial agriculture has nothing. In this section, I explore the aspects of the alternative movement that are unique to small, locally oriented food systems.

The third difference Beus identifies between conventional and alternative agriculture is *"competition vs. community."* Beus (604) refers to industrialized agriculture's deleterious effects, namely forcing small farms out of business, on rural communities over the last century. In the 19th and 20th centuries small farming populations had a community feel – interestingly, often driven primarily by farmwomen's "neighboring" efforts (Neth 70) – that is hard to find today. But community is anything but a dated concept, and embracing local foods is one of the most important methods we have to connect with neighbors in a society increasingly focused on individuals. Across time and cultures, food is something that draws people together, be it for growing, harvesting, cooking, or eating. Many writers (Michael Pollan and Wendell Berry come to mind) have already drawn attention to the fact that current American society is less connected to its food and the people who grow it than ever before. The supermarket, with its aisles of carefully packaged food (or, to use Pollan's phrase, "edible foodlike substances,") with no hint of where or by whom it was produced, is the ultimate symbol of this detachment.

One of the most obvious ways to fight this is to know from where one's food comes, an idea many of the women I interviewed endorsed by offering a standing invitation to their customers to visit their farm and see the vegetables still in the ground. Dawn explained, "Your customers like to put a face with their food…I tell all my customers, 'If you want to come out to my garden, come on out, look at it.'" A customer who accepts an offer to visit the farm is not only forming a deeper connection with the food, she is also forming important community and networking ties. Susan felt that the connections she formed though her CSA pickups were as important as the actual growing she did: "I'm not just a grower by any means…I feel like the success of our CSA is largely related to not only to what we provide, but the way we provide it, and the way that we promote it, and the connection that we make with people. It's definitely not

just about growing." Jan and Jill saw fostering these relationships as a definite benefit, something to be proud of and strive for. Jan told me, "I know there's a very strong sense of support and care between members and the farmer; it's a very supportive type of work." When I asked Jill about the main benefits of buying local, she said, "The two most important things are community economics and knowing the history of the product…being able to see that process when it's available, or at least being able to talk to those people, it makes all the difference in the world…Being able to be the person that offers that connection, even in a small way, is really phenomenal." Getting people to local farms is such a priority for farmers that several of them, including Lois and Jill, organized "Farm Crawl," a day-long public tour of area farms with featured events and tastings, which drew a crowd of 700 people in 2007, its first year.

Small scale, locally targeted farming fosters a sense of community not only between the customers and their farmer, but also between the farmers in one area. During the tour she gave me of her farm, Suzanne spoke positively about an agreement between her husband, Barney, and a friend of his. Floyd had been renting Barney his pasture for years, an agreement that Suzanne described as friendly and "done with a handshake," something that seems impossible without ties of friendship fostered by farming near each other for years. Jill and her husband had also benefited from existing farm community ties when they moved from Texas to Iowa. Lois had gone to church with Jill's grandfather and gotten to know her family, so Jill had a contact in Lois as soon as she arrived. The two became friends and now work together: Lois buys hay from Jill, whose CSA has the option of purchasing a goat cheese share from Lois, which features Jill's fresh herbs, and the two sell next to each other at the Des Moines farmers market. As Lois observed, "We have a great little network in this area…we all support each other." Such networking facilitates more productive, enjoyable, and ultimately sustainable farming.

Community ties benefit customers, perhaps especially those who did not grow up cooking or eating raw vegetables, by providing them with a supportive learning environment. Many of the women I interviewed spoke of their role as an educator with as much passion as their role as a grower, placing importance not just on giving their customers fresh, healthy food, but also making sure they knew what to do with it. Speaking about her role at the farmers market where her CSA members pick up their share, Susan said, "[At the market] the only job I have other than keeping the bulk containers filled is talking to people, and it's almost one hundred percent about how to cook something, responding to that question of 'I know I should eat this, but what do I do with it? How do I make it edible for my family?' We do a lot with recipes, and the more recipes we give, the happier people are." When I asked Angela and Dawn if their motivations for farming had changed at all since they got started, both told me they enjoyed teaching their customers more than they originally anticipated. Angela answered, "Connecting people to their food, I enjoy the educational process maybe more than I thought I would. Teaching people about their food, if they don't know what a vegetable is, or how to cook it." Dawn told me about how happy it made her for customers to come back to her after trying a vegetable they didn't recognize, wanting to learn more. They might have also been returning, of course, because of her generosity: she said, "If I have customers that come and they don't know what something is, I try to educate them as much as I can, but I also try to give them something to take home and try." Jeni looked forward to her role as an educator at future farmers markets, but she was more excited about growing heritage breeds that people had never seen before and telling customers about the vegetables' histories.

Knowing the best ways to prepare vegetables is undoubtedly an important part of fully enjoying them, but perhaps it is slightly less important for local, seasonal produce naturally

packed with flavor. It's hard to mess up a perfectly ripened tomato from two miles away, bought the day of harvest. When I asked Ann and Laura what their customers valued most about their produce, the first thing both mentioned was "freshness" or "taste." Ann went on to say, "The fact that I can harvest these vegetables when they're ripe, so that they have the maximum nutrient amount. They taste better. They may not ship worth a darn, but you use them right away and they're so much better." When produce does not need to travel thousands of miles, farmers can leave it on the vine (or tree, or in the soil) until it is naturally ripe, then pick and sell it the same day. They do not need to factor in concerns such as enduring long truck rides or holding a long shelf life, which continually plague big farms shipping to far-away grocery stores. Small farmers also have more time to invest in every individual plant, personal attention which helps ensure a better product. The pay-off for attention invested in individuals is perhaps even more apparent in livestock, like Lois' goats. Lois, who has named all her goats and is clearly fond of them (at the farmers market, her sign calls them "our girls," and she told me one of the hardest parts was selling goats after they had "become such good friends), has won awards for her cheese. Like Ann and Laura, she did not hesitate when I asked what her customers valued most about her cheese: "The fact that it doesn't have a goaty flavor, that's what I'm going for, it's just very mild. Fresh herbs, those things make a difference. I think it's just mostly the flavor."

