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## Old Roots and New Shoots: How Locals and Back-to-the-Landers Remade Maine's Local Food Economy

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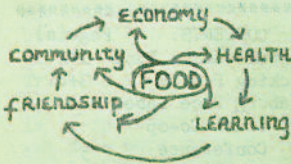
Federation of Cooperatives, Inc.  
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QUARTERLY

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Image from the front cover of Federation of Cooperatives, Inc. warehouse newsletter. This image shows how FEDCO was able to raise money by issuing bond certificates for purchasing grain in bulk, lending money to co-ops, and making long-term financial investments. Image courtesy of Fogler Library Special Collection.

# OLD ROOTS AND NEW SHOOTS: HOW LOCALS AND BACK-TO-THE- LANDERS REMADE MAINE'S LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY

BY EILEEN HAGERMAN

*Back-to-the-landers who relocated to Maine in large numbers during the 1970s often lacked traditional rural skills and encountered a variety of agricultural challenges related to the state's harsh climate and poor soils. Many who remained on the land often did so, at least initially, because they received support from elderly neighbors who still practiced low-input, small-scale farming. These neighbors tended to freely share their knowledge and skills and, in return, often benefited from the young newcomers' assistance with laborious on-farm tasks. The newcomers worked with their local allies to form organizations, share knowledge, and coordinate marketing efforts tailored to meet the needs of small-scale and organic farmers and gardeners. A major outgrowth of these efforts was the initiation of a small-farming renaissance that increasingly set Maine apart from that of the rest of the United States. Eileen Hagerman was born in Owensboro, Kentucky. She earned a BA in History from the University of Louisville in 2009 and an MA in History from the University of Maine in 2013. Her MA thesis, (submitted to the Graduate School under the name Eileen Palmer in August, 2013) is titled, Putting Down Roots: How Back-to-the-Landers Changed Maine's Local Food Economy. She is currently a PhD candidate in History at the University of Maine where she studies environmental and agricultural history, particularly food cooperatives in New England during the 1970s and 1980s.*

**I**N 2009, ten organic dairy farmers in Maine discovered that their contracts with the H.P. Hood milk company would not be renewed. Facing the possibility of bankruptcy, they began working with the Maine Farm Bureau, the Maine Department of Agriculture, and the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) to find a

solution. The conservative dairy farmers, state bureaucrats, and traditional Farm Bureau representatives made unlikely collaborators with MOFGA, which was founded in the early 1970s by back-to-the-landers to share information related to organic agriculture in Maine.<sup>1</sup> However, the successful collaboration of these disparate individuals and organizations made it possible for the dairy farmers to found their own organic milk cooperative. They incorporated as Maine's Own Organic Milk Company—or, MOO Milk Co—an L3C “limited profit” corporation.<sup>2</sup> This hybrid legal status allowed MOO Milk to receive government grants and charitable donations so that the farmers could engage in direct marketing, keep most of their profits, and remain viable. This also allowed the corporation to fulfill its social mission, which included farmland preservation and economic development within the state of Maine.<sup>3</sup>

Though MOO Milk was forced to disband due to an equipment failure in 2014, the company was a pioneering initiative within the American dairy industry, and its cooperative approach to making organic agriculture economically viable appealed to socially and environmentally conscious consumers in Maine and beyond. MOO Milk, however, emerged as a result of over four decades of collaboration between politically and culturally diverse individuals and organizations across Maine, all of which shared an interest in keeping small farms viable. It was in this collaborative climate—born of necessity, trust, and mutual respect—that MOO Milk's farmer-owners gained the support they needed to uphold their commitment to organic dairying. MOO Milk, however, is just one example of the way in which Maine agriculture has followed a unique path during the past forty years.

According to a number of reports released by the United States Department of Agriculture, the Maine Department of Agriculture, and MOFGA, farming in Maine, today benefits from considerably more stability than in the rest of New England and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Whereas other states have continued to experience a precipitous decline in small family farms since the end of World War II, this decline actually began to plateau in Maine during the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> According to Stewart Smith, Executive Director of the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society and Professor of Sustainable Agriculture Policy at the University of Maine, “Maine's agricultural sector has been steadily moving in a different direction from the rest of the country since the 1970s” due to the “entry of new, smaller, more diversified farms . . . participating in local agriculture.”<sup>6</sup> Though Smith admitted that increasingly large, commodity-ori-

ented farms still dominated agriculture in the state during this period, the steadily growing wave of small, local farms was significant enough to be considered one leg of a statewide “dual agricultural structure.”<sup>7</sup> This statement was echoed by the Maine Commissioner of Agriculture, Walter Whitcomb, when he said in a 2011 interview with *Bangor Daily News* that Maine “still [has] the area and ability to feed the rest of New England and the rest of the Northeast” due to the diversity and complexity of its agricultural system.<sup>8</sup> In the same article, agronomist Lauchlin Titus said of Maine: “Compared with the national trend, we are in good shape.”<sup>9</sup> Though these assertions might be interpreted by some as the exaggerated pronouncements of state boosters, numerous economic studies within the past decade have affirmed that Maine agriculture is, indeed, thriving. For example, in a report written by Jed Beach for MOFGA, 582 of Maine’s 8,100 farms and 90,000 acres of its 1.35 million acres of farmland were certified organic as of 2010.<sup>10</sup> This sizeable minority, a subset of the fifteen percent of producers that the Maine Department of Agriculture refers to as the state’s “Agricultural Creative Economy Sector,” was already generating roughly thirty-six million dollars in sales each year by 2008.<sup>11</sup> The growth of MOFGA’s annual Common Ground Country Fair is another case in point. Established in 1977 to celebrate all things local and organic, the fair attracted nearly 60,000 visitors and raised \$300,000 in September 2012 alone.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, there is something about Maine’s agricultural system that sets it apart from the rest of the nation, and, by most accounts, its uniqueness stems from transformative historical processes that began during the 1970s with the arrival of back-to-the-landers in the state.<sup>13</sup> This article, which is based upon an examination of first-person accounts contained in interviews dating from the 1970s to the present, affirms but also complicates this understanding. In doing so, it argues the following three points: that the back-to-the-land movement did have a positive impact upon Maine’s rural economy; that local people contributed to that positive impact in equal measure; and that collaboration between locals and newcomers was nurtured by shared hardships and a spirit of neighborly mutual aid. As a result of the dynamic working relationships that developed between these two camps in many locales, a large number of young, urban newcomers were able to gain the knowledge, skills, and credibility they needed to farm successfully in Maine, while many elderly locals benefitted from being able to market their goods more easily, see their rural communities revived, and pass on their traditions to a new generation. This was the formula that allowed a

