

GROWING FOOD, GROWING FARMERS: HOW FIRST-GENERATION FARMERS IN BLUE RIDGE
APPALACHIA LEARN HOW TO FARM AND FIND ACCESS TO FARM LAND

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Abstract

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DAVID HOUSTON WALKER, JR.

Chairperson: Susan E. Keefe

This thesis research seeks to explain changes occurring on the Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape, as first-generation small-scale diversified farmers become invested in sustainable agriculture; learn how to farm; find access to farm land, and form resilient agricultural enterprises in Blue Ridge Appalachia. This thesis documents the importance of small-scale agriculture, beginning with a literature review and then through a discussion of aspiring, beginning, and experienced farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia. Each stage represents an important transition for the farmer. However, the importance of mentoring echoes throughout each. By seeing what others have done, the aspiring farmer becomes engaged in farming as an occupation and lifestyle. Likewise, the beginning and experienced farmer gains strategies and confidence from their mentors and peers as they seek to form a sustainable livelihood in Blue Ridge Appalachia.

Dedication

This thesis research is dedicated to individuals that grow our food, today and tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the aspiring, beginning, and established farmers, who shared their time and wisdom with me. Your stories and examples guide our community's commitment to forming a healthier and more just planet. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One afternoon in the spring of 2014, my parents and I met at my grandmother's home place in the mountains of North Carolina. The maple and oak trees that stand in my parents' front yard had suffered limb damage. Instead of having the limbs trucked to the landfill, they brought the wood with them on one of their regular trips to visit me in the mountains. We planned to inoculate mushrooms in these torn pieces, hoping that their decomposition in this new place would interact with the mycelium. We hoped that this union would bring new fruit. In a very intimate act we significantly altered our food system and changed the landscape. Two generations worked together to transform how we used the abandoned farm through regeneration. It was an intentional metaphor as well as a step toward our own food production.

First-generation farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia also seek to do as my parents and I had done. They earnestly seek to rebuild our fractured foodshed, digging deep into why place matters. Even though many of the first-generation farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia were not born there, it cannot be helped for farmers to call upon place. "An agricultural landscape conveys meaning and purpose, as well as a shared heritage," writes sustainable agriculture scholar Philip Ackermen-Leist (2013, 8). This shared heritage and meaning, he writes, signifies our relationship with the earth. It occurs when humans identify a food's taste with its unique spatial origin. "Place," he continues, "is first and foremost the intersection between latitude and longitude, but place as it relates to local foods is also the intersection of people and their environs" (Ackermen-Leist 2013, 10). Place is what connects the farmers to their livelihood and community. Farming is a consuming activity as they work the land each day, bringing meaning from it.

In the fall of 2013, I interviewed a Cooperative Extension agent in Ashe County who specializes in cattle. When I asked her if the cattle-people that she interacts with talk about where they see their farm in ten or fifteen years, she stated, “They talk to each other about it. Some of them wonder about changing things up. Or, wonder who is going to take over my farm. Or, will so-and-so keep going with it. Their farm is a part of their family. They’re passionate about it and taking care of it” (Orfield 2013). This matters as the average farmer age in Ashe County increased from 57.3 to 59.2 between 2007 (“2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Ashe County”) and 2012 (“2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Ashe County”). This number encompasses many different forms of agriculture in Ashe County; however, it suggests two real concerns: Who will farm tomorrow and how will the landscape change? These concerns represent a national challenge. The National Young Farmers Coalition estimates “that between now and the year 2030, half a million (one-quarter) of American farmers will retire. When our nation loses family farms, we all suffer economic, environmental, and social harm. In agricultural areas, fewer farmers may mean a further consolidation of farmland, the decline of communities and their economies, and in suburban areas and the rural areas just beyond, this trend may contribute to the transition away from working farms into estates or residential developments” (Shute 2011, 9).

I then asked the extension agent if her cattle people were interested in mentoring new farmers. She replied:

I think I have some who would definitely be interested in mentoring a young farmer and setting them up, letting them have a few cattle on their farm. But, that’d probably be a question for them. I could see my farmers wanting to mentor others because they’ve talked about that before, wanting to get kids set up with them to mentor. But, that hasn’t happened yet (Orfield 2013).

