

"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 3

Sandhill Community Farm

Rutledge, Missouri

Scale: 135 acres (60 acres of grassland and 60 acres of woodland)

Operating body: six adults and a thirteen-year-old child, plus rotating interns

Type: for profit, certified organic

Currently producing: sorghum, wheat, honey, garlic, mustard, and horseradish

In operation: since 1974

Iconic plant/animal: sorghum

Website: www.sandhillfarm.org

For over thirty years, Sandhill Farm has been an intentional community farm built around biodynamic, cooperative, and egalitarian principals. The folks at Sandhill grow food for their own consumption, as well as for sale in markets and as processed “value added” products like jams, salsas, and their own line of sorghum goods (which they celebrate each fall with a harvest festival). They have prioritized self-sufficiency, raising more than 80 percent of their own food, including the difficult task of harvesting and processing their own grains. The group grapples with an approach to appropriate technologies for their time and context—opting, for example, to

use a fuel-based tractor but do most of the farming by hand. Recently they completed their own eco-audit to start to more precisely evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their consumption and production practices.

The group has changed and evolved since its beginnings in 1974. In 1979 they were looking to become connected to other groups who pooled their incomes across the country and thereby joined the Federation of Egalitarian Communities. Around 1989 the group decided to become the headquarters for the world-renowned Fellowship of Intentional Communities, which publishes a magazine and directory about communal living. Many of the aging members have taken on jobs off the farm and become involved in the broader community. Others have gotten heavily involved in activism trying to keep CAFOs from entering their county.

How would you describe this region?

Stan Hildebrand (SH), community member: It's a hilly region with deciduous forests. Farms are smaller compared to others in the United States, anywhere from two hundred to one thousand acres. People grow corn, soybeans, and beef cattle since the land is hilly and more suitable to pasture. It's very, very rural. Very few people live here. A lot of Mennonites have moved into the area in the last twenty years. They compose roughly a third of the population and more than half of the farmers in the county.

Gigi Wahba (GW), community member: Few people grow their own food anymore, even though they are farmers and they grew up eating food from gardens. There aren't many organic

farmers. We are definitely the minority. But there is a strong sense of community—quality of life and pride. There are multigenerations of the same family living within a hundred miles of each other. We don't have a Wal-Mart. And there aren't any stop lights in the whole county.

Talk about the your internal economy, sharing resources between yourselves, and also the external economy of having a business.

SH: Sandhill Farm started in 1974. When I came in '79, we were trying to earn all of our income from agricultural sources—we did the sorghum business, started honey, and managed various other businesses. Year after year we had a shortfall. The only way we stayed afloat was because several people gave or loaned money to the community, money that they had inherited or come by. Fifteen years after I joined we finally balanced our budget and realized [that another reason we survived] was because two people in the community did outside work. One was a massage therapist and the other was a piano teacher. It just kind of brought it home, at least to me, that our model wasn't working. We had to let go of that model of *making it* agriculturally.

Ever since then, more and more of our income has come from off-farm money than on-farm products. Costs keep going up, yet we're not able to increase prices [at the same rate], and so, luckily, we have these outside streams of income from jobs that people enjoy doing.

GW: Internally, we're kind of Marxist. To each according to their need, and from each according to their ability. We operate with a high level of trust between us. Our lives intersect a lot here.

Basically, when you become a member, you get the privilege of writing checks. When people have expenses, they generally feel free to pay for them. We keep track of where everything goes, and we can count every dollar spent, every income that's come in. There's no joining fee, and generally, when you are here, whatever work you do goes toward the common pool. When you leave, often the community will give you a leaving fund.

What bodies of ecology and food production thought do you subscribe to?

GW: Because there's so many people involved here, we're not real rigid about one particular type of methodology. Mostly we're growing soil. We are trying to increase fertility and productivity in all our soils, in the gardens, in the fields. We bring in insects, create microclimates that are favorable, maintain the natural habitats. Organic, biodynamic, permaculture, holistic field-management practices—all of that fits in.

SH: We try to make use of what we have here and circulate those resources rather than be dependent on outside resources. That can be Native American, it can be biodynamic, or it can be fukuoka. It is very eclectic.

How do you deal with waste here?

Käthe Nicosia (KN), community member: We recycle everything we possibly can, use up everything we can. For the stuff that isn't recyclable, we have a small landfill, and we try to manage it intelligibly.

Is there a story to how the Sandhill family of products came about?

SH: We started with one product, which was sorghum, a long time ago. We started going to fairs, and then we added honey. After a while we realized that if we're going to be sitting there at the table all day long, we could be selling ten products. So we started adding more and more things: mustard, horseradish, one after another. It was trial and error.

GW: Growing these gardens all these years, there's always something that does phenomenal. Oftentimes, it's tomatoes and peppers. We've taken the attitude that we'll work with whatever we've got.

KN: The products are also driven by people's interests, what we want to put energy into. There's a lot in the condiment line now: sauces, relishes, chutneys.

How does the division of labor work?

KN: We stay focused on what needs to be done. Some of our work is definitely very seasonal. Every member has a different mix of things they do—we don't all do exactly the same thing. But all of us are expected to do sorghum harvest. Those doing garden work must also routinely walk around the garden to keep everyone informed about what is going on with each crop and what harvests are coming up.

SH: We all take turns cooking and cleaning the house—we divide up chores, whether it's washing windows or washing floors. You get one area that you may do for a whole year, or you

might do it for a few months and switch with someone. All of us like a lot of variation in our daily routine—a lot of times you don't know what you are going to be doing that day when you get up, but you get to decide. People who want a more regular routine and know what their entire week looks like probably wouldn't fit here.

KN: We tend to self-select for self-starters. You've got to be motivated to get yourself going. Nobody's going to push you out the door.

GW: Another dynamic here is that the oldest members have taken a greater interest in things outside of Sandhill Farm. We all have outside jobs in addition to the daily chores. The community has had to evolve with that. For instance, you join a community at a certain phase of your life, then your interests change, and then you change. Can the community continue to support that? Sandhill's been around for over years, and if the community's going to go forward, we need young people who are going to do the day-to-day work and take on the management and that kind of thing. As always, we're in transition.

Where would you all like to see Sandhill in five years?

GW: I like what we're doing now! I'd hope we'd get people who'd like to continue what we're doing now. I hope we keep growing our food.

SH: I'd love to be part of the local-foods movement. If it means doing stuff with neighboring intentional communities or starting a local farmers market in Memphis, that'd be awesome.

KN: I think our initiative to start our own farmers market in the nearby town has some possibilities of turning into something pretty good, for both the local area and the local communities. That's been pretty exciting to me—it's been a high point of my year.