So local foods taste better, help community, and as an added bonus you can probably learn to prepare them from the same people who grew them. But they cost more, sometimes significantly more, than their conventional counterparts. It is true that two dollars for a dozen eggs can seem steep compared to 79 cent Flavorite eggs at Fareway, but aside from the fact that local foods reflect the real cost of production and are priced to give farmers a living wage, local foods can actually be one of the best options for lower-income people because of the openness

many local producers have to alternative payment plans, bartering, and donation. While unsold conventional food on the grocery store shelves goes bad and is thrown out, unsold food at farmers markets is more often donated to food pantries. When I asked if she had a "work-for-share option", Susan told me, "People can come out here and work for vegetables, yeah. But largely what we do is we take any kind of payment plan, and we barter…we offer whatever will work for people…All of our excess goes to food pantries, and right now it's going to elderly housing units. In general, if we have excess it goes for free to low-income people." Jill, who also offers a work for share option, was the first person to tell me about it. Essentially, work-for-share allows anyone who wants a CSA share to work out a deal with the farmer where he or she works on the farm for a set number of hours a week or season, but instead of wages, they received a free or discounted share. Such flexibility is typical of the alternative foods movement and helps ensure anyone, not just wealthy, have access to the freshest and healthiest local produce. Jeni hopes to take this a step further by involving local school systems and ingraining good eating habits in kids at a young age. She said, "I want to try to get schools involved…What if I have [excess produce], and I could just donate it, that's going to create a good relationship with my community, and it's going to start giving these kids some food that'll actually help their brains." Jeni later told me about a social worker friend of hers who works with at-risk kids. The two of them are brainstorming a field trip for the kids to Jeni's farm that would culminate in a vegetable treasure hunt and brief cooking lesson. Social justice ideals are found not only in the community surrounding a farm, of course – Lois is an excellent example of how such principles can do good right on the farm. Lois, who employees three people to help with various parts of her production, told me, "I pay my employees pretty well, because I just think they deserve a fair wage for what they're doing. I don't pay minimum wage." Small scale farming requires that the

farmer knows her employees personally, which naturally encourages her to treat them better than big corporations treat field workers. Well-paid workers and educated customers eating the freshest produce intuitively leads to happier communities, a benefit inherent in alternative farm systems with which industrial agriculture simply cannot compete.

PERSONAL BENEFITS OF GROWING ALTERNATIVELY

The benefits of alternative agriculture I discussed in the previous section are some of the most important aspects of the movement; they are also all focused on interpersonal relationships. Fostering ties between community members, between customers and farmers, and between farm employees and employers: these interactions are immensely valuable, and they are all within the public sphere. Starting my research, I was also curious about what personal benefits small-scale farming could provide to growers. In the introduction to her article, "Gendered Elements of the Alternative Agriculture Paradigm", Chiappe (374) writes,

> To what degree does the male derived paradigm leave out elements essential for the effective development of technology, policy, and education capable of facilitating a movement toward a more sustainable food system? By focusing specifically on farm women's views of sustainability, and locating them contextually, we attempt to bring a gender perspective to the alternative agriculture paradigm.

Chiappe's research found that women do value the six elements of Beus' alternative agriculture paradigm, but also included two new areas in their definition: quality family life and spirituality. My interviews broadly supported Chiappe's findings, but with interesting and widely varied interpretations of spirituality's relationship to farming, and some dissension about farming's effect on family and marriages. Since I spoke only to women, and thus do not know if men in the areas and communities I visited would also identify spirituality and family life as important tenets, I have refrained from citing gender as strictly causal for these values and have instead chosen to label them "personal benefits," ones that are experienced in the private sphere.

The women I spoke with who farmed on small acreages split themselves almost perfectly into two camps when I asked them about a relationship between spirituality and farming. The smaller of these two groups described their spiritual relationship to the Earth and farming in traditionally Christian-sounding terms, such as not being fully in charge and taking care of God's creation. Laura told me unambiguously,

> I'm a pretty conservative Christian, and so, yeah, taking care of the planet it pretty much a faith issue to me…I guess it just seems like a sin to destroy things, I can't think of any other way to put it. It would be a sin not to take care of things as good as you can, so why would you not do that? Why would you on purpose do something you knew was destructive?

Ann also explained how she saw her role as a caretaker, "I know I didn't create this earth, something had to create it. I'm just here to take care of it, and make sure it's in better condition when I'm not here. That's the spiritual aspect of it to me." The majority of women I interviewed had very similar farming practices to Ann and Laura – focus on fresh produce, minimal or zero chemicals, sustainable soil usage – but painted their spiritual beliefs in more liberal, free form terms. Linda and Angela are both Unitarian Universalists, and both cited the seventh Unitarian principle, respect for "the interconnected web of all existence," as an important tie between their spirituality and their farm. Viewing the farm as part of a broader ecological system as well as a system unto itself feeds spirituality by reminding farmers of their connections to the natural world and the interdependent nature of growing. Angela, who majored in chemistry and then spent time as a Unitarian religious educator, even described her farm as a "happy meeting ground" between science and spirituality. She said, "I think I've combined the two, science and spirituality, by having the farm." Similarly, Denise, Jeni, and Jill all voiced an appreciation of Native American spirituality and methods of collaborating with the land. Denise said, "We [she and her husband, Larry] both more or less embrace a Native

American aspect of working with the land, how we can work in harmony and do no harm, and that sort of thing. And I think that's always been a part of me, somehow, it's been there."

