

Wormfarm Institute. Inc.
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Home Grown Culture

Sauk County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state of Wisconsin. This growth, combined with long-term trends in agricultural consolidation can work to undermine what is unique about this area, resulting in the loss of regional identity and vital, diverse indigenous culture. At the same time the citizens of the county have identified as a top priority preserving the region's natural beauty and agricultural heritage. By forming an alliance between groups who have *creation in common* (farmers and artists) we foresee enormous possibilities to both inspire and nourish the cultural workers; and invigorate and celebrate the agricultural ones.

It was with this in mind that we began. Our initial proposal centered on developing a *brand* that would graphically illustrate the desirability of the *home grown*, both cultural and agricultural. This grant provided a remarkable opportunity to expand the Wormfarm's circle of innovators and develop a base of support for a much larger vision that would forge a strategic alliance between groups of people who are uniquely situated to positively transform rural life. In this time of rapid change, a collaboration between seemingly dissimilar fields could lead to creative sparks.

As we assembled a large diverse group it was evident our goals might shift and that is exactly what happened. Our goal to put the culture back into agriculture in rural Wisconsin entailed bringing people from both the agricultural and cultural communities together to explore commonalities and provide a framework for ongoing collaboration. It became clear from the second meeting that putting the "agri" back in the culture was at least equally important. As a result the thrust of our project shifted toward *ensuring a thriving rural culture*.

Baraboo, the county seat was the site of our first meeting with 17 people roughly split between those from the agricultural and cultural communities. The participant's backgrounds varied widely and we were sure to include people from conventional and sustainable agriculture as well as literary, visual, performing and culinary arts. Attendees included: organic dairy farmer, winemaker, bookstore owner, photographer, writer, cheese maker, painter, agricultural marketing person, curator, chef, local historian, Jesuit priest, actor, anthropologist, hoof trimmer, art teacher, student of rural sociology, CSA farmer, musician and more.

In keeping with the *Home Grown* theme, we were deliberate in our emphasis on excellent local food. We sourced Sauk County products where we could, serving meat, cheese, vegetables, beer and wine, being sure to acknowledge provenance.

Over the next 3 meetings we averaged 30 participants per meeting.

Current opportunities were briefly outlined underscoring the timeliness of our discussions. In addition to Sauk County having identified the preservation of natural beauty and agricultural heritage as among its top priorities, The Wisconsin Academy is conducting a series of statewide forums on The Future of Farming and Rural Life; Sauk is the only rural county in the state with an Arts, Humanities, Historic Preservation committee that offers grants to nonprofits; the Wormfarm is in the planning stages for 3rd annual Reedikulus Puppet Festival with the theme of *Funny Farm*; the Wisconsin Cow

Parade with its huge marketing campaign may allow other farm focused art events the visibility they wouldn't normally garner; the annual *Americans for the Arts* conference was held in Wisconsin in June, showcasing the state's cultural offerings to hundreds from all over the country.

The first meeting in February set the stage. Keynote speaker Jerry Apps put things in an historic perspective describing the work of Robert Gard and the first Artist in Residence at the University. One story in particular resonated with the audience; a radio show in the 1950s called *Let's Draw*. Out of the discussion that followed, certain themes emerged having to do with a yearning for lost gathering places and celebrations; and dramatic shifts in rural life. This was seen as both crisis and opportunity. Isolation, reinforced by mechanization and dwindling farm numbers, have left farmers without the social and cultural support provided by erstwhile barn raisins and threshing suppers. The loss of the "farm wife" to the grudgingly accepted town job for health insurance has undermined rural culture with consequences that touch us all –urban and rural.