This thesis research seeks to explain changes occurring on the Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape. Specifically, it seeks to explain how first-generation small-scale diversified farmers become invested in sustainable agriculture; learn how to farm; find access to farm land and form resilient agricultural enterprises in Blue Ridge Appalachia. To explore these themes, I believe that it is best to classify first-generation farmers into three distinct categories: aspiring, beginning, and experienced. Time spent farming differentiates an aspiring farmer from a beginning farmer and a beginning farmer from an experienced one; however, other elements do so as well. These include: ownership of their own farming enterprise; choices in the diversity and specialization of their products; sophistication of their markets; ownership of land; and, employment of others. I consider ownership of a farmer's own enterprise as the difference between an aspiring and beginning farmer. And I consider ownership of farmland the difference between beginning and experienced farmers as each farmer hoped to own their own farmland. Each farmer that I interviewed believed that this would afford them more control and sustainability of their systems. All of the farmers that I interviewed, regardless of experience, believe very much in a sustainable agriculture system and place significant values on social and environmental justice; a farmer's need to own his/her own land; and, planning.

From this research, I hoped to glimpse a moment or snapshot where individuals sought to change the landscape toward a regenerative future. To "build soil rather than deplete soil, or even rather than maintain equilibrium," as theologian and farmer Fred Bahnson states, "If you're practicing regenerative agriculture, you're actually improving soil in many cases" (Malcom, "'Soil and Sacrament' explores farming's spiritual side"). Bahnson's thoughts are both metaphorical and real; they are what I hoped to, and did, witness first-generation farmers doing in Blue Ridge Appalachia.

Methodology

At its heart, this research seeks to form a better understanding of a changing Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape through the exploration of an emerging sustainable agriculture community. Based upon Gaventa's premise that "Only when the 'peoples' knowledge of land is uncovered and valued will the full relationships of social capital and land tenure of a community be understood" (Gaventa 1995, 22-23) this research seeks to know how first-generation farmers transition from being interested in agriculture and become aspiring farmers; transition from aspiring farmers to beginning farmers; and, transition from beginning farmers to experienced farmers. Through this process, all of the farmers gained access to skills, markets, capital, land, and social networks in Ashe, Watauga, and Wilkes County, North Carolina.

Although the farmers that I interviewed may have been just as successful in other counties or states, I am specifically concerned with the farmers where I live. This matters to me because I cannot help but be concerned with the health of my own community through the creation of sustainable and meaningful jobs and the availability of good food. And so, this work seeks to be a significant qualitative study of first-generation farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia. First-generation farmers do not grow up learning how to farm from their parents. They are disadvantaged in that they do not know the land they farm as intimately as someone who spent his or her youth on that land. For these reasons, I believe that this study can also be considered relevant to any region that wishes to become more resilient, as this is the intended goal of the first-generation farmers that I interviewed. From this research, I hope the following narratives engage a conversation about the future of our local foodsheds. I cannot help but think of Appalachian scholar and activist Helen Matthews Lewis recommendation that "It is important to talk and plan together for the future, to have dreams and hopes and visions" (Lewis 2009, 77) when I think of the conversations that I had through the course of this work.

The research occurred through qualitative interviews, participant observation, and analysis of previous writing on the region and sustainable agriculture. Qualitative interviews included a sample group composed of first-generation farmers, aspiring, beginning, and experienced, as well as experts within Blue Ridge Appalachia, who assist first-generation farmers to become successful. By analyzing the earlier research of the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, Patricia Beaver, Ron Eller, Stephen Fisher, Stephen William Foster, John Gaventa, and John Stephenson, an historical and theoretical context was established for this present research on the changes of Blue Ridge Appalachia's landscape. This literature review of the region was coupled with an analysis of earlier research on sustainable agriculture, which included work by Philip Ackerman-Leist, Wendell Berry, Herman Daly and John Cobb, the Greenhorns, Kate Mailfert, Helen and Scott Nearing, Michael Pollan, Joel Salatin, Brett Zollinger and Richard Krannich, among others.

To reach an accurate sampling of the first-generation farmers that this project seeks to study, I used the chain-referral sampling method, specifically the snowball sampling method (Bernard 2002, 147-149). I chose this method because, as a researcher, I did not know the extent of the sample population and believed experts within the subject area would know the sample population better. To dilute bias from the experts in their chain-referral, I chose a wide variety of experts. This included experts from different institutions within Blue Ridge Appalachia.

The chain-referral sampling method process began by approaching experts, aspiring farmers, and individuals associated with the sustainable agriculture system. These initial contacts were identified by their prominence within the community or their association with my own academic institution, which actively promotes small-scale farms in Blue Ridge Appalachia through its teaching and research farm. The organizations are: Appalachian State University Center for Appalachian Studies, Appalachian State University Sustainable

Development Department, Ashe County Farmers' Market, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, High Country Grown, Maverick Farm's Farmer Incubator and Grower Project, North Carolina Cooperative Extension: Ashe County Center, North Carolina Cooperative Extension: Watauga County Center, and Watauga County Farmers' Market.

