

Local view: Locally produced food is healthier in many ways



Laborers weed the lettuce crop in the summer of 1916 at the farm of Gilford Graham Hartley, who lived from 1853 to 1922. Agriculture was one of Hartley's many interests. The farm is part of what is known today as Hartley Field in Duluth's Hunter's Park neighborhood. (Photo courtesy of the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center.)

By Randel D. Hanson
Duluth Tribune
11/07/09

As our western Lake Superior region seeks a healthier and more sustainable food system, the past is our journey's start.

Through the 1950s, we grew a lot of the food we ate. Home gardens were everywhere. Greysolon Farms, just north of Hunter's Park, rented 1- to 10-acre production plots to workers, farmers and truck gardeners. Other farms on Duluth's edge produced meat, dairy and vegetables commercially, including the 600-acre Jean Du Luth Farm, Hartley Field, and the Allendale, Exeter, State and Bridgeman farms. Regional lettuce, pea, poultry, and potato farms thrived, as did processing plants and distribution hubs. These activities were supported by commercial clubs, including 4H, the Future Farmers of America and the YMCA. They also were supported by our schools and by university and county agricultural extension outreach programs.

Entrepreneurial farmers organized many producer and consumer cooperatives across the last century to create markets and fair prices for their foodstuffs. These coops were nurtured by area leaders who connected support for rural families and urban eaters. In 1939, for example, 500 raspberry growers organized a producer coop, built a refrigerated warehouse on 21st Avenue West, and shipped a train car full of product to Chicago every week.

Today it is estimated we grow less than 1 percent of the food eaten in our region. Instead, it's grown on big farms across the world, linked by a handful of corporations which deliver lots of food fast.

We're told food's cheap, but the system hides big costs. Fossil fuels — for big machinery, fertilizers, pest/herbicides and transportation — risk our planet's climate health and encourage foreign conflicts. Chemical, antibiotic and hormone inputs risk our human health. Giant factory farms super-size common

food-poisoning bugs. And spiking obesity and diabetes rates will be echoed in great sorrow and health costs.

A boon for corporations and agribusiness, this system has hit farmers hard. Since the 1970s, food profits for growers dropped in half! For corporate farms, this is largely an accounting move: Conglomerates own many links in production, processing and consumption and can assign profits anywhere. For our region's independent growers, it has led to a dramatic drop in both farmers and farms.

These long-term health, environmental and social costs are unsustainable. Our community food security — the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, grown in sustainable ways — has been compromised.

Food is a commodity; and it's a public good, foundational to our public health, safety and welfare. Food can and needs to be guided by community input and planning.

We're seeing the true costs of "fast, convenient and cheap," seeking instead food based on "romance, memory and trust": romance for the foundational role food plays in our families and communities; memory of food prepared in healthy ways; and trust that links from farm to fork are fair and sustainable.

Our region boasts strong food coops, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture businesses, and vibrant food, farm and gardening organizations. We need more farmers who need more of our support to make good food more readily available. And good local food production means green jobs.

So many, for so many reasons, want better food. We can't produce locally everything we eat, but we sure can produce a lot more of it, and our communities and lands will be healthier when we do.

The past, both recent and more distant, is but the journey's start.

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