small farming population to thrive in Maine while it declined elsewhere. It also laid the social groundwork for larger-scale initiatives, including the establishment of alternative farming organizations such as MOFGA; the procurement of greater support for small and organic farms from state agriculture officials; and the pursuit of innovative and cooperative approaches to off-farm marketing.

### **The Back-to-the-Land Movement in the Literature**

Sociologist Jeffery Jacob, in *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future*, described the back-to-the-land movement as an urban-to-rural demographic shift, a subset of the larger environmental movement, and “an integral, though relatively unspectacular, part of the 1960s search for countercultural alternatives to the corporatism of mainstream America.”<sup>14</sup> Estimating that up to a million Americans went back to the land in at least one form during the 1970s and 1980s, Jacob argued that the movement helped to temporarily reverse a demographic shift toward urban in-migration that had characterized America for well over a century.<sup>15</sup> He also credited back-to-the-landers for their broader cultural impact upon contemporary discussions of sustainability.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of back-to-the-landers, radical neo-homesteaders, alternative agriculture advocates, and others in this camp upon the environmental movement and upon the broader culture has become better understood due to an increasing interest in sustainability in general as well as recent scholarly efforts, such as Jacob’s, to historically contextualize a contemporary back-to-the-land movement that has been growing in the United States for the past decade. For example, Andrew Kirk, in *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, examined how the appropriate technologies emphasis of the 1970s counterculture popularized new ideas about the role of technology and the importance of scale within the American environmental movement. Randall Beeman and James Pritchard, authors of *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century*, drew connections between what they called the “permanent agriculture” and “sustainable agriculture” movements of the 1930s and 1970s, respectively, and shifts within the governmental, collegiate, and corporate arms of America’s agricultural infrastructure. Similarly, Dona Brown extended the timeline of the back-to-the-land movement, making comparisons between the alternative agrarianism of the 1930s and 1970s in *Back*

*to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America.*

Most who have written about the back-to-the-land movement, however—whether from a scholarly, journalistic, or personal perspective—have also examined it in terms of its shortcomings. Jacob's evaluation, for example, while acknowledging their diversity of approaches and ceding their impact upon the environmental movement, viewed back-to-the-landers as having collectively failed to adhere to their own low-tech ideals.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Eleanor Agnew, in *Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back*, wrote about the inability of many back-to-the-landers (herself included) to maintain "pure" homesteading lifestyles and attempted to explain their tendency to return to urban centers or morph into rural suburbanites.<sup>18</sup> Beeman and Pritchard, though they did not specifically examine back-to-the-landers, also saw failure among proponents of alternative agriculture—many of whom were part of the neo-agrarian revolt of the 1970s—in that their efforts and ideals were often co-opted and diluted by government regulators and corporate marketing strategists.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, when viewed strictly in terms of their ability to adhere to the ideals of material austerity, adopt only the "softest" or most "appropriate" technologies (as defined by publications such as *Whole Earth Catalog* and *Mother Earth News*), or maintain ideological purity or consistency, the back-to-the-land movement does appear to be a series of failed experiments.

Analyzed at the community level, however, the image of the movement becomes much more complex. This was the case in much of Maine, where the impact of back-to-the-landers was overwhelmingly positive, especially in communities where newcomers were able to successfully integrate themselves into the fabric of rural life despite cultural differences. This insight, however, is not entirely new. Christopher Beach and Richard Judd, for example, in *Natural States: The Environmental Imagination in Maine, Oregon, and the Nation*, alluded to the possibility that the back-to-the-land movement in Maine may have been typified by beneficial relationships with locals more so than its counterparts on the West Coast and elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> As such, case studies of these relationships provide an opportunity to better understand other dimensions of the back-to-the-land movement in Maine and beyond. They also provide evidence for the existence of a more practical and committed—or, "down-to-earth"—subset of the movement, challenging the notion that all of its adherents were superficial or transient in their relationship to land and community. Indeed, as this article will reveal,

Maine's most committed back-to-the-landers established roots deep enough to alter the state's agricultural infrastructure, improving market conditions for themselves and their neighbors.

Much of this positive impact stemmed from cultural and generational cross-pollination between the predominantly young, out-of-state newcomers hoping to practice organic farming and their neighbors, many of whom still practiced small-scale, low-input agriculture. In many communities where back-to-the-landers settled, for example, locals shared agricultural knowledge and skills while newcomers assisted with labor-intensive tasks and off-farm marketing. Due to Maine's harsh climate, sparse population, and geographical isolation, neighborly mutual aid was already an essential survival strategy for many of the state's small farming communities, and, as the populations in these communities had dwindled and aged to an alarming degree by the 1970s, the newcomers often filled an important niche in the economic and social life of rural Maine. As such, exchanges of knowledge and labor between back-to-the-landers and locals often assumed great significance for both parties and provided much of the foundation upon which organizations such as MOFGA would go on to build networks of support for organic farming and gardening in the state. All too often, however, the role of local people in the emergence of the Farm Movement in Maine is overshadowed by the celebrity of more prominent figures within the state's back-to-the-land story.