From the initial contacts that I identified, I asked the following question: "If I were to conduct research on how first-generation farmers become successful and find access to land, who should I speak with?" The results from this initial inquiry were then compiled and the process was replicated until a significant sample group, 22, of first-generation farmers was formed. I believe that this provided an accurate understanding of who, within the subject area, is a first-generation farmer. With time, I continue to meet more and more first-generation farmers in northwestern North Carolina. Some plan to stay indefinitely. I have met others who have left. I believe the sample group number is a low estimate of the first-generation farmers in northwestern North Carolina.

To collect data, I held qualitative interviews with eleven of the first-generation farmer sample group. Interviewees were chosen based upon their interest and available schedules. Of the eleven farmers, five were aspiring farmers, four were beginning farmers, and three were experienced farmers. These individuals were asked a set of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, which were audio recorded. The questions focused on a set of themes: the individuals' introduction to farming, their association with the food system, their network, their association with new farmers, their vision of the future for the area and of their association with the food system, their conception of sustainability, and a set of background questions. In the course of this research, I also used participant observations during my time with interviewees at their farms throughout the year, to better understand the landscape from the perspective of the emerging farmers. The interview sites were located at the convenience of the interviewee.

The Farmers

While the sample and interview groups, may be limited in their size, the narratives shared often aligned with each other and with literature about their contemporaries in other parts of the country. What differentiates these farmers from other sustainable agriculture farmers is that these farmers work in Blue Ridge Appalachia. Place matters so much to food. It informs the challenges before the farmers and the strategies that they used to make a go at working the land. One individual that I interviewed preferred to use a pseudonym. Several of those that I interviewed are students at Appalachian State University and are in their early twenties, others are much older and do not have an academic affiliation to the University. The age range of the sample population was twenty-two to forty years old. All are white and college educated and none was born in Blue Ridge Appalachia. Seven are male and five are female. Four of seven beginning or experienced farmers work land in Watauga County, North Carolina. Two farm together in Wilkes County, and one farms in Caldwell County. Together, all of these farmers represent one image of sustainable agriculture in Blue Ridge Appalachia. What follows are the interviewees short biographies.

Aspiring Farmers

Hannah Barnwell was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. She graduated from Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development program in 2013 with a degree in Sustainable Development. She has worked on several farms in Watauga County as well as Mitchell County, North Carolina.

Caitlin Batcheller was born in Texas. She attended the University of Texas at San Antonio. She moved to the North Carolina mountains in 2013, where she worked worked on a farm homestead in Ashe County, North Carolina.

Alex Ettinger was born in western North Carolina. He attended the University of Montana for several years, working on its sustainable agriculture farm before returning to

North Carolina. He is currently an undergraduate student in Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development program.

Matt Gundlach was born in California. He completed a residency at Koinonia Farm in Georgia, an intentional community and works on a farm in Watauga County, North Carolina. He plans to attend Duke University's divinity program.

Tony Randolph was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He graduated from Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development program in 2014 with a degree in Sustainable Development. While a student at the University, he lived on the University's Sustainable Development Teaching and Research Farm and worked on several nearby farms.

Beginning Farmers

Lee Carleton was born in southern Georgia. She graduated from the University of Georgia with a horticulture degree. She farms at the Farm Incubator and Grower project in Valle Crucis, North Carolina, where she produces cut flowers and vegetables. She sells at the Watauga County Farmers' Market and has do so since 2009. She also sells to other markets like New River Organic Growers and directly to consumers outside of the farmers' market. Her farm name is Goldenrod Gardens.

Caroline Hampton was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with an Environmental Studies degree. While a college student, Hampton worked on several farms in the North Carolina piedmont; and afterwards, at a farm in Minnesota and at Center for Environmental Farming Systems's farm in Goldsboro, North Carolina. In 2014, she began her first season growing on her own. She produces vegetables and sells directly to restaurants as well as at the Watauga County Farmers' Market. Her farm name is Octopus Gardens, and she shares land under the Farm Incubator and Grower project in Valle Crucis, North Carolina.

Jordan Johnson is a pseudonym. He was born in the northeast, spent several years in the military, and graduated from Appalachian State University several years ago. While a college student, he worked on several area farms. After he graduated, he began his own farm and now raises chickens, ducks, and employs a livestock and crop rotation model promoted by Joel Salatin. He sells his produce through his farm's CSA, the Watauga County Farmers' Market, and directly to restaurants and individual consumers.