The March meeting focused on ***what constitutes a thriving rural culture?*** and explored what activities, sites, gathering places and events presently exist in Sauk and surrounding counties that might be highlighted, revived or transformed. In this meeting Bob Wills from Cedar Grove Cheese Factory discussed "terroir", the word used to describe the particular attributes of flavor, texture and color imparted by a specific place- its weather, soil, season, etc. Wormfarm co-founder Jay Salinas spoke about a term he coined to suggest the art equivalent: *cultureshed* defined as: 1. *A geographic region irrigated by streams of local talent and fed by deep pools of human and natural history.* 2. *An area nourished by what is cultivated locally.* 3. *The efforts of writers, artists, performers, scholars and chefs who contribute to a vital and diverse local culture.*

The April meeting focused on the future. We asked ***what sorts of events, occasions, celebrations, or collaborations can you imagine that may help realize a bright future for farming and rural life?*** To stimulate discussion John Kinsman from Family Farm Defenders spoke about his relationships with campesinos in Central and South America. Donna Neuwirth read an essay from the Wormfarm newsletter (attached).

At the May meeting we began with a list of ideas/ projects developed from previous conversations. The plan was to break into smaller groups by interest and after brainstorming see which of the project ideas were worth pursuing. This would launch Phase II – ***what actions can we take now to contribute to a thriving rural culture?*** As in all the meetings, the participants ultimately determined the direction and perhaps having had a bit too much structure in the previous meetings, elected not to break out in flip chart groups but just to have a broad conversation. It was clear that we had only scratched the surface and the group was energized to continue meeting and yet wanted also to take some action now.

Outcome

In addition to the specific project ideas there were fundamental discoveries that were made through our 4 meetings

1. Putting the "agri" back into the culture was determined to be equally if not more important than putting the culture back into agriculture
2. Thriving rural culture cannot exist without a thriving agriculture

3. Eating is most people's connection to agriculture- food must be emphasized, celebrated and given valuable time
4. There were concerns about the project devolving into artists interpreting farmer's lives for them
5. There were concerns about an artists work being valued only as a social or political tool or marketing scheme
6. It became clear that if this project is to have real substance it will take time - there would be no "deliverables" after 4 meetings.
7. So as not to lose momentum and to take advantage of the expected 3000 people, Paul Dietmann agreed to display Puppet Festival info in the education tent of The Sauk County Dairy Breakfast on June 10. This will be our first concrete step toward contributing to a thriving rural culture.

We couldn't be more thrilled with the outcome – we not only did exactly what we set out to do –create a format for ongoing conversation/collaboration - but we have participants who are eager to take it to the next level, to be involved in bringing ideas to fruition. We have set a meeting date to begin phase II.

Though the first phase is over, we have made an important start in what promises to be an exciting creative process. The group wants to continue and is anxious to go beyond the talking stage. We all recognize that it will be a long process to affect change and realize some of the exciting ideas the group has come up with. The word culture is embedded in agriculture. When farming was more integrated into most people's lives, celebrations of planting, fertility and harvest included music, art, ritual, dance and was inseparable from the activity of growing food. There is every reason to believe that with committed people, good food and institutional support that there can be a 21st century rural renaissance. On behalf of the Wormfarm and all the attendees, I thank you for the opportunity to enlarge our circle, scope and dreams for a prosperous rural future.

This is a list of ideas that have come up in the discussions that generated the most interest or seemed to hit a nerve.

Home Grown Culture project ideas

- **Farm Tour (D-tour)**– adjunct to or separate from *Fall Art Tour*, taste and touch of Sauk County/ Ag tourism, highlight existing assets, develop opportunities to build on them. Art and vegetables along country roads- land—food– health– beauty
- **Life & Death & Life**— lessons of the farm -kids tell us how, why and what it means, a photography/creative writing/ oral history project
- **Superstar farmers?** What does it take to elevate the status of a profession that has intrinsic value but low sex appeal? chefs have done it, musicians, athletes... a multi disciplinary approach
- **The Re-enchantment of Agriculture** - Celebrations-more and better. There is a vestigial need to celebrate planting and the harvest -how can we elevate, energize these

celebrations for the benefit of rural communities? How can artists of all kinds join in to examine hidden dimensions and new directions? Puppet Festival?

