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Nancy Janovicek

Seeds of Knowledge: From Back-to-the-Land to Urban Gardening

For the past few years, my partner and I have worked with a group of young entrepreneurs, the Leaf Ninjas, to transform a beat-up fence and a weedy patch of grass in our backyard into an “urban food forest.” The first steps involved working with our neighbours to tear down the fence, dig a swale to store water from our neighbours’ eaves trough, and plant a row of berry bushes on the property line. We followed plans that Luke Kimmel, one of the Ninjas, developed for us. Even with a lot of help from young activists from Calgary’s anarcho-punk scene, it took us three summers to complete the project. So we hired the Ninjas to finish the job on our side of the “food wall.” Now our backyard grows raspberries, apples, pears, plums, cherries, goji berries, Saskatoon berries, currants, gooseberries, sea buckthorn, blueberries, strawberries, rhubarb, asparagus, lovage, mint, chives, tarragon, dill, rosemary, and thyme. Bees from our neighbour’s hive pollinate the garden. We are nowhere close to being self-sustaining. I hope to harvest enough fruit to bake a bumbleberry pie next summer. But we’re proud of our small contribution to initiatives to build sustainable, local food economies.

I tell this story because the Leaf Ninjas have connections to the West Kootenays, a region in British Columbia, Canada, which is also the place where I study the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Kimmel trained with Grégoire Lamoureux at the Kootenay Permaculture Institute in the Slocan Valley, then returned to Calgary, Alberta, and founded the Leaf Ninjas in 2010 with three friends. The Ninjas are a Calgary-based permaculture company committed to creating food gardens in unused public spaces and private yards that are both beautiful and ecologically sustainable. One of the videos on their website explains that their goals are to “change the face of food today” and to “[knit] together the broken fabric of the ecosystem, which is so fragmented. Especially in cities.”¹

There are parallels between the lives of the Ninjas, well-known activists in Calgary’s contemporary local food movement, and those of the “freaks” who moved to the Kootenays in the 1960s and 1970s, now known as a hippie haven because of their migration to the region. The Ninjas are city kids. In their early twenties they travelled to rural

1 “Leaf Ninjas – Local Food Pioneers,” accessed 29 June 2015, <https://vimeo.com/channels/leafninjas/78936090>. Available via Leaf Ninjas website, <http://www.leafninjas.ca>.

places to learn the skills that they needed to build alternatives to wasteful industrial food systems. Yet they did not stay in the country, but instead decided to bring these skills to the city to share the knowledge that they had acquired from previous generations who had also learned by doing it themselves. The Ninjas and their fellow activists in the food movement are part of a history of the intergenerational dissemination of traditional agricultural skills that have been preserved to counter the rise of agribusiness and build alternatives to the industrial diet.² Their political messages have changed to address the shifting challenges created by environmental degradation. Yet these generations of activists share the belief that “food is a tool for social change.”³ Food activism focused on the preservation and transmission of agricultural skills does not only connect activists across generations, but also across space: the Leaf Ninjas and back-to-the landers are part of a transnational food movement that spans the Global North and the Global South.

Too often, histories of the back-to-the-land movement study the 1960s generation as an anomaly rather than identifying similarities to previous historical moments when significant numbers of people moved from cities to rural places.⁴ Popular accounts of back-to-the-land movements focus on the new ideas and lifestyles that hippies brought to staid rural communities.⁵ I find the relationships that young people, who were keen to live sustainable, self-sufficient, and simple lives on the land, built with the elders in their communities far more compelling. Learning to become self-sufficient was one of the deepest connections between the newcomers and old-timers. This was especially true for growing crops and putting up the harvest.

Coming to the Kootenays

Located in southeastern British Columbia, the West Kootenays is a popular tourist destination because of the bucolic old-growth forests protected in its provincial parks and

2 Anthony Winson, *The Industrial Diet: The Degradation of Food and the Struggle for Healthy Eating* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

3 BC Regional Group of The Peoples Food Commission, “Finding out About Food,” *Catalist*, February 1979, University of British Columbia Archives and Special Collections.