### **From the Nearings to the Nearby**

Most accounts of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement in Maine begin with Helen and Scott Nearing, the war resisters and socialist radicals who are often credited with inspiring a generation of young counterculture idealists to seek voluntary simplicity on the land with their 1954 book, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Simply and Sanely in a Troubled World*. The book went relatively unnoticed for over a decade and even went out of print until many within the 1960s and 1970s counterculture discovered within it a familiar anti-establishment rhetoric and an inspiring do-it-yourself ethos. This newfound popularity caused it to be republished in 1970.<sup>21</sup> As part of an earlier wave of back-to-the-land activity that had crested during the 1930s and 1940s, the Nearings functioned as important bridge-builders between the ideals of a new generation of dissident agrarians and those of the generation from which they had emerged.<sup>22</sup>



The Nearings also made themselves personally accessible to many within the 1960s and 1970s counterculture and were known for entertaining large numbers of unexpected young guests at their coastal farmstead in Harborside, Maine, as well as at their former farmstead in Jamaica, Vermont.<sup>23</sup> More than a few of the original founders of MOFGA partially attributed their inspiration for moving to Maine to the Nearings and often recounted arriving unannounced on their doorstep asking for advice or offering to help with farm labor. The Nearings were known for responding to these visitors like “long lost [friends],” usually right before they handed them a farming implement and put them to work.<sup>24</sup> Though these pilgrimages to the Nearings’ homestead amounted to a kind of radical agritourism, many—though certainly not all—of those back-to-the-landers who stayed in Maine to make a living from the soil continued to look to the Nearings as their mentors for years to come.<sup>25</sup>

While there is much truth in the Nearing-centric version of Maine’s back-to-the-land narrative, the influence of local people and communities was also crucial to the newcomers’ success at farming and organizing within the state. Many back-to-the-landers themselves were especially adamant about the importance of their relationships with neighbors. For example, in a series of interviews with MOFGA’s founders, which were conducted by the Maine Folklife Center over the course of the last decade, some respondents described the gap between their own experiences homesteading and the advice they had gleaned from the Nearings’ writings. Others claimed to have never heard of the Nearings until after they had already begun living on the land.<sup>26</sup> For example, Will Bonsall—well-known today for his efforts to preserve heirloom seed varieties at his farm in Industry, Maine—denied that their writing played any role in shaping his own “rural fantasy” as a youth growing up in Waterville, Maine. He did, however, state that he considered Helen Nearing a friend and described the Nearings as people who “happened to be going in the same direction.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Donna Kausen, a California native who worked in the fishing industry and learned sheepherding and scything techniques from local people, also claimed to have never heard of the Nearings until beginning her life in Maine. In the interview, Kausen also revealed that she had never even visited the Nearings’ historic homestead at Harborside, Maine until 1999.<sup>28</sup> Most back-to-the-landers in the aforementioned interviews, however, did acknowledge the Nearings and their writings as a source of inspiration but emphasized their elderly neighbors, hands-on experi-

mentation, and, eventually, MOFGA as their primary sources for practical knowledge. This had much to do with the circumstances most newcomers faced when they began their homesteading experiments.

### **Marginal Lands, Marginalized People**

After nearly a century of steady rural decline, Maine was home to an abundance of abandoned farmland by the late 1960s. A harsh climate and rocky soils, relative isolation from market outlets, and the ongoing dominance of the American West in large-scale, mechanized commodity crop production—with the notable exception of the state capturing much of the market in potatoes, dairy, and broiler chickens—had, for the most part, pushed Maine agriculture to the margins of the global food economy.<sup>29</sup> As small growers in the state could not offer prices competitive with those of regional wholesalers, many of Maine's food retailers, by the mid-twentieth century, were forced to import the bulk of their produce. In some cases, Maine produce was sold to wholesalers in Boston only to be sold back to retailers in Maine. This created a vicious cycle that forced many of the state's growers out of business and gutted Maine's agricultural infrastructure.<sup>30</sup>

As Maine attempted to adapt to these new realities, what remained was an increasingly consolidated and highly specialized network of large commodity producers interspersed with the scattered remnants of an earlier agricultural order—small, subsistence-plus farmsteads operated by an increasingly poor and elderly population.<sup>31</sup> This transformation caused many young people in rural Maine to leave their parents' farms to seek better opportunities in other parts of the country, exacerbating a demographic shift that had been draining the state's population since the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> It seemed that, by the 1960s, small farms in Maine—starved for markets and deprived of future generations—were destined for endless decline.

State boosters, like their counterparts in other states in northern New England, sought other means of economic development and promoted the state as a destination for tourists and seasonal residents seeking pristine natural beauty and rural charm. Though Maine was successfully rebranded as "Vacationland," most of the state was too isolated to benefit significantly from the urban affluence that encouraged economic growth in states like Vermont and New Hampshire.<sup>33</sup> All of this had the cumulative effect of depressing land prices in the state.<sup>34</sup> This economic, cultural, and demographic void, however, also represented new oppor-

tunities for the back-to-the-landers who settled there during the 1970s.

Though many would certainly take advantage of the affordable land prices that the state had to offer, not all did so solely out of economic opportunism. Many who had emerged from the 1960s counterculture and its attendant struggles for peace and social justice saw something honest, authentic, and eternal in the harsh landscape, marginal farmlands, lined faces, and wizened bodies that typified rural Maine. Beach and Judd referred to this image of Maine as stemming from a “pastoral ideal” that, they argue, has been a persistent feature of American culture for centuries. According to their account, the Maine landscape during the 1930s and afterward came to embody an independent spirit that was perceived as having been preserved and protected from the ravages of modernity by virtue of its geographic isolation, cold climate, and rugged yeomanry. Viewed from this perspective, Maine was not just a forgotten rural backwater; it was a place where people could live a free and authentic existence close to and in harmony with nature.<sup>35</sup> Back-to-the-landers also saw in the state’s elderly rural holdouts an opportunity to learn rapidly disappearing traditional skills that they felt must be preserved and revived in the wake of depleting energy resources, economic decay, and ongoing political chaos.<sup>36</sup> To many, the redeeming qualities, knowledge, and skills needed to build the world anew could still be found in the state’s elderly Yankee farmers, and for back-to-the-landers, Maine was both a balm for troubled times and a new front in the ongoing battle for radical social change.

