

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 17

On-the-Fly Farm

Union Pier, Michigan

Organizing body: 1

Scale: 5 acres

Type: for profit

Currently producing: bok choy, eggplant, kale, potato

In operation: since 2004

Iconic plant/animal: potato

Website: www.chicorycenter.org

Longtime activist David Meyers has bounced among artist communities, low-income neighborhoods, and community organizations, fighting for their rights to a neighborhood, a sovereign nation, and community gardens. His eclectic interests, intense personality, and high energy level keep him on the move—and his moves are on-the-fly, thus the name of his farming endeavor based in southwestern Michigan since 2004: On-the-Fly Farm.

A South Bend, Indiana, native, Meyers moved to nearby Chicago to study creative writing and journalism—a practice he maintains through an active blog about his unique Midwestern activism, his fair-trade coffee-roasting business, and life between the big city where his community remains and life on the rural farm growing potatoes and salad mixes for CSA subscribers.

As an anarchist, Meyers has also committed himself to not paying taxes to the government that go to fund wars. The principle most central to his work is that of solidarity—the goal of self-reliant communities and communities of support and care across class divisions.

When did On-the-Fly Farm start?

David Meyers, founder: It came from an act of brutal police violence that was directed at me on July 23, 1994. I tend to act with a degree of anger as my motivation. And On-the-Fly Farm comes partly out of that.

I started working on community gardens in Chicago a month or two after having suffered this police brutality. It was a major way of grounding myself. It came out of a spirit of anarchist direct action and experience doing organizing and solidarity work. The Green House Garden was in a city-owned lot—we never asked anyone for permission. My friend Amir and I set up a recycling program, and the kids would run around the alleys and collect stuff. We set up a compost bin. It was an amazing after-school program with no kind of funding from anyone. It also performed a kind of babysitting service for a lot of moms in the area. This was all incidental. We didn't have this in mind. But it was a great experience for us and the dozens of kids who

were involved. That garden turned into a battle of ownership. The city government knew that if we didn't get to keep our garden there we would dig up the sidewalks with jackhammers. We got a thousand signatures on a petition, plus signatures from businesspeople. And eventually the city gave it to us.

The history of the Greenhouse Garden is the history of the gentrification of Wicker Park. That's not necessarily a good history. But the garden is still there. It's not completely gentrified or yuppified, but the area certainly is.

In 1999 I collaborated with Alejandrina Torres, a Puerto Rican political prisoner pardoned by President Clinton, who really needed to ground herself after being incarcerated. Together we reignited the El Coquí garden in Humboldt Park.

I have a strong belief in grounding as a way to overcome adversity. It was something I really understood when working youth. I talked to so many youth who benefited from some kind of grounding on land. It's intimately tied to issues of gentrification. If you feel tied to some degree to the actual land beneath your feet, like Humboldt Park for example, then you are much more likely to fight to keep it.

By this point, were you working in that neighborhood?

I started working in Humboldt Park as a grant writer at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) in 1995. But aside from working with some youth from the PRCC high school, I ultimately found the grant writing part to be one of the most boring things on earth—it is something you

could probably train bonobos, monkeys, or chimps to do. So I had this idea to start some kind of rural outpost or retreat center. The basic idea was to “feed the people, feed the revolution.” [The outpost] would feed a social-change movement leading toward revolution that didn’t have a lot of not-for-profit constraints set up around it.

What happened between this time period and today that led you to get your own farm?

I saw a lot of problems with the rapidity of gentrification in Chicago. The idea of working on land that was going to be under threat of development was a really tiresome idea to me. So I decided to step out of Chicago for a while. The ideas started to simmer during the next couple of years. I had some extra income to get access to land, so I rented twenty-three acres from a woman in southwestern Michigan who was going to be out of town for a year and needed someone to stay on her land in Berrien County, one of the largest fruit-producing counties in the country. The house was insanely gorgeous and the land was mystically beautiful. I drove out there to start farming on April 30, 2004.

The land had not been farmed conventionally for at least twenty years. It was really well taken care of. It was a little bit hilly, which is not common in this flat land. It was really clean and not toxic. The soil was really dense, as most is in the Midwest, and a bit sandy because it’s close to Lake Michigan.

I purchased a rototiller on eBay and started to work. It was a very late start date for farming and for starting to grow food. But I was extremely motivated and had an insane amount of energy. I started rototilling and the chain snapped off. Since I didn’t want to spend the day dealing with a

small engine repair place, I just start digging with a shovel. I dug up probably the equivalent of a city lot that afternoon. That took a lot of energy, because it was really hard sod. I was nuts.

Two days later, I wondered how I would get the produce out to people. I had heard of the CSA model, and so I sat down and in four minutes had written a letter to friends: “On-the-Fly Farm CSA—Starts July 1st—You Wanna Join?” and I got all ten subscribers right away, each paying \$150 for the season. And that structure has stayed basically the same since.

From the start, I wanted a part of this farm to be about solidarity. I was concerned about who gets to eat this fresh organic and healthy food. I think about this a lot. I decided that a certain percentage of what I am growing needs to be used to challenge unequal structures of food consumption and distribution. I still had strong ties with Humboldt Park. So the first CSA subscribers were informed that part of their participation was subsidizing my work to get 20 to 30 percent of the food to low-income people in Humboldt Park and some in Little Village.

I knew this project had to have a political dimension as well. And that meant locally in the region where the farm was, as well as an urban-rural connection between Chicago and this place. At the same time I had a coffee-roasting hobby. I would later raise several thousand dollars in legal funds to support a friend and local seeking political asylum by selling this coffee.

How did you transition from the first farm to the current farm at Hidden Haven?

The first farm generated a lot of activity. People who were in the CSA came out to work, and different groups used the house for retreats. But when the landowner returned at the end of that

year, a lot of things fell apart simultaneously. It became clear that it was going to be hard to stay on the land. I had also just gone through a breakup. And to add to it all, I had lost 90 percent of my income because the IRS put levees on my consultant pay from the PRCC, which was subsidizing this project, resulting from my practice of tax resisting. Even though everything was crashing at the end of 2004, I somehow managed to do a second year of the CSA through subsidies from other small farmers in the area. That has always been a part of my interest, to connect with other people who are good at growing food but not interested in or able to be into marketing. I would pay them and put their food in the CSA box. In total, I was there fifteen months, enough to farm two seasons.

At the end of 2005, I happened to stumble across a listing buried on the Land Connection website that read “farmers looking for land and landowners looking for farmers”—there really needs to be a craigslist for this kind of farm situation; you could facilitate so much land reform informally!

Is there something that you’ve grown that you have a special relationship with?

From the get-go, the thing I love to grow the most is the potato. The potato is not the easiest thing to grow, especially by hand, because there is a lot of digging involved in the front end and the back. But for someone who wants to get grounded, it’s the best. Men love it. Women who want to use their big muscles love it. Troubled youth love it. There is an endorphin change that happens when you exert yourself that much.

A third of what I plant is potatoes, two hundred fifty pounds of them. That means digging a trench by hand that is a half-mile long. That is a lot of digging, and that gives you a lot of time to think.