4 For a study of the connections between back-to-the-land movements in the United States, see Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

5 Recent academic literature complicates this story. See Sharon Weaver, “First Encounters: 1970s Back-to-the-Land, Cape Breton, NS and Denman, Hornby and Lasqueti Islands, BC,” *Oral History Forum d’Histoire Orale* 30 (2010): 1–30; Jinny A. Turman-Deal, “‘We Were an Oddity’: A Look at the Back-to-the-Land Movement in Appalachia,” *West Virginia History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1–32.

because it has some of the best skiing conditions in Canada. Today, largely due to tourism, the region is affluent. But in the 1960s and 1970s, when the back-to-the-landers moved to the region, its then resource-based economy was in decline. Urban refugees moved to a place that had a long tradition of farming. Agriculture was an important part of the Kootenay economy until the Keenleyside Dam, opened in 1968, flooded 25,000 acres of arable land, which had been home to many successful market farms, to make way for the hydroelectric development.⁶ The completion of the highway—in parallel with the rise of mechanized agribusinesses—made it easier to produce food more cheaply elsewhere and transport it to supermarkets in the interior of British Columbia. This in turn made smallholder market farms even less lucrative. When young urban people were looking for land, many farmers were selling their properties because their children were leaving the farm and did not wish to follow their parents into farming. Cheap land prices attracted new homesteaders to the area.

These new homesteaders joined the remaining agrarian communities, many of whom shared their commitment to peace, self-sufficiency, and anti-consumerism. Doukhobors, a pacifist religious community, had lived in the Slocan Valley since the early twentieth century. The Doukhobors held land collectively until government intervention in the 1950s forced them to conform to private land-holding practices.⁷ While the British Columbia government was repressing Doukhobor families, a group of Quakers moved from California to Argenta, a small community east of Kootenay Lake, because they had refused to sign oaths of loyalty associated with McCarthy era fearmongering. They established the Delta Co-op in order to develop a collectively held, small-scale farming business that reflected their observance of religious practices and their political values. Some of the draft resisters opposed to American intervention in the Vietnam War also made their way to the region through the networks that helped young men and their families escape from the draft. Those who stayed in Argenta became part of the co-op while those who moved to the Slocan Valley lived separately from the Doukhobors.

6 Tina Loo, "People in the Way: Modernity, Environment, and Society on the Arrow Lakes," *BC Studies* 142/143 (Summer 2004): 167; Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953–2003* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

7 John McLaren, "The State, Child-Snatching, and the Law: The Seizure, Indoctrination of Sons of Freedom Children in British Columbia, 1950–1960," in *Regulating Lives: Historical Essays on the State, Society, the Individual, and the Law*, ed. John McLaren, Robert Menzies, and Dorothy Chunn (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 259–93.

Commitment to pacifism, as well as simple living and self-sufficiency, fostered supportive relationships between old and young. In the Slocan Valley, Doukhobor elders were an important source of knowledge for the urban youth who had little experience of living rurally. Bob Ploss, a draft resister who left Berkeley in 1966, had few gardening skills when he arrived. “I knew that the green side went up and the roots went down,” he joked.⁸ He recalled that neighbours were eager to help out the new young families:

We had a lot of support from the local Russians, especially the Sons of Freedom branch of the Doukhobors. Peter and Ellen Demoskoff and Mary Speirka were especially kind to us. And they showed us how to garden and lent us tools and plants to get started with, and helped us out.⁹

Many of the people I met shared similar stories. Some back-to-the-landers had already learned basic gardening skills from *Harrowsmith* and the *Rochdale Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening* and had maintained significant gardens in the city.¹⁰ Friendly relationships with people who had been farming in the region for generations helped them learn to adapt to local conditions.¹¹

As back-to-the-landers established themselves in the community, they took an active role in preserving traditional agricultural techniques. *The Smallholder*, published by the Quaker Press in Argenta since 1974, was a forum for new and old smallholders to share information about organic farming techniques and environmental politics. Often well-educated, back-to-the-landers also used their own knowledge and skills to develop traditional farming techniques. Sigrid Shepard, author of *The Thursday Night Feast* (a popular cookbook that inspired people to learn to cook East Asian foods in the 1970s), had moved to the Kootenays because living in the city was making her sick. Her doctor advised her to move to a place with clean air and water where she could grow her own organic food. She was also married to an entomologist, whose research on butterflies had sparked her interest in genetic diversity. She began to cultivate seeds suited to the local climate. She explained why this was important in the West Kootenays: “We live in a narrow mountain valley. We

8 Interview with Bob Ploss, Vancouver, BC, 7 July 2011. All interviews by author.

9 Ibid.

10 Interviews with Brenda and Gail Elder, 25 July 2012, and Sally Lamare, 31 August 2011, New Denver, BC.

11 It is important to note that there were many conflicts over politics and alternative lifestyles between back-to-the-landers and conservative communities in the Slocan Valley. I discuss these conflicts in my article “‘Good Ecology is Good Economics’: The Slocan Valley Community Forest Management Project, 1973–1979,” in *Canadian Countercultures and the Environment*, ed. Colin Coates (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015), 55–78.