Many soon discovered, however, that a life on the land in Maine would require knowledge and skills that most, as former urbanites and suburbanites, lacked.<sup>37</sup> As such, this generation faced a number of difficulties not encountered by their 1930s back-to-the-land predecessors. Tim Nason, former editor of MOFGA’s newspaper, *The Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener*, captured the nature of these challenges in an interview conducted in 2003 by the Maine Folklife Center. Nason explained that he had arrived in Maine in the early 1970s seeking the guidance of Helen and Scott Nearing due to their status as back-to-the-land “gurus.” He also described engaging in a few first attempts to sustain his family by gardening organically, raising a few animals, and blacksmithing.<sup>38</sup> With no money, no prior skills or knowledge, and no plan, he blindly pursued such endeavors with the vague notion that a traditional, rural existence might lead him to a “more sane way to live” and would immerse him in “the kind of economy that [he] had been searching for.”<sup>39</sup> Nason’s story was fairly typical of the homesteaders that began flooding

into Maine during the 1970s with their dog-eared copies of *Living the Good Life* seeking self-reliance, personal fulfillment, and ecological harmony through a closer and more ethical relationship with the land and one another. Examples such as Nason's also revealed that, while interest and commitment were essential, they were not adequate to ensure success. Most, if they were to maintain any hope of staying on the land, had to learn even the most basic rural life skills.

Contending with this steep learning curve, many back-to-the-landers sought the advice of one another, of organic gardening magazines, and of local extension agents and agriculture professors.<sup>40</sup> However, none of those sources provided the skills and knowledge they needed. How-to articles in organic gardening publications were often oriented to warmer and more arid ecosystems than that of Maine, and the state's land-grant complex was designed to assist growers in the application of modern, industrial methods that were unappealing to most back-to-the-landers. Many Cooperative Extension agents also considered low-input, small-scale production strategies to be old-fashioned and were skeptical of organic methods that had not yet been legitimized by an established body of scientific research.<sup>41</sup> Helen and Scott Nearing were, of course, willing teachers, but most newcomers did not live close enough to them to benefit from their consistent, hands-on instruction. As such, many of these first-generation farmers turned to their neighbors.

Fortunately for the newcomers, many of their neighbors were "old timers" who possessed a wealth of local knowledge and still practiced many low-tech agricultural techniques. Some farmed organically out of thrift or tradition, and a few had even been adherents to the J. I. Rodale school of organic growing since the 1940s.<sup>42</sup> Even where these old-timers had adopted the use of chemical inputs, their farms were often small enough in scale that they encountered many of the same challenges as back-to-the-landers.<sup>43</sup> As such, locals often proved to be indispensable resources to inexperienced newcomers, providing them with many of the skills they needed to successfully operate a farm, stay on the land, and become a source of community stability in Maine. This exchange of knowledge was also part of a rich, complex culture of neighborly mutual aid that not only allowed the two camps to meet their immediate, practical needs, but also allowed for new ideas to transcend the "culture gap" that helped define the youth counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Neighborly Mutual Aid

The importance of mutually beneficial relationships with neighbors was a recurring theme in Maine's back-to-the-land story. Described by Beach and Judd as "symbiotic," these relationships emerged, they argued, due to the fact that "the inexperienced newcomers needed part-time jobs and practical advice" and "helped fill a void in rural communities that had suffered dramatic population declines in the twentieth century."<sup>44</sup> They also observed that the newcomers' values and goals were similar to those of their neighbors, including the desire to obtain "peace of mind, self-reliance, autonomy, harmony with the land, [and] a new foundation for the work ethic."<sup>45</sup> Interviews conducted over the past four decades with back-to-the-landers in Maine generally support Beach and Judd's analysis.

Ariel Wilcox, co-founder of Peacemeal Farm in Dixmont, Maine and an active early participant in the cooperative movement, in a 1974 article in *Farmstead Magazine*, also mentioned acquiring knowledge from the "older folks" who lived in her community.<sup>46</sup> Specifically, she mentioned learning things like where the wet spots were in their fields, "how to keep deer from destroying new fruit trees by hanging out smelly socks," where to find an abandoned sugar bush, and when to expect a snowstorm.<sup>47</sup> She described this local information as "priceless" and expressed admiration for her neighbors, stating, "Here in Maine the farmers have known about security in diversity . . . to enjoy the daily work and not feel the desperation of specialization, of isolation."<sup>48</sup> Detailing her relationship with these neighbors, she said:

The social sphere of life is not neglected in the country, where it is often more valuable for its companionship and mutual aid. We enjoy honest, simple relationships with our neighbors. We are able to exchange knowledge, labor, and respect to an equal degree of reciprocity. We appreciate the opportunity to give of ourselves as much as we enjoy the richness of wisdom and fellowship which can be found in the community. We share a real affection with the older folks, and they take pleasure in watching us restore the old farm to usefulness.<sup>49</sup>

In a similar account, Tom Roberts, current co-owner of Snakeroot Farm in Pittsfield, Maine, described how he and his friends, despite being full of youthful enthusiasm, had little experience working the land and had, at first, attempted to adapt techniques from organic farming magazines. Soon, however, he and many others found that they could actually learn more from their neighbors, especially those who were still doing small-scale, though not necessarily organic, farming.<sup>50</sup> Roberts

specifically mentioned learning a great deal about machinery, row spacings, seasonal crop varieties, planting schedules, and other challenges faced by all of Maine's small farmers, regardless of their organic or non-organic status. He also mentioned receiving assistance from area farmers when it came to sharing equipment and plowing fields.<sup>51</sup> Roberts and company often returned the gesture by gathering their friends to help a neighbor with haying, barn raising, or some other laborious task.