- **The Farmer as Artist**—raise awareness in general population of the farmer as the creator of not only food and beautiful landscapes but the farmer as a creative problem solver. Tie into *Creative Class* model
- **The Family Economy**— *economy*— from the Greek— *oikonomia*: management of household. Each according to his ability for the good of the whole, a family farm may be the only working example of this left—how do we strengthen it and highlight the societal benefits that derive from this relationship?
- **Home Grown Culture**— develop concept further, create a *brand* to be liberally used to illuminate and build upon the cultural riches in our midst: agriculture, art, music, cheese making, theater, literature, dance, cuisine - expand to an annual festival highlighting all things cultural.
- **Infiltrate and invigorate existing agricultural celebrations:** County Fair, Butterfest, Dairy Breakfast, pasture walks, field days etc.

Following is an article written by Donna Neuwirth for the Wormfarm's weekly CSA newsletter The Stalk Market Report. It is sent out to shareholders 70% of whom live in Chicago, 30 % local. It was read it at the 3rd Home Grown Culture meeting April 25 2006

In the Realm of the Senses

The new Fall catalogues are out and the stack in front of me includes: Eddie Bauer, Territory Ahead, L.L. Bean and Early Winters, all of the covers and many of the inside photos show models in various stages of malnutrition posing in corn fields, in front of faded red barns, leaning on tractors. Stylish shoes are shown in puddles of hay, chickens scratching in the background. A loose weave lavender sweater hangs on a rustic barn door, a corduroy jacket lies next to a calf skull, a young woman with pouty lips perches on a mossy split rail fence, a curl of rusty barbed wire between the rails, silos in the distance.

As farms recede further from our actual lives they figure more prominently in our fantasies. How do ad agencies sell rugged outdoorsy clothes to busy yuppies? They show them lolling lazily in hayfields - no cell phones, blackberrys or SUVs in sight. Transporting geared up kids to soccer practice would be way too real –we don't want to see that in our fantasy life. But a farm—a picturesque American ruin - is perfect in its nostalgic coziness—and it's cheaper than sending the crew to Angkor Wat, Pompeii or the Parthenon.

Not too many years ago, I had a casual conversation with a guy in a Chicago bar. When I got around to asking him what he did - I remember doing the aural equivalent of a double take -I wasn't sure if I heard correctly. "Farmer" he repeated. I was puzzled. "Farmer??" I echoed, incredulity in my voice as if he had said -"Chariot Driver" or "Conquistador". I had never met one before and although it wasn't a conscious thought –I may have believed them extinct. Plus he didn't fit the Grant Wood inspired image.

Well look at me now.

Farmers are fewer than 1% of the population in this country and that counts nouveau/fusion farmers like us (a minimum of \$10,000 in farm income is the qualifier). So for most practical purposes we are extinct, rattling our chains through the halls – a half recollected dream of some archetype poor relation tilling the soil.

Are we like the buggy whip makers trying in desperation to delay the inevitable? Perhaps –but I prefer to think we're more like - garter belt manufacturers.

Garter belts - a once utilitarian device to keep ladies stockings up- have become obsolete, but they never went away. They've found a niche fetish market (fetish defined as: an object of unreasonably excessive attention or reverence) –a little kinky, maybe -but an anyone can do it wholesome kind of kinky. If your kids or mother-in-law rifled through your drawers - after being furious, you'd be embarrassed but not mortified.

Vegetables, fresh from the garden - as with certain adult toys, heighten our senses and prolong our pleasure. They both involve: slowing down, savoring and being in the moment.

This could be the salvation for human scale agriculture—a strategic alliance between vegetable growers and marital aid producers.

As industrial agriculture consolidates, completely eliminating family farms, there will be pockets of underground real food, heirloom varieties the dissemination of which is not controlled by Monsanto –naughty vegetables spilling their own seed without permission. These rogue seeds will be gathered and traded by farmer/collectors and secret gardens and the businesses that serve them will proliferate.