Of course, all of the women I spoke with expressed their spiritually in very individual terms, but I noticed a rough unity in women's recognition of the spiritual aspects of simply being outside. After telling me that she doesn't consider herself "religious" in traditional or conservative terms, Dawn told me, "To me, my religion is when I'm out in the garden. That's when I seem to connect with whatever's there. I feel it in the things that grow, and how they grow for me." Angela expressed a similar sentiment by modestly saying, "Well, it feeds my spirit to be out among nature." Spirituality was the topic with the most agreement among my consultants – there were differences of opinion, but no one answered negatively when I asked if they thought there was a connection between farming and spirituality until I interviewed Donna. Donna paused for a moment before simply responding, "I don't." I asked if anyone in her family did, and she said she did not think so. Donna is not an unreligious person – she told me about her efforts to keep her small church from closing for lack of funding – but for her, spirituality and farming are unrelated. This could be because her work on the farm, mainly bookkeeping and finances, does not bring her out into nature, or it could imply a more profound difference between small and large-scale farmers. Certainly one interview is not sufficient evidence to indicate causality or draw conclusions, but I nevertheless find it interesting to note that the only conventional, corn and beans farmer I interviewed was also the only one who did not see a connection between spirituality and farming.

However unusual Donna's response to my spirituality question was, she was still aligned with my other consultants in the other "personal" realm I chose to explore: family. Donna said her farm used to hire farm laborers, but in the 1980s chose to use exclusively family labor, a

change which Donna said has made the farm "much, much better." The women I spoke with varied in the degree their families were involved in their farming operation, but all of them could tell me ways it had affected their familial relationships. Farming can have a huge impact on family dynamics – either positive or negative – and the women I interviewed represented that entire spectrum. Susan was perhaps the most extreme example of the different effects farming can have one one's personal life. She told me that her kids enjoyed working on the farm: "Family life, I think it's been a really good life for the kids and I. They have lots of good memories about it…I would say that my kids, all of them, would say that there has been many positive aspects to it." Her children, who had "really wanted to farm," were part of her motivation to begin farming in the 1990s, and all helped her with the farm work while they were growing up. But while farming was enjoyable and beneficial for her children, it was not what Susan's ex-husband ultimately wanted to be doing. Before telling me about the pleasure and skills her children got out of working on the farm, Susan told me, "Family life and marriage would be separate. My husband was never happy with it, and that was part of the reason he left…he was a city boy who thought he could be a farmer. He was never happy with it, he didn't like all the work, all the stress, the financial ups and downs of farming. So, marriage, it didn't work." Lois also described some marital tension due to her decision to start the goat dairy, although she said her husband was "starting to come around," perhaps prompted by the success she's had at selling. Lois' husband may have had some preliminary doubts about the financial wisdom of starting a small business, but Lois' twelve-year-old son, Ben, has always been excited about the dairy. I met Ben during the interview – he was reading up in preparation for showing the goats at an upcoming 4-H event – and he was decidedly supportive of his mother's operation. Despite Ben's thorough endorsement (he was actually part of the reason she started the dairy),

Lois still voiced some personal discomfort that she was neglecting maternal responsibilities; she said, “I still struggle as a woman, too, in feeling, ‘Am I neglecting my son?’ Should I be doing more with him? Should I be making him be more a part of this? Am I being selfish for doing this project?...He tells me ‘Mom, I’m fine, I’m glad you’re doing this, I love this,’ but I still feel guilty sometimes. And I think that’s unique to women.”

Lois and Susan are unique among the women I interviewed in telling me that their choice to farm produced a degree of marital tension, but their children’s excitement about farming and eagerness to help was a common theme. Linda told me about the deliberate choice she and Mark had made to farm together and raise their children on the farm; “It was very intentional, and then how we raise them while we’re here, they very much have chores. It is a lifestyle choice.” During the interview, I got to know her youngest child, Martin, a little bit as he followed us around and eagerly did all the small chores Linda assigned him. Although Martin is her only child who was born on the farm, she described all three of her children as being “of this farm,” and she told me, “It’s so easy to be a parent out here. I know where my kids are.” Since Mark and Linda had chosen farming as a way to live their shared values, they became mutually reliant on each other’s dedication. “I could never do this without [Mark], I don’t think we could do it without each other,” she said. “And that’s really lucky, we’re really lucky to have each other.”

Linda’s view of farming as a lifestyle in which to raise her family was one shared by Ann, whose children grew up helping her. She explained, “I’ve used the CSA and the farmers market experiences as more, not necessarily to be a primary income maker for me, but more as a way to educate my own children…It is a lifestyle choice. It provides a routine, they know there’s work expected to be done every day, between animal chores and activities in the garden.” Jan, on the other hand, said she started farming because “I was interested in doing something to

keep my sanity, and not get lost just in raising children," although as her two children got older they did help her full time on the farm. Jan's husband, Tim, also quit his professional career in 2002, and they "made a commitment to farm full time together." Dawn was unique among the women I spoke with because she told me, "I don't think it has really affected it," when I asked her how farming had affected her family life, although I suspect this may have been a problem with my wording. Throughout the interview, she referred to her kids helping her farm, her daughter getting her into selling bouquets, herbs, and mixed greens, and her turning her "city kid" fiancé, Andy, into a farmer.

Every woman I talked with experienced the relationship between spirituality, family life, and farming uniquely, but among the smaller, alternative farmers, all articulated connections between their choice to farm and the private spheres of their life. Although farming did not mesh with every marriage, all of the women who had children recognized farming as a positive environment in which to raise a family. Farming and spirituality were also intrinsically linked for every alternative farmer with whom I spoke. I believe that alternative farming's way of integrating itself into every area of a farmer's life, usually, although not always, in a positive way, is a key component of its importance. When farming is one interrelated part of the farmer's entire life, and not a job or list of chores, it will be more enjoyable, productive, and sustainable.