This phenomenon of local and cross-cultural mutual aid was so typical of the early back-to-the-land experience that one newspaper, *The Maine Times*, published an article in 1973 with a detailed account of a few of these intergenerational exchanges, entitled, "Hard Work Brings Together Two Cultures." The article featured four families: the Crosses, the Forbuses, the Garretts, and the Christiansens. The Crosses and the Forbuses were small farmers still working the land by themselves in their seventies and eighties when twenty-somethings, the Garretts and Christiansens, arrived in Wellington, Maine.<sup>52</sup> Farms in this area were described as being "the most primitive, the least changed, [and] the most unmechanized" in the state with some still making use of horses for haying. The article also described Wellington as being typical of the rural depopulation and poverty so prevalent in northern Maine at the time. The article then went on to describe how Clair and Margie Cross, Charles and Opal Forbus, and other older farmers in the area helped Sheila and Richard Garrett, Milton Christiansen, and other newcomers with "questions about when to sow and reap, mow and harvest, plow and fertilize," stating that "on the brink of extinction, these old men and women are watching their traditions being revived, just when it seemed as if they must surely die." The Forbuses also provided the Garretts with a free place to stay before they built their house, and another elderly man in the community took them into the woods to show them a spring on their property that no one, save a few locals, knew about. Richard Garrett expressed his appreciation for this small but important gesture, stating, "In this country, water is everything."<sup>53</sup>

In return for these kindnesses, the Garretts, the Christiansens, and their friends frequently helped the Crosses, the Forbuses, and others in the community to bring in their hay, repair their farm machinery, shovel snow from the roofs of their barns, and sell their homemade cakes and breads at local craft fairs. The article also revealed that many young back-to-the-landers, such as the Garretts, were beginning to entrench themselves in their newfound communities by reviving local Granges and running for local offices, often at the urging of their neighbors. The

author, sensing that there was something more to this than mere neighborliness, referred to these exchanges as an “intricate series of relationships . . . drawing . . . two sub-cultures together to form patterns which neither had anticipated, nor can yet project.”<sup>54</sup> Reflecting this cross-pollination, a 1982 article that appeared in the *Times-Union* in Warsaw, Indiana described the revival of the Grange in a few Maine communities where the back-to-the-land movement had been concentrated. It also revealed how these Granges had a younger membership and less traditional programming, such as “contradancing, panel discussions on issues like nuclear power and a ‘Middle East Night’ featuring belly dancing and a Mideast-style dinner.”<sup>55</sup>

If countless interviews and articles are any indication, small farmers in Maine were quick to initiate their new neighbors into their communities by sharing valuable local knowledge and encouraging civic participation. In many cases, they did so as part of a mutual aid survival strategy that stemmed from the hardships associated with rural poverty and geographic isolation. Many were also concerned about the survival of their communities in light of the fact that so many young people had left for better-paying jobs in urban areas. As such, many locals chose to actively engage with the young newcomers as if they were their own children or grandchildren.

### **Local Criticism as Participation**

Though many old-timers openly embraced back-to-the-landers, they also occasionally chastised them for not observing certain social norms or for behaving in ways that they perceived as lazy, transient, or generally non-committal. This was the case even among organic farmers. For example, Earl Blackstone, a seventy-year-old tree nursery owner, captured some of the sub-surface cultural tensions that occasionally emerged between locals and back-to-the-landers when he criticized the newcomers in a 1978 article in *The Maine Times*. Blackstone had been growing potatoes chemically in Aroostook County when low commodity prices allowed the bank to foreclose on his family farm during the 1950s. While he recovered financially from this tragedy, Blackstone began growing organically for Wolfe’s Neck Farm in Freeport, Maine and eventually became a popular speaker within organic farming circles. Despite his newfound popularity, however, Blackstone began to admonish many of the newcomers for what he saw as a tendency toward ideological extremism and rootlessness, a lack of religious conviction, a rejection

of marriage, and a willingness to rely on government assistance and grants. Viewing both as less-than-ideal rural role models, he instead proposed a “marriage” between what he considered to be the best attributes of both organic and chemical farmers. In this marriage, Blackstone envisioned a harmonious blend between the traditional values and skills of conventional farmers and the care for the soil displayed by young, organic growers from away. This new, more perfect kind of Maine farmer would also be independent of outside government institutions, banks, and chemical corporations. Blackstone did, however, have positive things to say about a few of the newcomers who had impressed him, stating that they were “some fine people who [were] trying hard to learn.” Expressing paternalistic affection toward these chosen few, he referred to them as “brilliant kids” who he loved and predicted that they would become “great farmers.”<sup>56</sup>

Roberta Bailey, a back-to-the-lander who settled in Topsfield, Maine, described similar tensions between newcomers and locals, indicating that neighbors could occasionally waver in their support if they sensed what they viewed as laziness, instability, or haughtiness. Regarding this local skepticism, Bailey said:

[There] were a few people that, one minute they'd be helping you and the next minute they'd be telling you that you were walking in the ditch and that when you come around you'll want a fancy house and that sort of stuff. And then the next day they'd be back to being our buddy and helping us out again. They would kind of have their bad days.

This mixture of suspicion and affection in local-newcomer interactions earned rural Mainers a reputation for being difficult to befriend. However, these criticisms were a way in which local people both coped with and took advantage of the cultural and demographic changes taking place within their communities. By befriending the newcomers, local people were able to participate in the farm and food revival that was taking place in their state while exerting some influence over what form this rural renaissance would take.