Kathleen Petermann was raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, and graduated from Appalachian State University in 2013 with a Sustainable Development degree. As a college student, she began farming under the Farm Incubator and Grower project; however, she is now farming on another piece of land as a farm manager, under her own farm name Waxwing Farm. In 2014, she began her first year farming a full growing season and her first year selling produce at the Watauga County Farmers' Market.

Experienced Farmers

Matt Cooper was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and graduated from Appalachian State University and has lived in Watauga County, North Carolina, for fifteen years. He farms both on his own property and leased property adjacent to the Farm Incubator and Grower project. In 2014, he began the first year that he has farmed his own property, and he grows vegetables for two CSAs, the Watauga County Farmers' Market, and direct-sales to restaurants and customers. His farm name is Lively Up Farm.

Shiloh Avery and Jason Roehrig moved to North Carolina after serving in the Peace Corps. They first moved to Chatham County, North Carolina, where they became farm apprentices and took sustainable agriculture and small business classes. Knowing that they wanted to live and farm in western North Carolina, they moved to Caldwell County to advance their search for the right farm property to buy. After several years of searching, they purchased a property in Wilkes County, North Carolina, where they grow two hundred varieties of

vegetables on four acres for two CSA's and two farmers' markets. Each season, they employ several farm apprentices on their farm, Tumbling Shoals.

Chapter Organization

This work is presented in five distinct chapters. In the first chapter, I review previously published literature that examines why food sovereignty is important to communities that wish to become sustainable. I then describe several changes within our policy and thought that promote resilient communities and sustainable food systems. Next, I discuss the emergence of a new national food movement and return to the land. Specific strategies that first-generation farmers implement to become successful are then shown. I conclude with an analysis of the Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape and spaces for change, which may be mined for future work within sustainable development.

Within the second chapter, I present how the farmers that I interviewed became aspiring farmers. This section describes their epiphany and introduction to farm mentors. It also features the importance of educational and mentorship programs in the farmers' development from aspiring farmers to beginning farmers.

In the third chapter, I present examples of how the first-generation farmers found land to farm, both lease and own, as well as financing to develop their agricultural enterprise. I then present examples of why the farmers that I interviewed believe very much in planning.

The final data chapter narrates how first-generation Blue Ridge Appalachian farmers develop a sustainable system. These strategies include growing niche products as well as a diversity of products; the use of multiple markets, and the importance of record keeping and planning.

I then conclude with final observations from each distinct farmer group and a discussion of strategies that may be used to promote mentorship experiences within our sustainable agriculture community.

As previously stated, this research seeks to explain changes occurring on the Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape. Specifically, it seeks to explain how first-generation small-scale diversified farmers become invested in sustainable agriculture; learn how to farm; find access to farm land and form resilient agricultural enterprises in Blue Ridge Appalachia. What very quickly became apparent is that these farmers view themselves as a part of a movement. A movement to radically disrupt how our community and nation consumes food, where the eater can know where their food is grown and know whose hands it touched in the process. They acknowledge the role their own mentors had in their development. However, they are also acutely aware of their own role as mentors to tomorrow's farmers. From this research, I hope to add to this growing conversation and conclude this introduction with a conversation with Jason Roehrig and Shiloh Avery.

Dave Walker: What are you most proud of on your farm?

Shiloh Avery: I actually think that we're most proud of the fact that we make our entire living from our farm because that's so rare and that's something that distinguishes us. Also that we pay our employees. It's not like they're making a lot, but they are making eight dollars an hour and living on the farm so they don't have expenses. There's no rent or utilities or anything. There's probably a difference between what we each are most proud of, but I hear us saying that a lot, that we're one hundred percent full-time farmers (Avery 2014).

Jason Roehrig: I agree with that. One of the things that we talked about when we were first starting up to be a sustainable farming operation was that we wanted to demonstrate a model where people could get into farming without inheriting land or money because there is a social equity thing, especially around local food. It's something that bothers me a little bit, the perception that you have to be wealthy to eat local food. Another way to say that is that you have to be wealthy to eat healthy food. There is also

the idea that you have to be wealthy to grow local food because it takes so much money to get into agriculture. We would like there to be solutions to both of those problems. We don't have the answers, but we would like to demonstrate a model where two people who didn't have anything can become successful farmers (Roehrig 2014).

Chapter 2: REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE: A DOCUMENTED NATIONAL & LOCAL MOVEMENT

Introduction

When I hear the word sustainability, it's just kind of a blah word. It doesn't really do much for me. It gives the misperception that if we just replace our current energy use with solar or wind or something, we can keep consuming at the same rate, when all of the signals are indicating that we need to down-power on a massive scale and use a lot less energy.