WOMEN'S VIEWS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOCAL AND ORGANIC

Concluding his book, *Organic, Inc.*, Fromartz (252) writes, "In general, I find the debate about whether local is better than organic tiresome because each represents such a small portion (1 to 2 percent) of the food supply. It's like two people in a room of one hundred arguing about who has the most righteous alternative to what the other ninety-eight are doing. Both are right for different reasons and can thrive simultaneously." I am genuinely sorry this debate bores

Fromartz, because it is one of the most fundamental questions America must answer about the future of its food system. Studies have shown that organic is a healthier alternative to conventional food (organic produce has 2/3 less pesticide residue than conventional, and children fed an organic diet do not have the pesticide residue in their urine that other children do), but the industrial culture that has sprung up behind it, lobbying to water down the standards and shipping produce thousands of miles, is problematic (Fromartz 2). Local food supports communities and is environmentally friendlier for cutting down on transportation costs, but does not necessarily preclude pesticide use. However, using organic practices was still the intuitive choice for every small farmer I spoke with, even though only one was certified organic. Incorporating organic practices into the local foods movement allows producers and consumers the best of both worlds, offers one integrated alternative to the dominant food system instead of two simultaneous, yet conflicting, options and is a solution voiced by many of my consultants.

"I don't foresee the need to ever be certified organic, because there's so much paperwork, and so much of all that stuff. Like I said, if people don't believe me, they can come out and look." Dawn's words exemplify two important parts of the alternative movement as I now understand it. First, although she is committed to farming without pesticides, the actual certification process is simply too expensive and too much of a hassle to warrant it. Susan ("We do everything following the organic rules, but I'm not certified…The extra paperwork it would involve…I just didn't see that it made sense from a financial perspective") and Jan ("We are using organic practices, but we are not certified organic. So we do not market ourselves as organic, but we describe our practices to our members") told me similar stories. Second, Dawn is happy to show any customer her garden and talk to them about her practices. As Jan told me, "local food is all about accountability, honesty, and integrity;" buying local facilitates trusting,

personal relationships that can assuage customers' worries about pesticides just as well as, possibly better than, an organic label.

Organic is a weighty word today; while organic products are praised by the popular media and displayed prominently at Whole Foods, organic is also scorned by some members of the alternative movement for basically selling out. Linda told me, "Organic has been pretty industrialized, it has been used for a profit. Once the USDA made the standards, and the lobbyists had a chance to influence it, it made me really sad, although it could have been a whole lot worse…I think the organic movement is how it started, and now it's evolving into something more complex and far-reaching." Once big agriculture realized how much more customers were willing to pay for food they perceived as healthier and safer, it wanted a piece – a big piece – of those sales. Meanwhile, the truly alternative farmers were looking further than limiting pesticide use, wanting to create farms and relationships that were truly sustainable and beneficial to communities, something as far from big organic's mind as from conventional big agriculture's. Jan explained her view, "I think that when you look at organic standards, those are all built around a production factor. And the local food movement incorporates, or encompasses, a much broader range of issues than production alone. So I think organic certainly has a pretty key part to play, but I think if we want to grow this local food system, we have to make sure that we're paying attention to all the dimensions that need work."

The industrialization of organic has prompted many people, myself included, to now see local as the better choice. When possible, buying locally and seasonally from neighbors farming small acreages is truer to the roots of the alternative movement and is ultimately the more sustainable option than shipping Earthbound Organic salad mix from California in January. Some of the women I spoke with, like Jeni, expressed this explicit preference for local. She said,

"It's too bad that [organic and local] can't always work together, but especially when you're talking about certified, it just does not always work with supporting your local community. It's going to go towards local, or both...I think local can surpass organic." Denise voiced a similar opinion, with a note of optimism: "I know, at this point in time, that local trumps organic. But I would hope that there wouldn't be that much difference if everybody would be organic."

Interestingly, the only woman I interviewed who was certified, Angela, had a distinctly different view of organic. Angela was somewhat critical of the term "chemical free," which many farmers who are not certified but employ organic practices use to avoid legal problems, saying that it was a "misnomer" and "not enough." Angela described organic as "nothing more than a label for people to know how you're growing your food. I mean, it's for the benefit of the consumer to find someone that grows food in a certain manner, otherwise, why would I pay hundreds of dollars to get certified?" Angela was also the only person I interviewed who saw local and organic as "totally separate issues." Although she does not see a connection between the two issues, I could not help but observe that she is, in fact, living the connection. She is an organic farmer who sells exclusively to local markets – she told me that most of her CSA customers live within a 25-mile radius of her.

Local and organic are an intuitive fit. I do not necessarily mean organic as the strict USDA certification standards, but a flexible organic, even one that is willing to make exceptions. For example, Laura told me, "I dream of being an organic farmer," and does not consider herself conventional "in any sense of the word," but on rare occasion she has sprayed for bugs: two and a half pounds, over twelve years. Farming organically should not just entail checking items off a list while trying to find loopholes, it should be rooted in a deep understanding of why such methods are used. Local and organic make sense together for consumers, as well. In fact, many

farmers market customers already assume a connection; Jill told me, "There's a misconception, certainly among consumers at the Des Moines market, and I'm guessing that they're not unique, that people think that if it's at the farmers market, it's organic, it's chemical free." Susan agreed, saying "I think people make the assumption that when you're local, you're organic."