In many ways, the rhetoric of “hard work” was shorthand for a standard of ruralness—or Maine-ness—by which back-to-the-landers were measured. It became a kind of currency with which newcomers could buy authenticity and acceptance from their neighbors and with which locals could obtain a measure of insurance against the vicissitudes of demographic change. For example, back-to-the-lander Cynthia Thayer,





Photograph of tree nursery owner Earl Blackstone from the September – October 1976 issue of the *Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener*. His relationship with newcomers captured some of the sub-surface cultural tensions that occasionally emerged between locals and back-to-the-landers when he criticized them in a 1978 article in *The Maine Times*. Image courtesy of Tim Nason.

who is still farming in Gouldsboro, Maine, stated, “I think Mainers like to see people work hard, and if you are working hard, what can they say? They love you.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Jean Hay Bright, current co-owner of Bright-Berry Farm in Dixmont, Maine, described a “camaraderie” that developed between the young newcomers and older local farmers once skepticism had been replaced by respect. According to Bright, newcomers earned that respect by staying on the land and working hard.<sup>58</sup>

The criticisms of Earl Blackstone and other locals reflected concerns about whether newcomers possessed the maturity and fortitude to remain on the land. They also, however, reflected hope for the future of farming in Maine, which they cautiously placed in the hands of outsiders. By adopting the newcomers as extended family and exerting occasional pressure for them to commit, conform, or simply “work harder,”

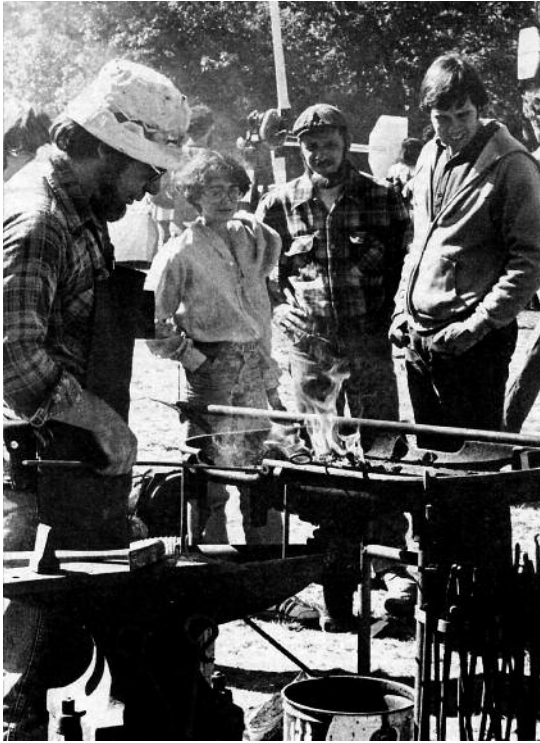
they were able to shape the culture of Maine's back-to-the-land movement, making it seem less strange and more familiar. As locals and back-to-the-landers came to respect one another through the bonds of neighborly mutual aid and the shared experience of hard work, they also began to realize that they shared many of the same difficulties when it came to growing and marketing their produce in Maine. In light of this, many began working together to promote the interests of small-scale and organic farms and agitate for changes within Maine's agricultural institutions. These efforts, by the late 1970s, would increasingly be referred to as the "Farm Movement."<sup>59</sup>

### New Networks

Back-to-the-landers in Maine were quick to share with one another the information they gleaned and patched together from a combination of neighborly advice, trial-and-error experimentation, and broad-based publications. This sharing often occurred via informal groups that met to discuss topics such as self-reliance, food growing, or soap making. MOFGA eventually evolved out of these scattered communities of



Picture of the Common Ground County Fair from September – October 1978 issue of the *Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener*. MOFGA began holding the Common Ground Country Fair in 1977, providing the organization with a source of income and creating a yearly space to exchange ideas and techniques. Image courtesy of Tim Nason.



Picture of the Common Ground Country Fair from September – October 1979 issue of the *Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener*. The growth of MOFGA's annual Common Ground Country Fair is exemplary of Maine's thriving and complex local agricultural system. Established in 1977 to celebrate all things local and organic, the fair attracted nearly 60,000 visitors and raised \$300,000 in September 2012 alone. Image courtesy of Tim Nason.

homesteaders and began serving as a statewide organization to promote organic farms during the early 1970s.<sup>60</sup> Originally formed in 1972 as the Maine Organic Foods Association (MOFA) and assisted by Cooperative Extension in the publishing of a regular newsletter, the organization eventually changed its name to the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, began certifying growers in 1973, and incorporated as a registered tax-exempt organization in 1974. That same year, MOFGA began printing the quarterly newsletter, *The Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener* to function as a mouthpiece for the organization and to disseminate otherwise scarce information about farming organically in Maine. By 1976, it had earned a reputation as “the most effective group of its kind in the country,” according to L.C. Goldman of Rodale Press's

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# Moose Produce

## Order Sheet & Food Newsletter

Nov. 23 - Dec 15 564

Source	Item	Case size	Est. price	x your order	= Est. cost	Actual price	x amount received	= Value received
ME	15m Apples: Max wpt	50#	.19#					
17m	Gold Del. wvs. Pansy	50#	.29#					
	Order	94d.	2.05 gal.					
	Avocados	190	.11 ea.					
	Spinach	50#	.24#					
	Pink grapefruit	40	.19 ea.					
	Naval orange	30	.16 ea.					
	Juice Orange	180	.09 ea.					
	Tomato King	180	.09 ea.					
	Seeded Green Grape	20	.18#					
	Amoy Pear	120	.10 ea.					
	Pink Apple	12	1.01#					
	Carrots	20#	.24#					
	Broccoli	14	.75 hd.					
	Swiss Chard	50#	.03#					
ME 00	Corn	20#	.24#					
ME	Chillie green	50#	.12 ea. (24#)					
	Cornflower	12	.30 hd.					
	Carrots	24	.10					
	Duke's	20	.15 ea.					
	Carrot Juice	20	1.14#					
ME	Alfalfa sprouts	50#	1.05#					
	Phil's dough	24#	1.47#					
	Waukena horise	24	.47 hd.					
	Muscadams	50#	1.14#					
	Corn	50#	1.14#					
ME 00	Kernuber Potato	50#	1.2#					
ME	Musset Baker	50#	1.17#					
	Red Onions	50#	1.14#					
	Sphach	50#	1.14#					
ME 00	Carrots	50#	1.14#					

1981 order sheet for Moose Produce, a company that was committed to purchasing both organic and local agricultural products to defray the importation of produce into Maine and support local farmers. Image courtesy of Tom Roberts.