I'd rather talk about regeneration, especially in terms of the way we grow our food. Regenerative agriculture is agriculture that builds soil rather than depletes soil, or even rather than maintains equilibrium. If you're practicing regenerative agriculture, you're actually improving soil in many cases. It takes nature about 500 years to build an inch of topsoil, but in using bio-intensive gardening practices of deep-bed preparation, cover cropping, compost, you can build an inch of soil in about eight years (Malcom, "'Soil and Sacrament' Explores Farming's Spiritual Side").

Locally-owned food systems encourage sovereignty, resiliency, and strong economies.

They guide the inputs needed to grow food and the outputs of how we distribute food. These include easing our dependence upon fossil fuel consumption and curing hunger. Just, equitable, locally-owned food systems work as true expressions of identity, purpose, and community.

As communities work to reclaim their food systems, individuals have begun to document this movement. They write as scholars, farmers, and activists about the reasons why it is imperative that we reform how we produce and consume food, the challenges in doing so, and the organizations and people working to take on those challenges. This chapter focuses on those writers.

A reformed food system is of a specific interest to my research as each farmer that I interviewed very much subscribes to or associates themselves with this movement. They are intimately a part of it as they build the soil and encourage consumers to support their efforts. Whether they call it regenerative, sustainable, sovereign, organic, or small scale, it matters to these farmers that they are a part of a significant change in how we produce and consume our food. It also matters, perhaps even more, that the community where these farmers live—my community—is a part of this movement, reclaiming its food sovereignty. The farmers that I interviewed often turn to their neighboring farmers for guidance. As Jordan Johnson stated in

an oral interview, “I think any of the small farmers that you meet here are the people that you could go to for advice because we’re in the same industry if you will. We’re all dealing with the same things” (Johnson 2013). And while farmers that I interviewed were informed by writers and spokespeople, interactions with mentors, neighbors and peers grounded their development as farmers. “Joel Salatin’s *You Can Farm* was one of the books that inspired me to want to farm full time, commercially,” said Johnson, continuing:

I don’t know if I’d consider him a mentor, but I’ve certainly been inspired by him. I share a lot of the same values as him. He’s proven that you can farm the way that I’m trying to farm now and make a living doing it. Other than Salatin and local farmers, I don’t seek guidance from too many other places for what concerns decisions on the farm (Johnson 2013).

This response echoed all of the other first-generation farmers that I interviewed. Each placed a high degree of importance on their peer network and community.

“I think that the sustainable agriculture movement is moving forward not because of leaders, but because of a grassroots interest in healthy eating as a backlash to unhealthy food products,” stated Jason Roehrig, another first-generation farmer that I interviewed (Roehrig 2014). Roehrig’s statement very much mirrors a conversation that I heard over a year earlier as I listened to Diane Rehm interview Wendell Berry on the radio.

“Are there developments you see in either our nation or the world that lead you to be less fearful today?” asked Rehm (Berry 2012). “There are good things going on,” Berry answered, “Yes, I think there are things going on that are making the world less fearful. And I think they’re coming not from the leadership, the nominal leadership at the top, but from the bottom” (Berry 2012). *From the bottom*, he stated, are community members “who have simply seen what needed to be done” and “have just started doing what they thought needed to be done” (Berry 2012).

Berry's answer came after an hour of speaking about reckless energy consumption, family, and rurality. The optimism that he described comes from the agency of neighbors: individuals who "honor their moral responsibility to the future to strive to avert the worst consequences of the environmental emergencies and leave a world as rich in life and possibility as the world we live in," as Kathleen Moore and Michael Nelson, editors of *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* write (Moore and Nelson 2010, xvi). It is an optimism in small acts, like eking out a livelihood on several acres and selling a tomato at a time at the farmers' market, which lead to larger shifts in how all of us consume food and connect with the land.

As I live and write in Blue Ridge Appalachia, I am concerned with my local food system, how it develops, and how farmers become successful within my community. Or as Berry writes, "If one lives in a country place, and if one loves it, one must think about it" (Berry 1990, 112). This work focuses on the six-county region of Blue Ridge Appalachia known as the High Country, featuring Watauga County, North Carolina and its five surrounding counties (Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Wilkes, North Carolina and Johnson, Tennessee). The challenges and opportunities before emerging farmers in this area are unique within a larger, global scope. For instance, tourism dominates and fractures the local economy and land here. Yet, there is a developing coalition of organizations which seeks to aid farmers and change the local dynamic.