It seems clear, then, that customers and producers should primarily support local producers, but work to make organic practices a solid tenet of the local ideology. Much of the work is already done; none of the local farmers I interviewed farmed conventionally, and those that did occasionally use chemicals were actively seeking ways to reduce their use. Smaller scale, diverse farming naturally requires fewer chemicals than huge monocultures, making the transition easier. Combining local with organic is on many farmers' minds and seems to be something of a goal for the near future. Denise said logically, "I would like to see them as one. I mean, I would hope that everybody would have access to safe, healthy, organic food." Since local farmers are more likely to donate excess to food pantries and be amenable to alternative payment plans, local foods is one of the best ways to feed the community. When those local farmers use organic methods, everyone in the community eats better. Jeni pointed out one of the most compelling reasons that local and organic go so well together when she said "If you're dealing on a local level, then people are more likely to see their impact on their environment, and be more organically minded, anyways, even if they're not certified organic." Farmers who see the results their practices have on the environment would naturally want to minimize or eliminate harmful practices, and those seeing the people they're selling to would want to feed those customers the best food they can. I imagine it is harder to hand your neighbor a bag of lettuce you sprayed with chemicals than it is to ship that lettuce off to an anonymous grocery store and faceless customers. The women I interviewed were living examples of the connection between

organic and local, farming and selling locally while doing the best they could to use as few chemicals as possible and do as much good for the earth as possible. Revising how we think about organic, and seeing it as a vital component of the local foods movement instead of the be-all and end-all of healthy eating will ultimately result in better farming practices, superior food, and a more sustainable alternative to conventional agriculture.

"THE WOMAN THING"

Finally, what effect does gender have on shaping these women's opinions on the food and agricultural issues I explored? Undoubtedly, being a female farmer is different than being a male farmer. Most women could tell me about gender-specific challenges they faced, the most common being an assumption by farm visitors and store clerks that questions should be addressed to the husband (even when he did not farm), and feeling unprepared to use farm machinery because of a gap in background education or because the machines are designed for a male operator. However, these sorts of prejudices are well documented, widely acknowledged, and for the most part, gradually improving. I am more interested in investigating gender not as a hindrance, but to see if it is an active cause of women's beliefs and opinions about farming. This section explores the degrees of importance the women I interviewed place on "the woman thing" in determining their approach to farming. They fall into two broad schools – women who emphasize their gender as significantly influencing their farming methods, and those who give higher priority to factors such as background, personality, or education. As would be expected, this is a complicated issue on which many women went back and forth. I do not attempt to draw a definite conclusion about gender's causality, but to present the different perspectives women have on what it means to be a woman farmer.

Women who affirmatively answered my question, "Does being a woman give you a different perspective on farming?" frequently cited women's traditional role as caretakers. Women are often in charge of feeding and caring for children, and this tendency towards nurturing can also be applied to the land, especially when growing food. Angela told me, "Certainly there tend to be nurturing issues, and that's why I think there might be more women growing the food than men, or more women interested in it because of the nurturing tendencies…They tend to be the caretakers, and they tend to be the ones that feed the rest of the family." Lois felt strongly that her intuitive nurturing side better prepared her to take care of animals. She said, "I do think women are much better livestock managers, because we're much more sensitive to changes in the animals, we're much more observant…If someone's hanging back and not behaving typically, that's usually your first sign of illness. And I can pick those things up quickly… whereas a lot of men wouldn't even notice it or pay attention to it until they're sick and down." Denise told me she resisted essentializing statements like "women are nurturers," but she conceded that "Women do have babies, women do take care of children, and women do put food on the table...and in the world, women are the majority of farmers." Dawn articulated a similar idea to me by describing "the mother mode," to which she attributed the desire to "mother things" and "take care of them," a mindset that seems exclusive to women and to translate well into farming. Dawn also saw more fundamental differences between women and men in terms of the relationships people form with the land. When I asked her if being a woman gave her a different perspective on farming, she answered:

> I think it does. I think it gives you more of a connection with the earth, and I think it gives you more of a connection with the food…A lot of the guys I see are vendors growing and selling, and I don't see the connection or the love for the stuff like the women…I think it's just the woman thing, we get so wrapped up in what we do and it's a passion, where sometimes with the guys they just do it.

Dawn also credited this innate connection to the land and the vegetables she grows with giving her a different perspective on sustainability. Leigh talked about women's different way of looking at sustainability, as well. She began by saying that while there are definitely lots of men who value sustainable practices, there might still be a gendered difference in approach. She said, "I think if there is a difference, it probably comes from the fact that women are by nature more synthetic thinkers. We think less linearly, we think in more holistic terms, and that's the way our brains are wired. I think women in general see consequences and connections more readily than men tend to." Leigh also speculated that cultural forces might be more aimed at pressuring boys to be a "corporate success;" I inferred that it might be more socially acceptable for women to garden than men, and men might get more negative feedback from neighbors or friends about choosing to run a small scale vegetable production. The holistic way of thinking which Leigh attributed to women was echoed by Jan's take on women's inherent skills. She said, "In this style of farming, it requires a lot of multitasking skills, and a lot of communication skills, and women have a lot of ability and a lot of skill in that…so yeah, I think women have a lot of advantage." Several of the women I interviewed named specific advantages to being a woman farmer, such as being naturally attuned to the earth, nurturing tendencies, or the different way women have of conceptualizing and approaching problems.

My next section examines theory's usefulness in analyzing women's approaches to farming, but I believe a brief consideration of classic idealist theory here provides a useful framework to conceptualize the women's attitudes that I have just presented. Émile Durkheim, a major idealist thinker in the 19th century, summarizes an important tenet of idealist thought in his essay *What Is a Social Fact?* He writes, "If the population crowds into our cities instead of scattering into the country, this is due to a trend of public opinion, a collective drive that imposes

this concentration upon the individuals" (90). Essentially, people's thoughts shape their actions. When my consultants voiced statements like "women are nurturers," "women are holistic thinkers," or "women are connected to the earth," they were voicing thoughts and beliefs that had an effect on their actions, namely the way they chose to farm. Idealist thought promotes gender as a determining factor in women's decisions about farming in a "nurturing" way or in a way that shows a more respectful connection to the earth. Because of society's (and their own) beliefs about "womanhood," they farm in ways that fulfill this idea.