Moose Produce delivery truck pictured in front of Piecemeal Farm in 1981. Image courtesy of Tom Roberts.

*Organic Farming and Gardening*.<sup>61</sup> MOFGA began holding the Common Ground Country Fair in 1977, providing the organization with a source of income and creating a yearly space to exchange ideas and techniques. This fostered a growing sense of community and cooperation, year after year.

Despite its countercultural associations, however, MOFGA functioned, from the beginning, as a central hub for a fairly diverse collection of local food and small-scale farming enthusiasts. Some of the earliest members of MOFGA were older market gardeners hoping to use the organization as vehicle to promote their produce in new ways. The organization also benefitted from the guidance and participation of several agriculture professors and extension agents sympathetic to the plight of small farmers in the state.<sup>62</sup> This diversity was an important factor in the organization's success. Many of its members also shared a desire to making a living from farming, market gardening, or crafting artisanal rural products but struggled to secure reliable markets for their goods. MOFGA responded to this challenge by promoting cooperation rather than competition among its members and by promoting organic agriculture through the dissemination of practical information.<sup>63</sup>

Increased knowledge, however, was not enough to ensure the long-term viability of organic growing in market-starved Maine. It also required a degree of entrepreneurial innovation and economic cooperation. In light of this, some members of MOFGA and other affiliated organizations began to envision for Maine a new kind of localized economic interdependence. Proponents asserted that, with institutional support for cooperative endeavors, producers could reduce their overhead and market directly to consumers. By reducing operating costs and removing middlemen from the equation, small farmers could earn more income while offering their customers lower prices. A cooperative model would also allow them to wholesale their produce to retailers more effectively. The idea was that this would put small growers on a more equal footing with larger competitors.<sup>64</sup> This approach represented a complex vision of economic interdependence that was scaled down to meet the needs of local people rather than the demands of the global marketplace. Such a vision straddled the line between practical survival strategy and radical social empowerment experiment in a way that appealed to a generation of radicals concerned with issues of both scarcity and social justice. It also likely resonated with many of Maine's old-timers who had, during the 1930s, rejected top-down federal control of agricultural relief programs in favor of localized, decentralist approaches.

Despite their reputation for being individualistic and perhaps even hostile to cooperative endeavors, local interdependence was something that, at least on a town scale, rural Mainers already knew quite well.<sup>65</sup> By expanding upon existing mutual aid relationships with locals and leveraging their growing credibility, many back-to-the-landers were able to bring innovative and cooperative marketing approaches they had absorbed from the 1960s and 1970s counterculture to neighbors who might otherwise be suspicious of such ideas.

Tom Roberts was among the many back-to-the-landers who engaged in this kind of cooperative activity with neighbors. Roberts had been part of the cooperative movement in the Boston area during the 1960s, and later became an early leader in this movement in Maine. In an interview conducted at the Common Ground Country Fair in 2000, he explained that he and a large number of homesteaders had arrived in Waldo County with the intention of eventually farming organically and forming rural co-ops based on their experiences with urban ones during the 1960s.<sup>66</sup> When Roberts and his cohorts began forming cooperative networks with other organic farmers in Maine, they did more than link themselves to regional producers and distributors of their own ilk. They also included their neighbors, assisting them in transporting, storing, and obtaining a fair price for their produce through newly-established co-ops and delivery services. In fact, Roberts and his associates specifically promoted their non-organic neighbors' produce as local, because they felt that local sourcing was just as important as growing organically. Of this, Roberts said, "We would do preferably organic, but anything that was local was good. It was better than bringing it in from out of state, and we touted that as one of the virtues of our business at Moose Produce that we were getting as much local as possible and as much organic as possible."<sup>67</sup> The efforts of Roberts and others in Maine's burgeoning co-op movement, as they organized with friends and neighbors to build cooperative marketing, purchasing, and distribution networks, played a significant role in helping small and organic farmers gain a foothold in the local supply chain.

The desire to establish, strengthen, and expand trade outlets for small producers was also reflected in the market research efforts of grassroots organizations like MOFGA, as well as governmental organizations such as Cooperative Extension.<sup>68</sup> One such collaborative project, announced in 1976, was initiated to generate a comprehensive marketing report for small and part-time farmers. This project was then chronicled in the "Director's Report" in *The Maine Organic Farmer & Gar-*

*dener*.<sup>69</sup> This column, created by Executive Director Chaitanya York, included a weekly information sheet that listed available and requested products as well as upcoming marketing and networking events. This market report was the result of a collaborative effort between the Division of Promotions of the Maine Department of Agriculture, which was printing it, and various distributors and environmental organizations, such as Northeast Carry, MOFGA, the Maine Audubon Society, and the Maine Federation of Cooperatives (FEDCO), which provided the initial funding and research for the project. York also announced that research for the report had revealed new potential marketing outlets via regional wholesalers for natural foods headquartered in Boston and New York.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, a growing concern among back-to-the-landers and locals for the future of farming in Maine led many to get involved in campaigns to engage the state in protecting Maine's farmland from development. Many, for example, worked to support the Farm and Open Space Tax Law, enacted in 1975 to tax agricultural land based on its current use value rather than its development value.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, many also began to work together to encourage more state support in helping small farmers meet their economic needs. For example, when the Farm-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1977 was passed, many were upset that Maine had not received funding to implement it. In response, the state legislature passed the Maine Direct Marketing Law in 1977, which made the Maine Department of Agriculture and the University of Maine responsible for providing research support for the new marketing program.<sup>72</sup>