lose the sun at five or six in the afternoon. It drops down to below ten degrees every night. We knew that we had to grow our own seeds in order to produce food that we could grow here.”¹² She worked with a collective of women to found a seed-saving group in 1978 to preserve the seeds that grew in the climate. They relied on local knowledge to understand which crops were best suited to the region:

I saved seeds from the Russian community, from the German community, from the Dutch community, from the Italian community. And also Chinese people, too. And Japanese. All of the different ethnic groups that have been in the Kootenays before I came ... had saved seeds. I took their seeds and I saved it here.¹³

Growing food organically was both personal and political. Bonnie Baker, a founder of the Kootenay Organic Growers, grew organic crops because “it never occurred to me to do anything else. I don’t want to handle toxic chemicals. Why would I do that? ... I can’t tell you where it came from, I just knew it.”¹⁴

In the back-to-the-land movement, growing one’s own food was an essential step towards self-sufficiency and removing oneself from wasteful and chemical-dependent food systems. Judi Morton and Alex Berland believed that organic farming was political and grew their own food so that they would not be tied to the corporate grocery store.¹⁵ However, the short growing season made it impossible for back-to-the-landers to grow all of their food. Building on the socialist co-operative tradition, Morton and Berland helped establish a food-buying club to source food that they could not grow themselves. Organizing food-buying clubs helped back-to-the-landers supplement the fresh produce that they could grow in the valley with beans, flour, and other staples. More importantly, worker-run co-ops gave back-to-the-landers control over the food they ate and enabled them to buy food that was produced by independent farmers who used environmentally sustainable agricultural techniques. This offered another way to support farmers who were preserving older knowledge and techniques, and contributed to building a viable alternative to profit-driven global food systems that paid no heed to the impact of agribusiness on local environments.

12 Interview with Sigrid Shepard, Nelson, BC, 24 October 2010.

13 Ibid. When I interviewed Shepard, the collective was still active.

14 Interview with Bonnie Baker, Nelson, BC, 26 October 2010.

15 Interview with Judi Morton and Alex Berland, Passmore, BC, 25 July 2012.

Conclusion

Many of the counterculturalists who went back to the land in the 1960s and 1970s believed that fostering local agricultural economies could produce a viable alternative to exploitive and wasteful global food systems. The young families who moved to the West Kootenays brought new ideas to the region, but they were also receptive to learning farming skills from the elders who had been raised in the area. Those who stayed are now the elders. They are passing on their knowledge to a new generation of activists who share their concerns about the negative impacts of agribusiness on the environment and the exploitation of agricultural workers who produce most of the food that is sold in grocery stores. Others have chosen not to stay but are passing on their knowledge in other ways. When I was doing research for this project, I attended a talk by Bonnie Baker who has sold her farm and moved into Nelson, an urban hub in the West Kootenays. She was encouraging people to replace the grass in their yards with an urban farm, a trend that has caught on in the city.

Urban farming and community gardens are becoming increasingly popular in larger urban centres, too. The Leaf Ninjas are successful in part because of the current enthusiasm for eating from our backyards. Education and the preservation of local foods are central components of their business. They offer “ed-u-tain-ment” lessons in classrooms and community halls to teach Calgarians the basics of soil biology, urban farming, and vermiculture. They also run the Future Fruit Foundation, a project that they hope will preserve the genetic stock of heritage fruit trees in the city that are disappearing because of new development. In exchange for a free consultation on the health of a heritage fruit tree in one’s yard, owners agree to allow the Ninjas to collect cuttings from the tree in order to produce new plants to “keep the legacies of these trees alive.”¹⁶

Access to healthy, wholesome food is fundamental to food security. Producing and distributing food using techniques and systems that are economically and environmentally sustainable are tools of a growing social movement that is at once global and profoundly local. Preserving local seeds, knowledge, and agricultural techniques is most often associated with addressing malnourishment and poverty in rural communi-

¹⁶ “Call to Calgary Fruit Tree Owners,” Leaf Ninjas, accessed 28 December 2015, <http://www.leafninjas.ca/future-fruit-trees>. See the Leaf Ninjas blog for examples of other education events, <http://www.leafninjas.ca/blog/>.

ties in the Global South, areas that have been most devastated by capitalist expansion. Revitalizing local food economies in these areas is crucial to ending the systemic economic inequities caused by globalization. Yet tackling global inequality and building alternatives to a globalized food system requires change in the Global North as well. Back-to-the-landers and the young food activists whom they have inspired realize that fostering local food economies in affluent countries is a necessary part of this political movement.

Suggested Further Reading

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