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Return to the Garden

by Gordon Clark

Here's a quick quiz for all you foodies out there: when did the term "food miles" first originate?

While a very contemporary sounding phrase, one that now pertains to global warming and the insane number of miles (1500) that the average piece of food travels before hitting our plate, the phrase was actually first coined almost 100 years ago, as part of a national effort during the First World War.

This is just one of many remarkable facts in a recent presentation on the history of Victory Gardens I attended at the U.S. Botanic Garden. The speaker was historian Rose Hayden-Smith, a Fellow in the Food & Society Policy Fellows Program and one of the most ardent gardening advocates you're likely to hear.

While most of us think of Victory Gardens as a World War II phenomenon, a national emphasis on food gardening was central to our government's efforts in World War I as well. President Woodrow Wilson announced "Food will win the war," and created a Food Administration as one of his first acts after declaring war.

The concerns of that time parallel those of today, so much so that some of the official propaganda of 1917 looks like it could have been written by food author Michael Pollan, of *Omnivore's Dilemma* fame. Health was a major issue, as a large number of new army recruits were discovered to have rickets, a diet-related bone disease. And lowering one's "food miles" was the government's prescription for eating local food, an attempt to relieve pressure on a national train system that had to focus on transporting troops and munitions.

It was also understood that local food production was a way to build community and civic engagement, and it was emphasized for children as well as adults. The U.S. School Garden Army was created, with the motto "A Garden for Every Child, a Child in Every Garden."

Victory Gardens became central to our government's home front efforts in World War II as well, and once again issues of health, community building and national mobilization focusing on

moral, physical and even spiritual well-being were at the forefront. Americans responded, and by 1943 roughly 3/5 of all American households were engaged in food gardening, producing more than 40% of the fresh fruit and vegetable consumed nationally.

It was only after World War II, for a variety of reasons, that food gardening fell out of vogue and came to be viewed as a "hick" activity.

But the tide has turned once again, and America is undergoing what Hayden-Smith describes as a "gardening revolution." It is estimated that 7 million new households started food gardening in 2008-2009. The USDA has initiated local food programs such as "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food." Even the Disney Channel's cartoon star "Handy Manny" launched a Generation X Garden in New York City this past April.

Of course this new gardening revolution has nothing to do with our current military wars, which most Americans believe should be ended anyway. But we have battles to fight every bit as urgent as a war, and local food production, including personal, community and school food gardening, is a primary weapon in the following struggles:

Hunger - Even in a wealthy county like ours, it is estimated up to 28% of the population suffers from food insecurity at some point during the year. And this was before the current economic slump, which has seen an explosion in demand at food pantries such as Montgomery County's Manna Food Center - much of it from formerly middle class but now unemployed citizens.

We may not see much of this hunger where we live, at least not yet, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist - three of Manna's local drop-off points are right here in Silver Spring.

Health - Americans are currently suffering from skyrocketing rates of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease - all illnesses directly related to our high sugar, high carbohydrate, high fat national diet. As Michael Pollan noted in a recent NY Times op-ed, one of the primary products of our national food system is now patients for our national health care system. And unless we start changing what and how we eat, no amount of reform will prevent our health care system from being overwhelmed by these growing epidemics.

Food Safety - Food-borne disease outbreaks have risen from about 100 a year in the early 1990s to some 350 a year now. These diseases are often a direct result of our industrial food production system, and they are spread by our national food distribution system. When's the

last time you heard of anyone getting salmonella or e-coli from food purchased at a local farmers market?

Unemployment - With predictions of a "jobless recovery" and double digit unemployment for the foreseeable future, is it really so radical to suggest that, with a little assist from government, many of our unemployed could find meaningful work growing food and distributing it locally? Providing meaningful employment was yet another reason local food production was emphasized in World War I, and the need is just as great today as it was then.

The above list does not even include the positive benefits of local food production on profound environmental concerns such as soil degradation, pesticide use and the previously mentioned global warming. And while we're at it, couldn't we use a little community building as well? Indeed, it's hard to think of anything that would have more profoundly positive and far-reaching implications than a change in how we produce our food.

Of course, this may still seem far-fetched to many of us living in our post-industrial world. As one of my friends said, we'll never go back to being an agrarian society.

Well... maybe yes, maybe no. But just don't tell that to the millions of Americans, even urban dwellers, who are suddenly now growing their own food or shopping at farmers markets. With a war-like mobilization by our government, hints of which we are beginning to see, there is no telling what we could do. Certainly, as our history shows, we have done it before.

As Ms. Hayden-Smith concluded, we were a nation of farmers at start, and we are still a nation of farmers at heart. And for the massive challenges we face today, there are few more appropriate responses than a return to the garden.

[For more information on food gardening and building a local food system, go to www.montgomeryvictorygardens.org]

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