But giving gender an exclusive causal role in forming one's opinions or methods is an oversimplification. Gender is, of course, still just one factor in the composition of one's mindset and approach to farming or sustainability, and its importance in shaping the overall concept remains flexible and individual. Linda articulated some of this when she said, "I think how I view the farm is different because I'm a woman, but I don't know. I don't view it as a commodity. But I don't know if that's a biologist thing or a woman thing, I can't really tease out the difference." Laura was even more sure that her view of the farm was unaffected by being woman; she told me, "My approach to sustainability comes from my education, because I have so much ecology and systems thinking in my education, that I see sustainability as a component of functionality. If you want the farm to work, you've got to be sustainable. I would say that's because of my education, and not because of my gender." Angela, who has a degree in chemistry, told me simply, "I don't see that as being a gender issue" when I asked if being a woman affected her view of sustainability. Susan answered similarly, attributing her view of sustainability more to her involvement in Practical Farmers of Iowa than to being a woman. Besides education and formal farming communities, some women also saw their farming approach coming directly out of small-scale agriculture itself, rather than being a woman. Jill

said, “I think it’s more personality based sex roles than specifically ‘I’m a female so I see it differently.’ I think the way that we have chosen to farm colors my perspective on farming more than my gender…I think personality has more effect than gender…just the base philosophy of why we do what we do, I think is probably more a part of that than gender.” Reaping the benefits of choosing to farm a small acreage in a sustainable, community-friendly way can cement the importance and appropriateness of such farming methods more than just being a woman could.

Donna offered an interesting contrast to the other women I interviewed, effectively sitting on the fence between gender and other factors as primary. When I asked her if gender gave her a different perspective on sustainability, she first said, “A lot of my ideas now have come about from working with the Farmers Union.” I thought she was starting to deemphasize gender, but she continued, “We have to get back to more sustainability, where we’re not using up our resources or shipping them over seas. I don’t know whether my sons think that way or not. I’m not sure that my husband even does.” “But you do?” I asked. “I do,” she answered. While the Farmers Union influenced her attitude towards sustainability more than her gender, she still holds a distinctly different opinion than her husband and sons. Gender is always a tricky thing to trace opinions or behaviors back to; it is sometimes easier, more socially acceptable, or simply truer to say education, colleagues, or personality are more important influences than gender. Nevertheless, a significant number of the women I spoke with still felt that being a woman gave them notable advantages in farming and colored their perspective in an important way. Every individual’s relationship with gender and the extent to which it manifested itself in her work is unique; while some saw their farming methods as expressing commonly held beliefs about

womanhood and femininity, others firmly rejected the suggestion that their gender could have such influence.

DISCUSSION: THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

In his 2008 article, "Rethinking the Meat-Guzzler," New York Times food columnist Mark Bittman wrote, "Perhaps the best hope for change lies in consumers' [sic] becoming aware of the true costs of industrial meat production." This hope sounds like what many of the women I interviewed told me when I asked what changes are needed to facilitate a shift towards a more sustainable (specifically local) food system. They hoped that consumers would become aware of not just industrial meat production, but of the costs associated with all of industrial agriculture. However, a roughly equal number of women told me something much different, that it would take the near or total collapse of our current food system from factors like climate change or fuel prices to effect such a major change. My research has convinced me that the alternative agriculture movement, exemplified by the small-scale women farmers I got to know, is one of the most viable alternatives to the mainstream system we are living with today. The food produced is healthier for the grower and consumer, the small scale facilitates community networking and allows for more ethical treatment of the land and animals, and alternative agriculture fosters more personal benefits to the grower than corporate agriculture. With all of these benefits, the end point seems assured, and we need only answer the question, "How do we get there?" The classic anthropological divide between the materialists and idealists is an interesting tool here. We can assume the trends towards the local/alternative foods will continue and the movement will become an important component in the future of agriculture for the reasons I have outlined. The two theories serve as guidelines for imagining two possible journeys to reach that future.

The idealist Durkheim, to whom I referred in my preceding section, is remembered especially for his description of social facts, or the understood rules governing individual behavior in a society. All members of society who follow social norms feel their effect. In *What is a Social Fact?* Durkheim writes,

> The objection may be raised that a phenomenon is collective only if it is common to all members of society, or at least to most of them – in other words, if it is truly general. This may be true, but it is general because it is collective (that is, more or less obligatory), and certainly not collective because general. It is a group condition repeated in the individual because imposed on him. It is to be found in each part because it exists in the whole, rather than in the whole because it exists in the parts. (89)

In short, people share social facts because they are common in the majority, not because every individual happens to make similar decisions. To effect social change through idealist methods, then, the beliefs and values of the majority must be altered. Like Durkheim's example of public opinion driving populations to move into cities, Americans must change their fundamental opinions about food before a change in the way they eat will occur. Right now, mainstream America prizes cheap, convenient food; cost is often the only factor when grocery shopping. Idealist theory would facilitate the change towards local foods by focusing on changing the way Americans think about food – as long as shoppers still value cheap food above all else, the movement is doomed. Many women told me how educating the customers was an important step – education would hopefully lead to a change in values, prompting customers to buy different food even if it was more expensive. Dawn told me,

> [Customers] don't think about where it came from, they don't think about who grew it, they don't think about what's on it. It's just convenience. So, I guess being a grower and being a vendor at markets we just have to keep educating them and pushing it out there as much as you can. People probably get tired of it, but if they keep seeing it and hearing it, they change their ways…It's easy for them to hop in the car and go to the grocery store…it's convenience. This society we have now is a convenience society and a throw away society. Just keep educating them.

