

Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn

Since I was a kid, I have been fascinated by the connected farmsteads of New England. Recently, I found a book about them, the title of which is the title of this post.

After my return to New England following many years in New York City, I discovered there were very few farms left and began to wonder why small farms like those with the connected buildings, had a business model that seemed broken, making local food scarce and expensive or, more metaphorically, boutique food.

Connected New England Farm Buildings

“Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn” is actually an architectural study of 18th and 19th century New England farmsteads and includes insights into why many developed into the four, named in the title, connected entities.

The big house, often pretty small, was usually the first thing built as a place for the farm family to live. The barn followed and was often not connected.

Then the little house was added to the big house. It was a more capable cooking location for the growing family and worker corps, a necessity on a small farm.

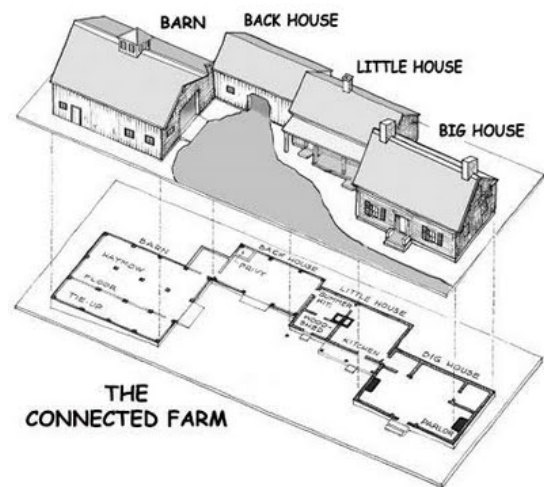
The final piece was the back house, often connected to the little house for convenience, weather, style, and other reasons that the book will tell you. At this point, a disconnected barn was often moved to link up to the rest of the buildings.

The back house was where the farmer and the production from his work in the fields, pastures, and barn connected with other members of the family who made the value added products like cheese, jams and jellies, put up vegetables, pickles, and on and on.

The result was a very tidy, efficient, and nice looking farm products facility.

Connected Farmsteads to CAFO's and Big Ag

Remember the time frame for these wonderful and productive little farms. It was the late 18th and early 19th century. Then... the industrial revolution began to influence agriculture.





All these years later we have lost most of these small farms and replaced them with the factory farms and CAFO's (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) that utilize industrial efficiency to produce huge amounts of food, well, huge amounts of corn, soybeans, and questionable meat.

These industrial farming practices destroy the soil and require the persistent application of chemical fertilizers to create soil fertility. The fertilizers pollute the land, water ways,

and ground water with run off.

A CAFO only has to be seen to create a terrifying response in the observer and has converted many of those observers to vegetarianism.

There is a link between the collapsed small farm business model and these industrial farms. At first, it seems like it is merely a question of scale. Small farms don't scale well vs. big fields, big tractors, and big farming science. But it isn't that simple.

The link is the government and the crony capitalism that arises from big companies having large amounts of political leverage.

As big ag grew and consolidated we ended up with what we have in so many industries, an oligopoly. These companies have enormous lobbying power, can buy candidates, and consequently can shape the industry to their will through regulations developed by their functionaries in government.



While the image here refers to the federal government, state and local governments are in the game as well. Their effect can be less severe and sometimes even positive for small farms because they, as the founding fathers realized, are closer to the people and are more apt to actually represent them.

Health

These industrial food facilities have brought us the "food" that is killing us. Two thirds of us are overweight or obese and heart disease kills more of us than any other medical cause.

But, it's healthy food says the FDA. However, with all of the additives that make its taste tolerable, its appearance exciting, its skin thick for transport, and its growth accelerated, our bodies are constantly challenged as they try to deal with all of these unnatural elements.

The Revolving Door

The huge oligopoly companies including Con Agra, Cargill, Monsanto, and Archer Daniels Midland and the FDA swap executives back and forth forming the true essence of crony capitalism. Together they support the cronyism with lobbying efforts made possible by their huge size and deep pockets.

There are other parties at this dance, the Land Grant Colleges, but that must be a topic for another day.