Within this microcosm is a changing community, much like many other communities affected by climate change and global inequity, that wishes to form a sovereign food system and act to rebuild a more resilient landscape. To begin, this literature review discusses a problem: the connection between fossil fuel consumption and food sovereignty. It then discusses the call for a reformed landscape that values the earth and its fruits. Next, it discusses the current new-agrarian movement, which features farmer-authors whose strategies were often implemented by the individuals that I interviewed, just as they are implemented in other places. Finally, this review will discuss the need to find and understand the margins, as Berry writes, moments

where true structural changes can be activated on a national and local level, thus realizing real systemic change. Together, this literature review seeks to thread together the layered landscape of a regenerative food system as a local and national space of exploitation, protest, and hope for repair and healing.

Fossil Fuel Consumption and Food Sovereignty

This question often comes up when people talk about climate change, and our farming community definitely talks about climate change. However, it's just something that I don't think that I have the power to eliminate as a farm manager. So we have a reactive response to climate change instead of a pro-active strategy. Like maybe we're having a cold winter and spring because of global warming and we'll just deal with the cold winter and spring. Every season has been very different from one to the other. We don't have a very good plan, but people are talking about it; and maybe from our conversations, we'll learn something from that (Roehrig 2014).

The Problem

In November of 2005, the European Project for Ice Coring reported that “carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are now 30 percent higher than at any time in the last 800,000 years and methane levels are also 130 percent higher than at any time in that period” (Ponting 2007, 394). These are indicators of a rapidly changing climate, which has occurred as “the world consumes more resources than nature can regenerate” (Sachs et al. 2006, 34). Indicators that reflect human activity and consumption of natural resources on an intensive scale based upon limitless growth. This is “the greatest threat that the world faces,” warns Clive Ponting, who adds, “Finding a solution will be extremely difficult for reasons that lie deep within the way human societies have evolved in the last 10,000 years and, in particular, the transition to high-energy-use societies in parts of the world since 1800,” (Ponting 2007, 398). Individuals who acknowledge these changes directly attribute them in part to our recent intensification of agriculture. These individuals document our role and subsequent exploitation as we mine the earth to feed our unbridled consumption. However, the writers also often offer solutions for us to alter course, to cultivate a more reparative earth.

Herman Daly and John Cobb are two individuals who identify our use of land through the lens of limitless growth as a key cause of our rapidly altering planet. Land, they write, “is likely to be treated so that it does in fact yield an enduring increase. When land is treated as capital its fertility can be depreciated as other forms of capital are depreciated” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 111). When land is viewed as “indestructible” and then becomes fruitless, it is viewed as exchangeable for other more promising land.

Quoted by Daly and Cobb, economists Richard Ely and George Wehrwein write, “Too often the ‘conquest of nature’ benefiting immediate generations has resulted in the ‘conquest of man’ by those natural forces operating into eternity” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 99). As these land economists write of humanity’s effects upon the environment in 1940, they do so in the wake of the Dust Bowl and the emergence of the American conservation movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their statement predates the Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainable development in 1987 as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 77). During the nearly fifty-year period between these two statements, our human impact upon the earth intensified as never before. Led by the United States’ efforts to feed the world, the Green Revolution led to introductions of innovative and efficient technologies, as well as unintended consequences. “In the years after World War II, even as human populations skyrocketed, global grain harvests double skyrocketed,” writes Bill McKibben (2010, 152-153). Yet many are still unable to feed themselves (McKibben 2010, 153), our economy is directly tied to the increase production of grains (McKibben 2010, 158), and our landscape is ravaged by its industrialization (McKibben 2010, 165).

Daly and Cobb write that “It seems we will always commit this fallacy to some degree, and we must think of minimizing it rather than eliminating it entirely” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 41). They propose two tasks to regain our understanding of true costs. First, humans must

realize the existence of raw material required for production and the premise for the development of the product (Daly and Cobb 1989, 42). This radically reorganizes how we interact with our environment and each other. No longer are items consumable goods, but they are recognized as having multiple layered meanings and agency. Items have a story that becomes complex when their origin is realized. “The second and related rule of thumb,” they write, “is to avoid excessive professional specialization” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 42). With small-scale, diversified farms, this matters. The farmer must be a grower of several dozen varieties of plants, but also a business person, a mechanic, a builder, and other roles. Diversity is important; it builds resiliency. However, it is also hindering in the realization that some tasks are more enjoyable and easier for some people to do. The farmer becomes known for certain products, their cut-flowers or pigs, but they must find a balance between knowing what they are good at, what they cannot do, and what they must do.

