

Inspecting tomato plants  
at the Ruetnik Gardens  
Greenhouses, circa 1960.



PHOTO BY CLEVELAND PRESS COLLECTION,  
CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY



# LEARNING FROM OLD McDONALD

Looking to Ohio's agricultural heritage to build the modern local-food system desired by consumers.

By Brian Williams

**A**S RECENTLY AS 50 YEARS AGO, Cleveland had 400 acres of farmland within the city limits, producing much of the tomatoes, cucumbers, greens, and other vegetables eaten in Cuyahoga County. Most of the farmland was under glass, in the greenhouses concentrated in the Old Brooklyn neighborhood and scattered around the city and region.

Energy costs — and the cost of meeting new environmental regulations on energy production — hastened the demise of the greenhouse industry at a time when food production, processing and distribution was being consolidated on a national scale.

But until then, Ohio didn't really have "local food." It simply had food, and most of it was local.

The food-producing greenhouses in Cleveland, Lorain County and the Toledo area either disappeared or evolved into landscaping and nursery businesses. Commercial food production in Cleveland all but vanished until 2012, when Green City Growers emerged within a remnant of Cleveland's old economy — a state-of-the-art greenhouse occupies an old factory on

a 10-acre, central-city industrial site.

That pattern of loss and rebirth is playing out statewide with fruits, vegetables, dairies, meat and poultry. Why? Because consumers — their appetites whetted by the proliferation of farmers markets — show a desire to see local foods in restaurants, grocery stores, schools and hospitals.

Last year, Ohio's largest university and the state's largest school district made substantial commitments to seeking local sources for the food they serve. The Ohio State University wants 40 percent of its \$39 million dining-services budget to be spent in Ohio by 2025. Columbus City Schools' target is not that specific, but in January it kicked off a monthly "Ohio Days: Our State, Our Plate" meal, and is reaching out to farmers, processors and distributors to expand the effort in the 2017-18 school year.

Green City Growers is one of several businesses in Cleveland's Evergreen Cooperative Initiative, which brings development, jobs and the chance of employee ownership to struggling urban neighborhoods. With 3.5 acres of hydroponic lettuce and other products under glass, the greenhouse makes up about 1 percent of what Cleveland had 50 years ago. Better technology and

more efficient ways of heating the greenhouses make today's operations more productive.

Others see the same opportunity. In the last two years, two other large hydroponic greenhouses have begun production in Ohio and a third is under construction. Nature Fresh Farms is producing in the first of a proposed 175 acres of greenhouses in Fulton County. Golden Fresh Farms has the first segment of a proposed 200-acre greenhouse complex producing tomatoes in Wapakoneta. In Huron, Mucci Farms is working on 95 acres of greenhouses to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and other produce.

All three companies are Canadian-owned. At a recent meeting of a new statewide farmer initiative in Columbus, some producers wondered why Ohio is not more actively promoting home-grown entrepreneurialism on that scale.

In 1959, the Columbus area, with about 60 percent of the current metropolitan population, had eight dairies. It also had 10 meat packers and 25 produce distributors — 16 of them near the old Central Market.

Go to any antique mall in Ohio and you'll find some vendor selling old milk bottles. The older ones will have the dairy name embossed, and "newer" ones will have the name and town stamped on the bottle. Every town of any size had its own dairy brand. Dover, in Tuscarawas County, had three locally owned dairy stores into the 1960s, when the population was 11,000. Those, like scores of local dairies across the state, are long gone.

So many had closed, and so few had opened, that the Ohio Department of Agriculture was caught off guard when the Hartzler clan in Wayne County grew tired of price fluctuations and the bureaucracy of the federal milk-marketing process and decided to open their own plant to process milk from their own farms.

The department, which regulates dairy plants and many other food facilities, managed to sort out the process, and Hartzler Family Dairy in Wooster has been selling milk, butter and ice cream in the on-site store and at markets and restaurants around the state since 1994. The milk is pasteurized, but not homogenized; the cream is on the top and you have to



In the greenhouses at Great Lakes Growers in Burton, workers transplant seedlings to an irrigation apparatus.

shake the bottle before pouring. About those bottles: They're clear glass that may someday show up in an antique store.

Ten years later, Snowville Creamery came on the scene in rural Meigs County with milk (cream on top; shake well) in colorful cartons designed by a local artist. Warren Taylor, the "dairy revolutionary," took his experience designing and building dairy plants for corporations and channeled it into a specialized operation with a focus on sustainable farming and a less intensive pasteurization process.

