

Chapter 1

Industrial Agriculture

I thought I knew what I wanted to know, but fairly soon I realized that I didn't. The phrase back to scratch comes to mind. Scratching in the dirt?

Many of the people I was interviewing were farmers, peasants, people in the countryside. What they were doing connected an understanding of food, of natural resources, and of how to build a fair and sustainable society. Perhaps, if democracy is an expression of what a society feels it needs to do to survive and improve, then what society does to produce food is important?

Anyway, for millennia this has been the case. Food production knowledge has been built up and passed from generation to generation the world over by indigenous people, peasants, and farmers. They have kept us all alive and healthy. They have sustained growing populations and highly sophisticated cultures. And they have done so in harmony with the environment of which humans are a part.

With this in mind, I'm not so sure that democracy is simply something that just showed up in ancient Greece among the slave-owning class, with its undeniably great thinkers, and pointed the way to a future in which democracy is now spread around the world by a dubious alliance of free-trade seeking corporations and their public and private armies. Surely there have been other expressions of a society's individuals

with collective thought and action.

And indeed, in just one example, I was thrilled to learn of the Tiwanaku civilization who lived 1,600 to 600 years ago on the Andes Mountains *Altiplano* around and beyond Lake Titicaca.⁶ According to archeologist Dr. Juan V. Albarracin-Jordan, the Tiwanaku prospered in this mountaintop (15,000 feet high) world with an intricate agriculture of terraced hills, raised fields, and water management. They developed complex interrelationships of family, land and ayllu⁷ in an "integrated system of social units with local political hierarchies." They grew diverse crops using diverse technologies.⁸

I first learned about the Tiwanaku standing on a very small, almost deserted island in the Bolivian part of Lake Titicaca. (I saw in the valley below a young shepherd guiding her fifteen sheep and a pig). I was surrounded by ancient tombs, ancient stone homes and terraced fields. Behind me, back over the lake, was a snow-capped cordillera of the Andes. Later in the day, I was introduced to the Akapana pyramid, brilliant statues and sculpture, the huge Kalasasaya ceremonial precinct.

Apparently, the Tiwanaku area was taken over by the Incan empire and soon after that came the genocidal onslaught of the Spanish empire. Albarracin-Jordan describes many connections between the



The graveyard at Lilly Grove church – the church long gone.

Aymara of today and the Tiwanaku of the past.

The Fifties – the new way of farming

One of the original sections of *In Motion Magazine* is called *Rural America*. It is co-edited by two leaders of the statewide farmer organization the Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC), Roger Allison and Rhonda Perry. (This section of the magazine also serves as the MRCC website.) As of this writing, this grassroots organization of 5,500 farmer and rural families has been building for twenty-five years (since 1985). On one of my several visits to Missouri to stay with Roger and Rhonda and learn more about what they do, I spent the night as a guest of former MRCC president Bill Christison and his wife Dixie, on their farm near Chillicothe. The next day, as we drove around, Bill stopped on a bit of a rise among



Bill Christison driving me around in his truck.

the miles of fields and trees, part of the huge expanse of the Missouri River Valley, to show me a graveyard. I got out of the truck to take some photos. It was very, very cold. But the graveyard was quite a ways back from the road. Between us and the graves was open grassy land where once had stood a church. Bill told me then, and later in an interview:

“Lilly Grove church was established early on after the land was patented in this area in the last part of the 1830s and the first part of the 1840s and was settled very quickly. A lot of people went to that church. There was a large cemetery there and all of the stones are dated very old now because the cemetery isn’t used, to any degree at all, because all of the families and all of the people are gone. The church was used during the Civil War and there were actual bullet holes made by the soldiers inside of the church that

came there when services were being held.

“The reason that the church left is that there are probably less than 10% of the people farming the land that were farming there back in the 1800s. There’s no church; there is not any town. The church stopped operating in about 1950. It was after the soldiers returned from World War II and decided that they couldn’t make a living farming. There was a dramatic change right there in not very many years.”

“And later?” I asked, “In the ’60s, the ’70s, after the Reagan-era Farm Bill of 1986 and the Newt Gingrich /Bill Clinton-era Farm Bill of 1996?”

“It is not only the churches that have disappeared. The post office has disappeared. It’s been the small town and all the infrastructure in those small towns and then, you know, the people are gone. The school systems have changed. School systems are gone. Concentrated. It happens all the time. First they combine the extremely small schools, country schools, where (grades) 1 through 8 was taught and then the small high schools are gone. It’s a continual concentration of everything and every way. It is also the loss of population.”⁹

He went on to talk about the loss of utilities, the lack of maintenance of roads and bridges.