To reach these states, Daly and Cobb suggest various reforms like a reevaluation of land to reflect sustainable inputs (Daly and Cobb 1989, 257-258), forming more fair-trade blocs between nations that do not depend upon debt inducement (Daly and Cobb 1989, 232-235), and the “rehumanizing of work” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 304). This final example suggests that “There seems to be an inherent tension between humanly satisfying work and the quantity of production per worker” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 305). And, it underlines their other recommendations as humans and the environment are believed to hold purpose. When we consider the complex, exploitative state of our dominant system, its irrational and unjust characteristics become apparent. For instance, as the worker is leveraged to produce more efficiently, an emphasis is placed upon the quantity of the products made and less on the individual. The person loses his/her agency and becomes not just someone who works, but someone defined by the consumable good that the worker produces. In response, Daly and Cobb promote the idea that worker satisfaction can be tied to “creative expression” and the

ability of the consumer to grasp the laborer's touch on a product, such as through handicrafts (Daly and Cobb 1989, 308-309). They believe that this lends agency to the laborer and the product. These policies and directives encourage humanity's connection with nature and other humans. Consumed items become real and hold purpose and meaning.

As I sit at the drive-thru of a fast-food restaurant or open the door on the grocery store's freezer aisle, I am not very connected to the people or the space around me, let alone the Earth. These are acts in an exploitive society. "We are all to some extent the products of an exploitive society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp," writes Berry (1977, 7). We all cut the earth and consume its fruits, often with an impact that is devastating and irreversible. For many, this occurs in what we eat. "We have become a race of corn eaters," as Michael Pollan writes (2006, 117). We, as a nation, only eat a handful of the varieties of plants that are available to us. And, our American diet holds a profound impact upon our relationship with the Earth and with each other. As Pollan writes, "As much as a third of all the greenhouse gases that human activity has added to the atmosphere can be attributed to the saw and the plow" (Pollan 2006, 198). This occurs as we seek to engineer, design, and manipulate the earth for maximum efficiency. In the process, we are divorced from our neighbors and our environment.

The Call for a Reformed Landscape

Changing our current agricultural landscape and food system is daunting. Without change, the future appears daunting. However, there is a possibility for a reformed, resilient return to a deeper connection with each other and the Earth. Just as Daly and Cobb offer recommendations toward this goal, many others also lend their voices and ideas. And often these individuals begin by encouraging us to reframe how we view the environment and our communities, which leads us to critique how we describe the land.

Paradigm Shifts

Using the example, and metaphor, of a garden, Gibson-Graham et al. argue in *Take Back the Economy* that a more just system may occur if communities “share the commons” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xvi). This occurs when we “produce together what is needed for individual and collective survival” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xvii) and “consume resources and encounter others in the process of meeting individual and collective needs” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xvii). It also happens when we “produce and dispose of the surplus (which is given to neighbors, and the food bank or sold to raise funds to buy more tools)” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xvii); and, “invest in the garden by taking so-called waste and composting it so it can be returned to the soil as nourishment for future crops” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xvii). This text builds upon Gibson-Graham’s *A Post-capitalist Politics*, which begins with the epigraph: “Hope is the difference between probability and possibility,” a line by Isabelle Stengers (Gibson-Graham 2006, ix). These authors offer a choice and agency for a more just future on Earth for every community. By viewing our Earth and our communities as a commons and as a garden, the authors frame resources as shared, regenerative objects that can be cultivated. They purposefully create and allow a space for Nature.

Using this framework, Gibson-Graham write, allows individuals “an identity embedded in local circumstances and a role in the global dialogue. And that dialogue exists in service of the local” (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxi). It is in this space that the local food movement exists as an alternative in conflict with the dominant paradigm. It is at times a violent conflict, as hunger and climate change cause real pain. Wendell Berry uses stark revolutionary terms as he frames his vision of “an authentic settlement and inhabitation our country” (Berry 1977, 223). He invokes Lexington and Concord (Berry 1977, 5) and Jefferson as he writes in *The Unsettling of America* of “the disease of the modern character” (Berry 1977, 19) and “the effort to make something

comely and enduring of our life on this earth” (Berry 1977, 234). Similarly, Gibson-Graham et al. cite the American Civil War and reference women’s suffrage (which was violent and remains violent in many parts of the world) (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, 8) as parallel moments of injustice that demanded radical change. While conflict permeates and guides these frames, they are uniting in their urgency, sense of equity, and imagination of a new, reformed landscape.

