

Introduction

Regional Foods and Markets: Reconnecting Farmers and Consumers in the Western Reserve is the subject of the 17th annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium. Begun in 1985 and designed to provide a forum for students and scholars of northeastern Ohio's history and culture, the objective of the symposia is to advance the exploration of the distinctive aspects of Ohio's Western Reserve over two centuries.

The focus this year is on local farmers, markets and consumers. It was inspired by my shopping experience at the North Union Farmers Market at Shaker Square where I have enjoyed the bounty of northeastern Ohio farmers in the setting of a marketplace centrally located in the Western Reserve. It always recalls for me those family excursions into the country to buy directly from farmers at their roadside stands and in town to the Coit Road Farmers Market, the Central and West Side Markets. On the way home, one relished the freshness of a juicy apple, sweet peach and dreamed of the promise of garden salads of succulent lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, radishes and fresh herbs. And then there was the freshly plucked corn. Oh, such delights!

This year it has been my pleasure to be joined by Mary Homes, founder and past president of the North Union Farmers Market. Two years ago I told Mary that in 2002, the Market would be a feature of the Symposium. And so it has been a partnership of dedicated effort in designing this year's program around mutually held interests, goals and objectives. She has responded to my invitation to express her thoughts that follow.

The College of Arts and Sciences, the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities and the Nord Family Foundation have our deepest appreciation for their interest and support in bringing about this Symposium.

Gladys Haddad

Director

Western Reserve Studies Symposium

It has been a privilege for me to work with Gladys Haddad on the 17th annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium, entitled, Regional Foods and Markets: Reconnecting Farmers and Consumers in the Western Reserve. This topic is of particular interest to me. As a child I spent much time on my grandparents' farm and learned from my mother how to can fruits, make jams, and prepare every kind of fresh vegetable. As a young mother, I grew my own vegetables (even in Cambridge, Massachusetts) and later patronized farmers markets whenever I could.

When we opened the North Union Farmers Market in July 1995, we knew that we were participating in a new trend. Eating Well and other popular magazines were writing about farmers markets. Gourmet Magazine published an article about the impact of the Union Square Market in New York on not only food availability, but farmland preservation and urban revitalization. This Symposium is designed to pull together the many facets of the farmers' market movement and place them in the context of the history and future of the Western Reserve.

Farmers' markets are experiencing resurgence across the nation because people are beginning to realize that fresh, locally grown produce is more nutritious, better tasting, safer than food that travels hundreds of miles and is handled multiple times in the process. Once they taste vine and tree ripened fruits, corn and other vegetables picked the day they buy them, they understand the difference in flavor and quality of local produce. (Apples, tomatoes and other products bred for shipping and picked green cannot compete with the local product!)

People are also beginning to understand that to preserve the rural landscape, farmers must be able to make a living farming. Farmers' markets provide one of the best ways for farmers to do that because farmers receive a retail price for their product and can help create demand for the products they love to grow. Farmers' markets invite people to eat better, learn how to prepare fresh foods, and care about the fate of the farms and farmland around them. And farmers get reconnected with consumers so that the exchange of information and ideas can help them grow foods that people want to eat. With Northeast Ohio losing precious farmland at an alarming rate, this matter is of utmost urgency.

Finally, farmers' markets reconnect people with each other. The colors, smells, enthusiasm for "what's in season" provide a backdrop for a lively exchange between farmer and customer and customers with each other. The market is a social gathering place where people across economic and ethnic spectrums find commonality around food. The farmers' market feeds the soul as well as the body.

The purpose of this symposium is to use the discipline of history to enhance our understanding of the present and guide us in our considerations of future actions. In the case of foods and markets, we in the Western Reserve have acquiesced to

national trends toward factory farming and agribusiness so completely, that we are consuming valuable farmland for development faster than all but a handful of states. At the same time, we are winning prizes for obesity and high rates of degenerative diseases. Farmers' markets can help us reverse these trends. Several other creative ideas for connecting farmers with consumers and educating the community about alternative approaches are developing here as well.

So while there is much cause for concern, there is also reason for hope. The Western Reserve has as a natural resource high quality farmland. This symposium will explore ways to preserve this natural resource and at the same time encourage the small farm entrepreneur whose successful business of producing products for local consumption strengthens our rural communities and slows urban sprawl.

Mary Holmes