A single example of the **revolving door**, is the FDA's approval of the genetically engineered cattle drug rBGH from Monsanto, which failed to gain approval in either Europe or Canada. Genetically modified food is largely banned by the countries of the European Union and other countries like Canada and Russia. This at a time when almost ALL of the corn, soybean, cotton, and sweet beets in the United States are cultivated from plants that have been genetically modified.

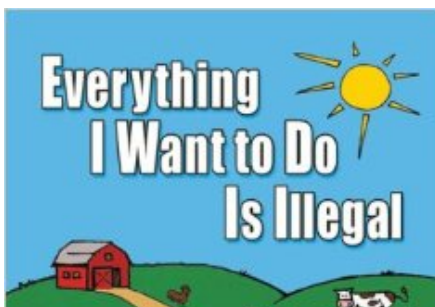
rBGH was approved, and the labeling guidelines were written by, Michael R. Taylor, the FDA's deputy commissioner for policy. For seven years Mr Taylor was a lawyer for the Monsanto Corporation.

Regulations... Again...

The cronyism results in thousands of regulations, favoring the companies but not consumers or small agriculture practitioners interested in the creation of pure, natural, nutritious, and healthy food.

As beef, pork, chicken, and other meat sources were taken into the industrializing food system, factory like processing became the norm. This led to troubles with contamination and regulations were required.

After all, you couldn't just go over to the farm and confront the farmer. The farm was now this huge, faceless thing, thousands of miles away. In addition, you would need a team of lawyers to confront them and guess what, we little, local folks don't have those. Bigness took away our ability to care for ourselves. It replaced personal responsibility with state responsibility.



Regulation in the food industry is at the heart of another book, "**Everything I Want to do is Illegal**" by Joel Salatin, the owner of Polyface Farm in Virginia. Polyface farm is

likely the most sustainable farm in the country.

To look at how the government's involvement and crony capitalism has turned our food system into an unsustainable mess that disrespects nature while presumptuously thinking it can fix its problems with new technologies, let's look at a simple story from Joel Salatin's childhood. It's a story about milk.

When Joel was in high school in the seventies, he, amazingly, considering what his peers were up to, wanted to farm. He figured that he could make a decent living starting off with ten cows. He would milk them by hand and sell the raw milk to his neighbors. He calculated that this tiny endeavor would produce enough profitability to enable him to get a foothold in the farm business and begin to make a living.



Unfortunately, he found out that his state, Virginia, did not allow this.

Raw milk from grass fed cows is rich with nutrients. It can be assured to be safe because you can visit the farm and look the producer in the eye and see how they handle the milk.

Under the pretext of preserving health, the government is actually controlling who gets to be in the market and who does not. They also forced the product's nutritional downgrading through pasteurization.

As usual with government intervention, less for more is the result.

Process vs. Farm

Butchering was often done in the connected farmstead. Remember, that this all started with folks raising animals and other food for their own family.

The industrialization of farming brought specialization and regulations were developed that declared that a farm is a farm and not a processing facility. So the back house of the connected New England farm is now completely illegal.

Bacon

Have you ever tried to find bacon at a local farm? Bacon is the belly of the hog. It is about fifteen by fifteen by one inch and needs to be cured to create bacon.

First the hog has to be butchered and we have the federal inspector/slaughter house (abattoir) problem. You can't slaughter on the farm. On a somewhat positive note, there

has been a modest amount of decentralization that allows local farms access to federally inspected abattoirs. While this is good for small farmers, it adds cost as the animal has to be transported to and from the abattoir.

The creation of bacon requires a curing process which happens after the butchering and is something many abattoirs don't want to do. In true industrial terminology, it isn't core to their business.



Why not cure it on the farm when the meat gets back from the abattoir?

You can guess that answer by now but here is some more insight. Even if you could beat the farm is a farm not a processing facility problem, you would now need a curing facility.

Regulations define this facility. It must have certain characteristics like a bathroom, separate rooms for different steps of the process, an office, an employee locker/changing facility, etc. It does not matter that the employees are family

members who live just yards from where they want to cure the bacon, where there are bathrooms, changing rooms, clean clothes, etc.

