

Rural Papers

Published four times/year
by the
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Rural Papers is the voice of the Kansas Rural Center, Inc., (KRC), a non-profit organization that promotes the long-term health of the land and its people through research, education, and advocacy. The KRC cultivates grassroots support for public policies that encourage family farming and stewardship of soil and water. KRC is committed to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable rural culture. The KRC is funded by private foundations, churches, and individual contributions.

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Small Farmer Commentary Book Review

“Lentil Underground” Tells Our Story

by Mary Fund

*Liz Carlisle has done organic and sustainable agriculture a huge favor. Only a few pages into her book, **Lentil Underground: Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America**, I recognized not only my husband and I's story, but that of countless others around the country in our 40-year quest for a different vision of agriculture. This book comes just as those of us who have been at it 20, 30 or more years, are seeing increasing interest from a new generation of farmers and consumers, and have begun turning the task over to them.*

Carlisle, a fellow at the Center for Diversified Farming Systems at the University of California, Berkeley, and Montana native, recounts the story of the organic/sustainable agriculture movement in Montana. Not the first place you think of when you think organic farmers and natural foods ... you might think California, East coast or the Pacific Northwest, or any place with more urban markets. But that this happened and is happening in Montana—the quintessential Western rural state—is an important story to tell. It is a story all the more important because it has been replicated to some degree or another by groups of individuals involved in sustainable and organic agriculture around the country.

Here is the story of a group of stubbornly independent, hard working people trying to make a living in a place they love, protect the land by working with nature not against it, and avoid the straitjacket of modern industrial farming's dependence on fossil fuels, corporate inputs and markets. To do this—while facing all the same challenges of credit, bills, expensive health care, and weather extremes that conventional ag faces, plus deal with government programs hell bent on putting up barriers ~ all while having to resist the laughter or disdain of neighbors who think you are crazy, takes drive, passion and vision. Carlisle captures this along with the

unique personalities and perspectives that run the Montana gamut from “gun-toting libertarians to Christian homesteaders to peace-sign waving environmental activists”.

Underground of course has double meaning. Underground in terms of soil health— these farmers were heavily into building soil health long before it was cool to mainstream ag or conservation agencies and researchers, or the term “cover crop” was commonplace; and underground in terms of resistance—resistance to “the status quo is inevitable” mantra of the capital intensive, chemical dependent agriculture promoted by scientists, researchers and primarily by the corporations selling the inputs.

The story is largely the quest to develop an alternative agriculture, to find crops other than dryland wheat and barley, suitable for Montana, that will reduce input costs while providing nitrogen and nutrients to the soil, not harm the natural environment, and provide a decent living for the farmer.

Specifically, Carlisle tells the story of Dave Oien, who returned to his family's small Montana farm in 1976 after stints at the University of Chicago and University of Montana, determined to introduce solar heat collectors to his parent's farm and the larger community. More importantly he came home determined to find a new direction for their small family farm.

Oien's search led him to Black Medic, a nitrogen fixing native plant despised by farmers as a common weed, which led to lentils, another dryland nitrogen fixing crop but one that can serve as human food, which led to a cooperative business, Timeless Seeds, now Timeless Natural Foods. The path was not easy or clear.

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“When Oien seeded his first organic lentil crop, it was a radical act,” writes Carlisle. “On the northern Plains, farmers specialize in either wheat or barley.....all other life forms stand aside so that farmers can grow one plant year after year aiming to fill the bin each August.” If wheat and barley are the sum total of modern technology and inputs, lentils, an ancient grain, are the opposite.

“Instead of mining the soil for nutrients... this Robin Hood of the dryland prairie gathers the abundant fertility of the aboveground world—of the air, in fact—and shares it freely beneath the earth’s surface. Inside the plant’s nodules bacteria surreptitiously convert atmospheric nitrogen into a community nutrient supply.” In a diverse rotation they also keep weed pressure at bay, and do not need chemicals at all. In other words, the plants perform the functions expensive industrial inputs do.

“If wheat is the symbol of rugged individualism,” Carlisle writes, “then lentils embody that other agrarian hallmark all too often overlooked in the Western mythos: community.”

Looking at the struggles of the “lentil underground” community and their more current recruits some of whom focus as much on fruits and vegetable production as on grains, will help all of us as we move forward toward a new vision of agriculture. That vision mimics natural systems offering a diverse mix of crops and ecological benefits, and makes food – and food related livelihoods– accessible to more people.

KRC Board Appoints New Executive Director

The Kansas Rural Center (KRC) Board of Directors announces the appointment of Mary Fund to its Executive Director position. Fund has been serving as the Interim Executive Director since January 2015, and is a long time KRC staff member.

“We are pleased that Mary has accepted the position, and feel that her history with the organization, and her background in sustainable agriculture circles, make her uniquely suited for the job,” stated Stu Shafer, KRC board president. “We look forward to working with her and the other staff to build on KRC's accomplishments and rich history.” Most recently, Fund has been KRC's Policy and Program Director and editor of KRC's newsletter, Rural Papers, and the Weekly Legislative Policy Updates.

“KRC has a long history of promoting a diversified, ecologically based, and economically viable food and farming system,” stated Fund. “In recent years, our vision has expanded to include greater local and regional food production, promotion of beginning farmer opportunities, and healthy accessible food for all Kansans.”

“We have historically maintained a two-pronged approach to our mission,” Fund explained. “First, we offer practical information and how-to education to farmers, ranchers, and growers seeking more environmentally sound, diversified practices and marketing options; and second, we identify and advocate public policy at a state and federal level that supports a more sustainable agriculture and food system.”

“Historically we have identified emerging issues, asked the right questions, and focused attention on them, growing the grassroots support until they become recognized and accepted as the broad issues they are. This was the case with a range of issues from the 1980's farm crisis of foreclosures and bankruptcies, water quality concerns, management intensive grazing systems, community wind, and how Kansas could and should produce more of its food locally. Our work on all of these has been and is geared toward giving people~ both growers and consumers~ greater control over farm, food and resource decisions.”

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I recall moving back to our farm after my father's death in 1978, and saying “Only if we can do this differently. We are not into big is better. We will avoid debt. We will not use chemicals. We will rely on nature and biology as our guide, and we will find kindred spirits.”

Like Dave Oien and his Montana neighbors, we found other like minded farmers scattered across the state: all of

us asking tough questions, sharing what we learned, and working together. Here's to many more years for all of us in the so-called “lentil underground.” □

Lentil Underground: Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America by Liz Carlisle, 2015. Gotham Books. ISBN: 978-1-592-40924-4