A postcard received in 1952

More recently, Bill told me about a postcard his parents had received in 1952 when he was younger but old enough that he had his own farm, producing corn and soy beans, wheat, cattle, and hogs.

“The postcard that we received in the mail, at that time, was from the seed company in our little town of Chillicothe, inviting my parents, and whoever else

wanted, to come to a growers’ meeting. My mother always had a large flock of laying hens and most of the time she sold hatchery eggs. And this card, little did we know what it really meant, it promised about twice as much money for your eggs as my mother was receiving at that particular time. So I went with my parents; we went to that meeting.

“Well, the people that were putting on the meeting – and there was a meal connected with it, and there was probably a good big crowd of farm people – what they were doing was explaining this new system, the new way of farming.

“What it included was that they wanted the farmers to buy their chickens, their baby chickens, and feed them and grow them up on their feed. And, if you raised quality eggs, they would pay you 75 cents a dozen instead of maybe 35 cents a dozen.

“Now you had to jump certain hoops. You had to have decent facilities. You had to buy their baby chicks, and they were high. You had to have the right roosters that they also supplied. (And) this was a major feed and seed company that was supplying the feed. But, we now know that this was the first step going down the wrong road of agricultural production. It was definitely the beginning of the farmer becoming the chicken house janitor, so to speak.

“We did make some money. We were not stepped on too hard. But, definitely, it was the first shot over the bow for corporations taking over the production of farm products in the United States.”¹⁰

Agribusiness and Vertical Integration

A truly encyclopedic and highly-praised book about the history and mechanics of this wrong road of



Pigs run wild on the Storm family farm near Bosworth, Missouri.



agricultural production is *The Corporate Reapers: The Book of Agribusiness* by Al V. Krebs.¹¹ In this book, I discovered that the very word “agribusiness” comes from this era Bill describes: the post-World War II era of President Eisenhower; the era of the birth of Milton Friedman’s University of Chicago, Economics Department theories (free trade, privatization, reduced government services);¹² the era of the “right roosters that they also supplied.”

I learned in *The Book of Agribusiness* that parallel to the fundamentalist capitalist theories being engineered as the Chicago school of economics, there was a similar set of views emerging at Cornell University. Krebs points out that these theories were specifically targeted at agriculture, and that several of the authors of these theories became members of President Eisenhower’s Department of Agriculture and later President Reagan’s.¹³

In examining this group, Krebs writes of Eisenhower’s Assistant Secretary of Agriculture John H. Davis. “... (I)n the January-February 1956 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Davis suggested that the time had come for a movement advocating vertical integration as the alternative to ‘big government programs to help agriculture.’ He called such a movement ‘agribusiness.’”

Krebs comments, “It is fitting that the concept of ‘agribusiness’ came into common usage during the Eisenhower presidency and in the decade of Benson’s farm policy (Ezra Taft Benson, Eisenhower’s Secretary of Agriculture from 1953-1961), for that conjunction and its economic and political consequences reverberate today throughout the entire structure of American agriculture.”

This vertical integration is the ownership of food production from top to bottom. From the seed for their chicks which come from their roosters – to the egg distribution and marketing. From the barns of chickens to their slaughter – to the city supermarket presentation. From the hogs in acres of polluting warehouses to the dressing of meat – to the market. From miles and miles of one-crop corn or one-crop soy to cheap feed for cattle – and on.

This vertical integration was made possible by agribusiness-inspired social and economic policy changes which bankrupted farmers, drove them off the land into cities, emptied towns, poisoned the soil and the crops, and depleted the nutritional value of our food.

The trick – was not to give farmers a fair price for their products. The rule, in fact, was that farmers receive less than the cost of production. This condition came to be known as the “cost-price squeeze.”¹⁴

Of what sustainable is

But how could this be? Isn’t this massive social engineering of the worst kind? Or perhaps this is just the way it should be? This is free enterprise, efficient industrial agriculture, the way cities develop. It had been very difficult for me to know. Certainly, that’s what I had heard on the news, read in the papers, what the president says (whichever one). But talking with farmers about what they do, about the history they know – with the farmers, the producers, indigenous people – it seems there’s more to know. They say that ever since these corporate entities have placed their economic development at the center of social development there has not only been resis-