Dawn's conviction that if people "keep seeing it and hearing it" their food values will change is firmly within idealist theory. Changing people's ideas and opinions, according to Durkheim and other idealists, is the only effective way of changing society because the force of shared social facts is so compelling. Lois also felt education was an important tool for changing people's beliefs; when I asked her what changes were needed, she told me, "Obviously more education…. I would say for a lot of people, just education of what's involved in producing food from the farm because most people's issue is cost. 'Why would I pay a dollar for something that was grown here if I could get it cheaper from some place else?'" Linda, who described herself as "morbidly fascinated" by the future of Iowa agriculture, also voiced idealist reasons for effecting change, but she specifically credited popular books and media attention for changing people's opinions: "I'm seeing shifts. I'm seeing real changes," she said. "I think the books by Michael Pollan have been pretty good, both of them…books like that have made a great deal of difference…people are coming out of the woodwork looking for this food because of books like that, but they're all people with four year degrees or better." Roughly half of the women I talked with told me idealist changes that were needed to move our society towards a food system centered on local foods and sustainable practices; overall, these sounded more optimistic to me and offered more hope that America will be able to make significant changes before it is too late.

The other half of the women I spoke with, however, told me a darker take on what will ultimately produce changes. These are the women whom I align with Marx's materialist theory. Materialists essentially hold the opposite view of the idealists regarding what produces social change: they see human consciousness firmly rooted in human existence, and in order to produce change, the actual lived experiences of people must be altered. Without such tangible changes in the way people interact with their environment and each other, there is no motivation to change

beliefs, values, or ideas. In *Feuerbach*, Marx wrote, "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process…We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process." Thus, the women who answered my questions about what changes were needed with lists of physical changes that are either already taking place or predicted to happen were describing a materialist approach.

Ann and Jill especially exemplified this mindset. I asked Ann what changes were needed, and she answered,

> They're happening. We're having major flooding, the climate changes are going to drive it. The economics are going to drive it. We're almost to four-dollar gas here, and it is so much worse in other places. Physically to move food, it's trucked. Some of it goes by rail, but that's mostly commodity produce. Fresh produce for human consumption is not sent by rail. It's trucked…The economic costs associated with global warming are going to drive changes. I wish people would want to make those changes voluntarily before it gets to that point….I think there's going to be more economic market pressures that are going to come to bear to force those changes.

Ann's wish that people would voluntarily make changes before being forced to embrace local foods as the only option was somewhat echoed by Jill, who, despite describing herself as "a fairly optimistic person," told me,

> Unfortunately I really believe that it will probably require changes on a catastrophic level to really bring things back to a system of local economics…a complete disruption of the world fuel system would do it. When we start looking at climate changes that require that we can't leave our house for three months, that would probably be really good on the local food system. I really believe it's going to be a sea change that will make huge changes. And those of us who raise food have to be ready for those things as well.

Laura also told me that she was "kind of worried for Iowa agriculture in the next ten years" because of problems with the fuel supply. Materialist theory strikes me as describing the more likely of the two paths leading towards the future of American agriculture, if for no other reason than we are running out of time for people to change their minds about the value of supporting

sustainable agriculture. Because of climate changes, fuel prices, the depletion of natural resources, and more alarming threats such as food borne disease and pesticides, transformations in the food system will soon necessarily be a result of responding to these changes, regardless of where society's mindset and values are at the time.

However, my conviction that actual, physical events will be required before Americans permanently change their eating habits is slightly shaken when I reflect on the past century and how we arrived at our present state. The past century has seen the dominant model of American farming move from rural family farms to industrialized super-farms. This scientific approach to farming has been embraced by the public largely because of the love affair Americans have had with scientific and technological advancements. 20th century events such as the end of the industrial revolution, the massive scientific discoveries during and following World War II and President Kennedy's promise to put a man on the moon show the eagerness with which Americans received every new technological innovation. This trust and excitement for science also extended to agriculture, seen in Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's infamous advice to farmers during the 1970s to "get big or get out" and plant "fence row to fence row," both of which necessarily required large-scale farm technology. A belief in the power of science had swept the country, and it is easy to argue from an idealist perspective that these beliefs shaped Americans' relationship to food. Since American agriculture was becoming ever more technological, and since technology was seen by many as definitively "good," the food produced by these new systems was also undoubtedly "good," and to say otherwise was to risk being labeled backwards or even unpatriotic. Large-scale advertising campaigns extolling the virtues of "modern" products, such as those urging American women to buy the newest kitchen appliance in order to prepare pre-packaged meals, are also symptoms of a belief in the near-

absolute rule of science and technology. That all of these firmly held beliefs and ideas about the benefits of science manifested themselves in America's actual eating habits is firmly within idealist theory, leading me to think that to finally and completely change people's way of thinking about, preparing, and eating food, a change in the material environment may not entirely suffice. People might walk to the farmers market if gas prices are too high to drive to the supermarket, but if their values do not also change, it is hard for me to imagine that they would not immediately return to the supermarket with the next dip in fuel prices. As is so often the case, it seems that neither theory will absolutely be the only path to the future, and a combination of changing people's minds about the most important factors in food along with material, observable benefits to buying that food will be necessary.

CONCLUSION

During my interview with Denise, she said something that stayed with me: "Big agriculture can take care of itself, it has its own system, it has its own experts, it has everything else. The fledgling, emerging, organic, sustainable, local food system needs a lot of help. And it can stand right up there with big ag if there's someone out there advocating for it." Denise's optimism – that local foods can survive and effectively compete with industrialized agriculture, and all it needs is an effective advocate to promote it and get it equal footing – provides some much needed hope within an underdog movement. Alternative agriculture undeniably faces some serious disadvantages: it is small, not as politically well-connected or funded as big agriculture, and obviously lacks the global networks inherent in big agriculture. But Denise is right; alternative agriculture can stand up to mainstream agriculture, and if the two were on any sort of equal footing right now – for instance, if conventional agriculture was not propped up by federal subsidies – I believe local foods would be the mainstream model. For reasons I hope I

have effectively shown in this paper, the alternative agricultural movement, as lived by the women I interviewed, will clearly play a major part in the future of the American food system. The benefits to the customers, producers, communities, land, and livestock are so significant, and big agriculture is so unequipped to compete with them, that I believe any sustainable option must incorporate local foods. Whether we achieve this future though changing society's values and opinions regarding food, because we push the current system until it buckles under its hidden costs and leaves us no alternative, or because of some combination, remains to be seen. Having met a dozen amazing women farming in this movement and having my own values significantly changed over ten weeks, I am guardedly hopeful that America can change her relationship with food and the food system before disaster drives her to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the few things all the women I spoke with agreed on was that farming is time consuming, intensive work. Despite this, every woman I contacted this summer happily found time to accommodate me and my list of questions; many talked with me for two hours or more. I thank them for letting me into their homes and lives, answering my questions with thought and patience, and giving me more data than I know what to do with. This paper would not have been possible without their generosity and openness, and I feel honored to have met all of them.