A couple of generations ago, towns all over the state had "truck farms" that grew much of the fruits and vegetables for their communities and hired legions of boys and girls whose first jobs were to harvest the crops. In Pickaway County, those kinds of farms were common along U.S. Route 23 until recent years. Many have now faded, as did the vegetable canneries that used to dot the county.

"Business is about relationships — partnerships. That's what we've always done. Price and cost matter, but it's very important to get what you need and want. [Local partners] care more, and are more responsive. That's what community is about. For many places, fresh meat means not frozen. For us, it really is fresh — just down the road from the slaughterhouse." — **SCOTT SHUTT**, *President of Kewpee Hamburgers*

One of the remaining vegetable farms is operated by Pickaway County Commissioner Harold “Champ” Henson, who recalled the old days of his family’s business two years ago at a forum in Columbus.

The old Central Market in downtown Columbus was more than just a retail market for consumers and wholesale market for shops and restaurants. It was the hub of the food trade, surrounded by dozens of produce companies, food distributors, processors and other businesses. Henson said when his parents and grandparents brought vegetables to the market, they did not go home with an empty truck — they picked up supplies to use on the farm.

He cautioned that contemporary efforts to redevelop a regional food system need to reflect on the past, learn from it and build upon the best of the earlier system.

But today — other than local-food purchases by institutions — much of Ohio’s local food is sold through farmers markets, consumer-supported agriculture (CSA) deliveries, and restaurants — typically high-end establishments and “gastropubs.” One challenge is how to democratize local food — make it mainstream and affordable, available in local supermarkets, convenience stores, and smaller, neighborhood restaurants.

Fortunately, there’s an Ohio model. Kewpee Hamburgers in Lima is a local, three-store, fast-food chain with fresh, local beef delivered daily to each shop, where it is ground and pattied, and served on buns from a local commercial bakery with bibb lettuce from a hydroponic grower 20 miles away.

Kewpee buys its beef from Keystone Meats in Lima. Keystone buys cattle at auctions in Wapakoneta and Bucyrus, slaughters them for Kewpee and other customers, and delivers the de-boned meat to the hamburger stands. Kewpee’s new equipment for crafting the square hamburger patties was designed by engineering students at nearby Ohio Northern University and fabricated by a Lima machine shop.

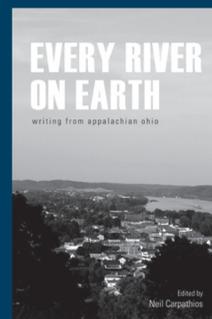
The business is modern, but Kewpee president Scott Shutt says its way of doing business goes back 70 years.

“We’re doing it the way a lot of people used to do it,” he said. “Business is about relationships — partnerships. That’s what we’ve always done. Price and cost matter, but it’s very important to get what you need and want. [Local partners] care more, and are more responsive. That’s what community is about. For many places, fresh meat means not frozen. For us, it really is fresh — just down the road from the slaughterhouse. When you buy a Kewpee, it’s pretty much a Buckeye product.” ♥

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# WHAT WE’RE READING NOW

## *Every River on Earth: Writing from Appalachian Ohio*



### THE CLICHÉS ABOUT APPALACHIA ARE LEGION.

“Hard-scrabble” and “haunted” come quickly to mind. Reviewing the pieces within *Every River on Earth* that address agricultural life in Appalachia, one is drawn to those near-at-hand descriptors. The land often wears down the farmer. Their lives are never easy and the danger of a dark turn is ever present. The

sublime moments in these pieces generally carry a deep sense of terror beneath the beautiful.

Thinking about how these residents and natives came to write about this place, we ought to consider whether the land made the people or the people made the land. How did the one part of Ohio that held back the flattening crush of the glacier develop such a distinct sense of place? In the way that streams and roads in Appalachian Ohio bend and twist to follow the rolling contours of the land, so does life in that world come alive in the poetry, short fiction and essays of this collection.

Neil Carpathios of Shawnee State University has put together a wonderfully diverse and accessible group of voices to reflect on life in Appalachian Ohio. Three pieces are worthy of particular mention: “Watching My Neighbor in His Fields,” by Jeanne Bryner, in which the hay fields seem ready to swallow the man trying to pull a living from the grass hillocks, and Richard Hague’s “Sycamore County,” which raises the question of whether the holler experience can be found in the big city. “Market Day,” by Michelle Burke, is an ode to the farmers market farmer. Of interest to those searching out a sense of place, “The Tourist Brochure for Athens, OH,” by Rebecca Lachman is a particularly incisive piece. ♥

The collection should be of interest to anyone looking for contemporary voices of the Appalachian Ohio experience.