

BOARD STUDY MINUTES

La Montanita Food Co-op
Board of Directors Meeting – April 21, 2015

Topic – Food for Change: History of Co-ops

Led by: David Hurley

Those present watched an excerpt from *Food for Change*, a documentary on the history of co-ops.

From Foodforchange.coop:

The movie tells the story of the cooperative movement in the U.S. through interviews, rare archival footage, and commentary by the filmmaker and social historians. This is the first film to examine the important historical role played by food co-ops, their pioneering quest for organic foods, and their current efforts to create regional food systems. Additionally, the film shows how the co-op movement strengthens communities where they are located, enhancing local economies and food security.

Summary of excerpt:

- Co-ops grew during the Great Depression but with World War II and wartime spending, there was more centralization into large corporations.
- In the 1950s, interest in consumer cooperatives was lower. People who were organizing cooperatives during the 50s were sometimes accused of being communists, attacked as un-American organizations that took advantage of the free market but didn't pay their fair share of taxes. In response, co-ops had to advocate for themselves, finding a champion in California Representative Jerry Voorhis.
- 1960s: Growing inequality toward the end of the 1950s proved fertile ground for co-ops. Many in co-op development were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and community organizing. Many co-ops aimed to provide good food at low prices to low-income families. A second wave of co-op development was encouraged by Johnson's War on Poverty and related self-help, anti-poverty programs. Small farmers also formed cooperatives. The co-op movement was then adopted by the "hippies" as well.
- Meanwhile family farms were giving way to large agribusiness, with consequences for the environment and decreasing the quality and nutritional value of food produced.
- The War on Poverty ended with the Vietnam War in 1968.
- During the 1970s, co-ops sprang up around the country with the goal of addressing environmental and economic problems by selling healthy food from small producers and using a cooperative economic model. This was an alternative economic system centered around food.
- Of the 800 food cooperatives founded in the 60s and 70s, only 200 survived. Idealism was not always built on strong economic principles.
- To survive, many co-ops shifted toward a focus on whole and natural foods at the expense of a focus on inexpensive food.
- Some co-ops hired general managers – a difficult transition because stores had previously operated with cooperative management. Using the principles of cooperation, small volunteer co-ops around the country grew and transitioned into more established grocery stores with paid staff. This process was sometimes tumultuous as members discussed and balanced values and ideals against practical and economic realities.

Discussion:

- I was struck that low-cost food for low-income people shifted to a natural food focus, which was not inexpensive. That is something we still struggle with. Low cost does not seem possible with the quality of food we sell.
- Quality was a concern in the early years of co-ops. They were unhappy with adulterated food sometimes sold in supermarkets.
- What was most obvious to me was the change in the color of people's skin when it moved from being low-cost to serving higher income members. How do we get back to providing healthy food to low-income neighborhoods? One of the challenges is the perception that co-ops are white phenomenon.
- I found it interesting that people recognized co-ops to be such an alternative economic model that it was labeled communism. I don't think many people think of co-ops today as being so much an alternative economic model.
 - I actually think the alternative economic model is what we have to "sell" because it is what makes us different from Whole Foods and Sprouts.
 - The reason co-ops got the attention they did was because they were large enough to be considered a threat. That is not the case today. Co-ops do not have the market share today that they did before.
 - We here in New Mexico are doing well. We have a huge stake in the success of co-ops everywhere. We are all in this together.
 - In the Great Depression, the members were suffering in the economic climate. Today it may be harder to sell our alternative economic model because our members aren't suffering economically in the same way.
- A take-away for me: While agribusiness grew, farmers started to develop cooperatives to support local farmers. I've seen a growth of aggregated food products across the state.