APPENDIX: FARMER BIOGRAPHIES

Angela (59) has been farming 20 acres of certified organic fruit and vegetables in Granger, IA for thirteen years. She grew up on a small, conventional farm in Oklahoma, and holds degrees in Chemistry and Horticulture. Angela farms full-time to supply her 150-share CSA and direct-market produce stands, but previously worked in research laboratories and as a religious educator at a Unitarian Church.

Ann (47) is currently in her 8th season running a CSA; this year I am lucky enough to be one of her 34 members. She grows vegetables on about half an acre in Malcolm and about a thousand square feet Grinnell; while she has owned her Malcolm farm for nineteen years, she has only been farming in Grinnell for six months. Agriculture has been part of her life since childhood, when she grew up on a small farm in Iowa. She attended the agriculture program at Iowa State University during the early eighties, and has taught agricultural education.

Dawn (47) grew up on a forty-acre farm near Tama, IA, learning agriculture from her father and uncles. She graduated from Marshalltown Community College with degrees in sustainable agriculture and business, and recently purchased a three-acre farm in Melbourne, IA, where she

grows vegetables to sell at Toledo and Marshalltown farmers markets. She also works part time at the Iowa Veterans' Home.

Denise (58) has been farming with her husband for 32 years. In the 1980s, they worked for activist organizations while raising three children on the farm. She served as the national president for the National Family Farm Coalition in the early 1990s, and in 1997, she officially founded the Women, Food & Agriculture Network. Denise was involved in the early meetings regarding the organic certification standards, and in 2006 she ran for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, finishing a close second. She is currently farming full-time on three acres, selling at a farmers market and supplying a CSA.

Donna (72) handles all of the business, banking, and marketing aspects of her family's 800-acre corn and soybeans farm. She comes from a long line of farmers, has farmed with her husband since their marriage in 1960. Her oldest son currently does most of the farm labor, but her daughter would like to get more involved in farming. Donna has worked off the farm at a feed mill, doing statistical work for the USDA, and at the post office. She is also on the board of the Farmers' Union.

Jan (46) has been farming on 55 acres full-time with her husband, Tim, since 2002 – they deliver a wide range of vegetables to their 116 CSA members, who are primarily located in Des Moines. Jan grew up in Des Moines and holds a degree in natural resources. She worked as an environmental educator before she began farming. Their teenage children, have always helped out on the farm, as well.

Jeni (25) moved back to her family's farm in January 2008 after five years in Minneapolis, where she worked in public schools. She is growing vegetables on approximately one acre of her family's old pastureland, a small corner of their larger, corn and soybeans operation. Despite

some involvement on the farm growing up, she did not think she would return to agriculture until becoming involved in the Women's Environmental Institute in Minneapolis.

Jill (38) moved to Iowa with her husband, Sean, three years ago from Texas, where they both were working in the theatre business. Jill did not grow up on a farm, but comes from a farming family, and it was a visit home that included cleaning up the family farm that planted the idea of farming in her and Sean's minds. The first year they farmed, they only sold at the Des Moines Farmers Market, but they started a CSA their second year in response to customer demand. They grow a wide variety of vegetables and herbs.

Laura (51) bought her Mt. Vernon farm in 1988 after completing her undergraduate work at Iowa State University in agronomy and soil conservation and her graduate degree at the University of Florida in agronomy. She works her 72-acre farm primarily by herself, and the majority of her farm income comes from her 150-share CSA. Laura also teaches Biology at Cornell College.

Leigh (48) grew up on a family farm, but is not a farmer herself. She majored in communications with a journalism minor, and is currently the interim Executive Director of the WFAN. She has been involved with the WFAN for two and half years, and recently resigned from the Iowa Farmers Union.

Linda (47) teaches Biology at Marshalltown Community College, and holds degrees in Biology from the University of Minnesota (undergraduate) and Iowa State University (graduate). Linda grew up near Minneapolis, but moved to Iowa with her husband, Mark, in 1987. They have been farming at their current farm for 12 years and have three children. They originally started growing vegetables, fruit, flowers and raising livestock to be as self-sufficient as possible and to connect their spiritual health and physical health, but now also sell directly to customers.

Lois (45) had raised goats for eight years before receiving Iowa's first certification for a goat micro dairy last year. The dairy is now her full time job; before being licensed, she worked as an occupational therapist. Lois has lived in Iowa for 17 years, but grew up in an agricultural community in Kansas. She is milking fifteen goats with the help of part-time employees and her twelve-year-old son. Her cheese has won multiple awards at competitions sponsored by the American Goat Dairy Association.

Susan (55) grew up on a small farm in Minnesota in the 1960s and has a masters degree in social work. She bought her 80-acre farm in Solon, IA in 1994 and started one of Iowa's first CSAs with two other growers in 1996. Today, she is the only grower for the CSA's 250 members. Until this year, she also had a hog operation, but the cost of grain is too prohibitive. Susan's four children, whom she home-schooled while farming full time, help her on the farm.

Suzanne was the first woman farmer I met this summer – I did not formally interview her or record our conversation, but she very graciously showed me around the two acreages she and her husband, Barney, farm. Suzanne did not grow up with an agricultural background, but became interested in raising pigs when she moved back to Iowa several years ago. She and Barney raise primarily livestock (pigs, chickens, sheep, cattle).

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