

AJES

Adirondack Journal of
Environmental Studies

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MISSION STATEMENT

The *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies* (AJES) exists to foster a dialogue about the broad range of issues that concern the Northern Forest.

AJES serves to bridge the gaps among academic disciplines and among researchers and practitioners devoted to understanding and promoting the development of sustainable communities, both human and wild.

The journal purposefully avoids serving as a vehicle for any single or special point of view. To the contrary, in searching for common ground AJES welcomes variety and a broad spectrum of opinion from its contributors.

CONTRIBUTING TO AJES

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, reviews, photographs, artwork and letters to the editor. For additional information please visit the AJES website at www.ajes.org/ or contact Gary Chilson at chilsog@paulsmiths.edu or 518-327-6377.

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PREROGATIVE

Support Sustainable Agriculture: Buy Local

By GARY CHILSON
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The last century witnessed a tremendous transition in America. In the late 1800s, rural villagers and small family farmers made up the majority of our population. Then the Industrial Revolution, with men like Ford, Edison, et. al., our entry into the First World War, and our stunning productivity during the Second World War transformed our agricultural society into the most powerful military/industrial economy in the world. In the process, particularly since the 50s, industrialism and corporate capitalism brought large-scale agribusiness and animal factories to the countryside. As a result, the nature of rural America changed as small farms failed and communities died.

The industrialization of agriculture developed slowly at first. Those who worked the land knew nature would resist and confound standardization. So industrialism's first half-century actually brought significant improvements to small-scale farms and rural communities. The internal combustion engine used to power tractors and equipment and rural electrification in the 30s are just two examples. Social theorists like Wendell Berry's predecessors, Borsodi and Morgan, praised these examples of appropriate technology. They hoped for a cultural renaissance throughout America made possible by the leisure such machines would bring to the rural working class.

Their hopes were dashed when agricultural industrialism really took off after the Second World War. Corporate capitalism, having already captured mining, manufacturing and transportation, came to agriculture for several reasons: its overwhelming political clout in rural counties; the availability of farm subsidies; "miracle" pesticides; low cost fertilizer;

a "science will conquer all" mindset in our nation's land grant colleges; and a more relaxed regulatory environment achieved simply by calling a food factory a farm. The factory approach soon generated tremendous yields, driving down commodity prices and small farmers' incomes. The new era of industrialized agriculture forced farmers to choose — become one of the few factory workers needed or leave the land, their heritage and culture altogether.

This process is tragic. To quote Thomas Jefferson: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." He also said, in contrast: "I consider the class of artificers as the panders of vice, and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned." By "artificers" he meant manufacturers without distinguishing between labor and management.

By the 1990s, the transformation of rural America was just about complete. Jefferson's yeomanry were nearly gone and, with them, both the moral compass and the rudder of our experiment in democracy. The landscape was toxic and the air reeked but food, especially meat, had never been cheaper or more convenient. In fact, amidst mounting fears about feeding the world's mushrooming population, industrialized agriculture promised salvation through its ability to mix just a little labor (plus sunlight, of course, and relatively clean air) together with tremendous amounts of fossil fuels, ancient aquifers, toxic chemicals, growth hormones, fertilizers, antibiotics and mined topsoil into edible calories.