The absurdity should be obvious.

There are countless more examples in Joel's book that will drive a local food person nuts by the time they finish reading it.

Beware Good Intentions

The odd thing is that most local food folks are often politically aligned with the more and bigger government folks. This often finds its basis in the passionate desire of these kind and caring folks to do good for everyone. They need funds to do this and those often come in the form of government programs and their grants.

At the farmer's market a few weeks ago, I met a young woman who was taking notes on a clipboard with great intensity. "What are you doing?", I inquired. She was collecting information about the vendors to facilitate her non profit organization's program that doubled what the amount from an EBT (electronic benefits transfer, i.e. food stamps) card would be worth when the bearer used it at the farmer's market.

It's great, she said, the farmers sell more and the less fortunate can now afford the food. Sounds good, right?

In spite of her passionate kindness, she is part of the problem not part of the solution.

What she is doing continues to assure the boutique nature of local food by artificially keeping the prices high. It keeps the prices high with money taken from all of us in taxes.

Taxing destroys productive capacity by taking capital away from folks like farmers or local investors. It feeds the bureaucracy and supports cronyism (picking winners and losers) that contributes to our problems as noted above. How can we get these wonderful, compassionate young folks to understand this?



What To Do?

We need to be able to easily create and buy local food products. The market needs to be freed up for these folks to get them out of the boutique food business and into the main stream. We need an awareness of how devastating to health, to the environment, and to energy consumption the big ag/big government approach really is.

To make healthy, local food more available requires more local producers, local and regional distribution systems, balanced retail and wholesale business models, and available local capital, that has not been taxed away, for aspiring and existing farmers.

For an order of magnitude of the problem in New Hampshire, consider that, with the few remaining connected farmsteads and other small farms, the state is only capable of producing less than ten percent of the food it consumes.

The chasm is broad and the required solutions are almost revolutionary but until these challenges are addressed, local food will remain boutique food, general health problems will prevail, environmental destruction will continue, and a sustainable food system will not be achieved.

So what can WE, the little guys, do? This is a question that keeps me awake nights, makes my sweetie nuts as I rant and rave about it, and seems not to be even remotely understood by the general population and even by many of the folks working on it.

In a small state like New Hampshire it does seem that we might start at the local and state government level following the path of federalism the founders outlined.

This brings another book on the scene, "Slow Democracy", again, a topic for another time.

Authentic sustainability requires slow democracy, slow money, and slow food. Start reading and start reorienting your mind. Then try to figure out ways to move these ideas

into the mainstream. Today we are mired in boutique thinking and boutique initiatives. This needs to change if we ever hope to achieve authentic sustainability in the food system.



Links:

Big house:

http://www.amazon.com/Big-House-Little-Back-Barn/dp/1584653728/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1380033346&sr=1-1&keywords=big+house+little+house+back+house+barn

Link for Joel's book:

http://www.amazon.com/Everything-Want-Do-Illegal-Stories/dp/0963810952/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1380132637&sr=1-1&keywords=everything+i+want+to+do+is+illegal

Revolving door

<http://www.psrast.org/ecologmons.htm>

Milk

<http://www.heartandpen.com/2011/02/10/this-isnt-local/>

Slow Democracy

http://www.amazon.com/Slow-Democracy-Rediscovering-Community-Bringing/dp/1603584137/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1381453127&sr=1-1&keywords=slow+democracy

Slow Money

http://www.amazon.com/Inquiries-into-Nature-Slow-Money/dp/1603582541/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1381453236&sr=1-1&keywords=slow+money+tasch

Slow food

http://www.amazon.com/Slow-Food-Nation-Should-Clean/dp/0847829456/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1381453263&sr=1-1&keywords=slow+food+movement

The government bureaucrats provide a great advocacy group for the those in the industrial food system as they create job security for themselves by assisting with the creation of regulations biased toward the industrial food folks.

The industrial food system has proven to be really good at producing a lot of a very small selection of products that they can price aggressively vs. those local products and distribute everywhere.