These victories encouraged MOFGA to use its political clout to build more governmental and institutional support for small and organic farmers. The organization even began to weigh in on more controversial issues, such as tighter restrictions on the aerial spraying of pesticides. For example, in 1979, a group of organic gardeners, members of the Blueberry Workers Association, and other concerned citizens began protesting the aerial spraying practices of the Jasper Wyman Company. As clashes between protestors and the Wyman Company escalated into threats of violence and the grounding of spray helicopters, members of MOFGA asked the organization's leaders to get involved, leading Chaitanya York to participate in a meeting with state officials and other stakeholders to discuss concerns about the use of chemicals in Maine's blueberry industry.<sup>73</sup> At this meeting, Maine Commissioner of Agriculture Stewart Smith issued a stern warning to Wyman to keep their spray from drifting onto neighboring lands, especially those of organic farm-

ers. In regard to future acts of negligence, Smith said, "I warn each of you fellows . . . that the [Pesticides Control Board] will snap licenses very rapidly when you are too close to that line. We are not going to be reluctant to pull applicators' licenses."<sup>74</sup>

In extending its reach and making itself into a hub through which various spokes of the Farm Movement in Maine could connect, MOFGA assisted in the reorganization and reorientation of an entire regional food network. This reorganization, however, took place at a variety of scales and through the efforts of a large number of individuals and organizations, all of which were connected to varying degrees by their efforts to innovate economically and build political and institutional support systems to make Maine more hospitable to small and organic farmers. For most of the people who participated in this movement, these reform efforts were as much about the mechanics of everyday survival within rural communities as they were about abstract economic and political goals.

### **Conclusion**

When urban transplants went back to the land, seeking a sense of place in the Maine soil, most found it difficult to get established, and few would have stayed on the land long-term had they not received initial support from elderly neighbors. Most of these old-timers possessed skills accumulated through generations of experience, usually on the same piece of land. Their experiential knowledge, though not valued by most, was priceless to the back-to-the-landers who joined their communities. Many locals freely shared this knowledge with newcomers, and, in return, they often benefitted from extra help with difficult chores and experienced the satisfaction of knowing that their way of life would persist.

When back-to-the-landers were integrated into community, both newcomers and locals were able to obtain greater support both on and off the farm. As knowledge and labor were exchanged between neighbors through simple acts of mutual aid, so too were ideas and culture. It was through these exchanges that many back-to-the-landers became stable, rural citizens, old-timers became accidental agrarian radicals, and Maine's Farm Movement began to take shape. Participation in educational organizations such as MOFGA, alternative marketing and distribution entities such as Moose Produce, and the growing number of farmers' markets and co-ops across the state only intensified this cross-pollination between locals and newcomers.



While much has changed in Maine agriculture since the arrival of the back-to-the-landers in the 1970s, much of the old Maine continues to endure. By living like their neighbors, learning from them and working alongside them, newcomers experienced many of their hardships and embraced some of their survival strategies. Many also complained of the hopeless poverty of homesteading and, instead, sought a higher standard of living by selling their vegetables and a few cash crops.<sup>75</sup> However, markets were difficult to access in Maine. It was remote state with a low population density, and large wholesalers providing cheap, imported food regularly undercut local producers. They also encountered an agricultural establishment that, while heartened by the deluge of new farmers, was not fully prepared to support them. Straddling the line between ideological and economic imperatives, back-to-the-landers and locals met these challenges together by forming new farming organizations to share knowledge and coordinate cooperative marketing efforts. MOFGA's efforts toward building this decentralized network of small-scale producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers became increasingly important. The gravitational pull that it exerted as it grew allowed for a diverse group of agents pursuing a multiplicity of projects along the food chain to find common cause.

In a 1979 special issue of *The Maine Organic Farmer and Gardener*, MOFGA printed a full-page statement of purpose for the organization. That statement began with an account of one generation's movement to go back to the land in Maine. It then described the organization as giving "backbone and substance to [that] movement, raising it above the level of a mere fad, and helping to bring about a tangible measure of change in Maine's agricultural history." To this, it added, "Individuals may come and go" but "MOFGA is the common ground, a stability amidst the flux and change that are natural to any movement."<sup>76</sup> It was this stability that made it possible for so many different farm groups to come together and support Maine's organic dairy farmers in 2009. Due to the strong local support networks that evolved from the ground up and over the course of four decades, the innovative and collaborative efforts that helped to establish MOO Milk became a possibility.

The effort to rebuild Maine's local food economy took many forms, all of which were part of the state's agricultural success story—its thriving creative agricultural sector, its openness to unconventional growing and marketing approaches, and its recovery from the fabled rural decline that typified much of twentieth-century America. As this success story continues to attract national attention, however, it is important to

keep in mind that the movement that created it was not solely driven by the ideals of young, college-educated outsiders or celebrities such as Helen and Scott Nearing. It was also driven by the relationships that formed between locals and newcomers as they struggled to survive on the land. Together, upon the scaffolding of neighborly mutual aid, they slowly rebuilt Maine's local food economy, and in doing so, both found ways to impart their values while making Maine an easier place to farm. Or, to use a grafting analogy, the old-timers might be seen as the hardy rootstock from which many back-to-the-landers would receive sustenance and stability while sending forth new shoots. Together, these old roots and new shoots would allow Maine agriculture to survive by growing in new and exciting directions.

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