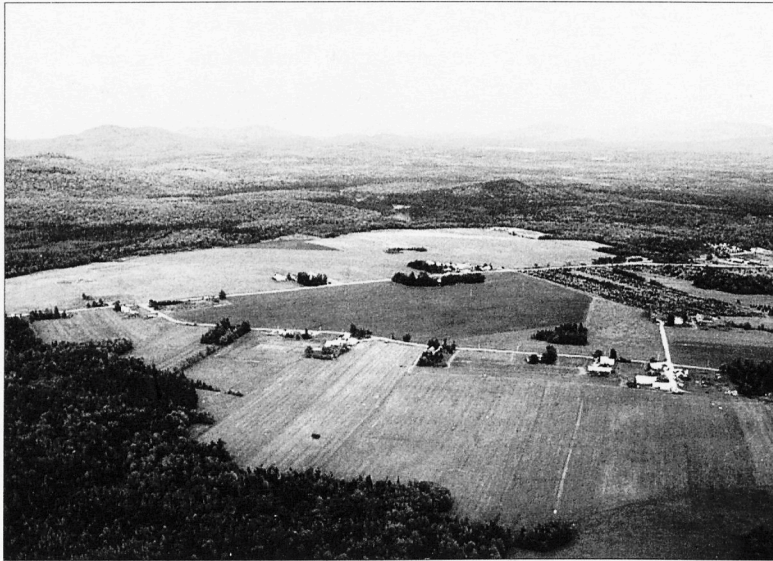
Recently, though, something changed. Consumers are choosing to purchase specialty foods — food grown or raised on a farm that cannot be produced in a food factory. They are seeking, even at higher cost and inconvenience, food that is better in quality, healthier to eat, and more ethically produced. We can see this change where we buy our food. In season, we now see more farmers' markets, roadside stands and U-Pickums. Over the last few years, however, the most significant change we've seen has been at the supermarket. Where once we had to search, usually in vain, for the occasional organic or natural offering, now whole sections of the store are devoted to a wide variety of products from fresh produce to processed frozen and convenience foods.

The agricultural census report confirms what we've already seen: last year the number of small farms did not decline. I think small farms are becoming economical again because they can produce what factory farms cannot. This wholesome change in America's taste and preferences for food, if not just a fad, means we have another significant opportunity with which to develop sustainable communities in the Northern Forest. Along with sustainable forestry and tourism, sustainable agriculture brings benefits and income into our communities without damaging the environment more than necessary.

Over the years, agriculture in the Northern Forest declined precipitously because of our harsh climate, hilly terrain and thin, acidic soil. These factors made agriculture of any sort in our region less profitable than factory farms out west with their long growing season, flat land, deep, rich soils and cheap, subsidized transportation. Consequently, much of our farmland was abandoned and it

returned to forest — a good thing in itself. Still, approximately 12 percent of the Northern Forest's 26 million acres is in agriculture and small farms in our region now have an edge: millions of tourists and seasonal residents swell the demand for locally and ethically produced fresh, wholesome food and another 70 million live within a day's drive of our farms.

I am delighted by the prospect of our small farms' revival. As a resident, I can-



This Adirondack farm has been worked by the same family for nearly 150 years.

not contribute much to sustainable tourism efforts in our region. Of course I avoid national chains as much as I can when I travel but I don't travel often. Nor, for that matter, can I purchase any significant amount of our sustainably harvested forest products. My personal ability to support sustainable tourism and forestry is limited — but I eat every day. More than any other single approach to achieving sustainability, our food choices and where we purchase our food make a difference.

I want to eschew factory meat, fish and produce and buy locally produced food. My purchases and those of others like me create the demand shift we see at the farmers' markets and in the supermarkets. The problem is convenience. Local farms aren't well represented where we buy most of our food. While organizations like the Adirondack North Country

Association are working to make local products better known and available, more convenience for the consumer is needed if we are to help local farmers promote sustainable agriculture in the Northern Forest.

It seems strange to be writing about such bucolic local opportunities in the Northern Forest after just last year spouting off about America's preemptive War in Iraq. Like everyone else, of course, I'm sad about Iraq. The repercussions in that region will haunt us for years to come. But now I am confused again. Why are there so many American and other foreign corporations rebuilding Iraq? Why weren't Iraqis hired to rebuild Iraq? Why didn't all those billions we gave to rebuild the country go to the people who needed to be put to work with something constructive to do? Surely they know how to rebuild their civilization. I'd guess, too, that with so many Iraqis un-

employed right now, they'd work harder and for less than the foreigners imported to supplant them. So now there are all those unemployed Iraqis hanging around with nothing productive to do — surely a recipe for disaster.

Nevertheless, an individual can do little at the global level we're asked to think about. It is only where we live and eat that we actually have an affect on the reality of our times. Buy local. It's good for the environment, good for our health, and good for the animals. Buying locally is as good for our communities as hiring locally would have been for Iraq's.

Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for *AJES* to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith's College, Paul Smiths NY 12970, chilsog@paulsmiths.edu.