Linguistic Choices

The frames act to counter the impediments that exist for small farmers, who operate within a system that systematically moves against them. Neil Hamilton’s work, “Moving Toward Food Democracy: Better Food, New Farmers, and the Myth of Feeding the World,” explores the USDA’s marginalization of small and emerging farmers. He writes that while ninety percent of all farms are small (Hamilton 2011, 132), these farms are classified by the federal government as “residential/lifestyle” or as “retirement” (Hamilton 2011, 133-134) and by implication insignificant. Likewise, Martin Lenihan and Kathryn Brasier’s recent work, “Ecological Modernization and the US Farm Bill: The Case of the Conservation Security Program,” seeks to understand the competing ecological frames placed on American agriculture, specifically in the 2002 US Farm Bill’s implementation of the Conservation Security Program. Like Hamilton, Lenihan and Brasier identify the incredible influence that neoliberal, growth-based institutions have on United States agricultural policy. They found that environmental organizations actively engage big-business advocacy groups and the government to form “green governmentality” or “green neoliberal” agendas. The actors influenced and collaboratively developed policy despite their competing ecological frameworks because the actors found economic incentives toward conservation (Lenihan and Brasier 2010, 225-226). By focusing on the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, Lenihan and Brasier found that while

environmental groups helped steer the policy toward their conservation goals, “The shape of conservation programs is more likely to be influenced by principles of the free-market, rather than the wider public good” (Lenihan and Brasier 2010, 226).

The choices by the USDA, the federal government, that these authors describe, hold tremendous linguistic implications in how we view the land. For instance, by designating a farm as “residential/lifestyle” or as “retirement,” we relegate it to a hobby. Small-scale farming becomes romanticized and not deserving of serious economic considerations. Two classes of farmers emerge, those that use intensive machinery and those that use intensive hand labor. Each holds different and significant effects upon our health through the chemical inputs and soil degradation that come with intensive machinery and the long-term soil building practices that come with intensive hand labor. Intensive, conventional production yields quick monetary gains, but the food grown is designed for travelling long distances and its appearance. Versus, growing food in a healthy soil.

It should not be surprising that our national agricultural agenda and culture has sought to energize the food system through intensive machinery and specialization, as Berry (1977, 19-20) and Daly and Cobb critique (1989, 42). This has made farming an undesirable and unnecessary occupation. “Our culture made a grave error decades ago in shoving farming and home economics into a half-lit corner of our K-through-12 educational system, as if there were no future at all,” writes Philip Ackerman-Leist (2013, 254). “For several generations, we used education as the vehicle to get people off the farm. Now we have to make it clear that community food systems and community educational systems are inextricably linked,” he continues (Ackerman-Leist 2013, 254-255). The authors noted above believe that it is imperative to not just critique how we frame industrial agriculture, but to also recast and promote small-scale agriculture as a viable and hopeful strategy for a reparative environment.

Aspiring Farmer to Experienced Farmer: A Shift Toward a New Agrarian Movement

As discussed, to significantly alter how we consume resources and converse with the Earth, we must begin to reimagine rural spaces as regenerative spaces instead of exploitive spaces. This means encouraging individuals to reclaim the land and to farm. This is not a new idea. Wendell Berry notes the depth of the American agrarian pursuit, writing, “There are few of us whose families have not at some time been moved to see its vision and to attempt to enact its possibility. I am talking about the idea that as many as possible should share in the ownership of the land and thus be bound to it by economic interest, by the investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition” (Berry 1977, 13). However, for this to occur, individuals must have an epiphany, realizing that they should farm. Then a transition occurs, and they begin to act intentionally with the land. They take steps, developing specific strategies, to learn how to farm and eventually buy land, becoming experienced farmers. The individuals that I interviewed often implemented these strategies, just as other new farmers do in other communities.

An Epiphany: Becoming an Aspiring Farmer

“Many of us never meant to become farmers,” writes Greenhorn Trace Ramsey, “We had our ambitions to enter the world as accountants or lawyers or teachers or some other clean, respectable professional” (Ramsey 2013, 53). Then, “a shift occurred,” he writes. “The soil moved under us somehow, got stuck in creases of our pants, in the ridges of our shoes, in the lines of our palms,” he writes (Ramsey 2013, 53). An awakening or “epiphany” stirred individuals from diverse backgrounds to become rooted in agriculture as a calling. The initial introduction occurs casually: a simple introduction to someone who farms or holds an intense interest in food. Then a transformation occurs that is powerful and overwhelming.

Jenna Woginrich describes the moment as an infection, “The symptoms are mild at first,” she writes, “You start reading online homesteading forums and shopping at cheese-making

supply sites on your lunch break. You go home after work and instead of turning on the television, you bake a pie and study chicken-coop building plans. Then somehow, somewhere along the way you realize that you're happiest when you're weeding the garden" (Woginrich 2011, 8). Evocative narratives like hers can be found in books written by new farmers such as the Greenhorns' *New Farmer's Almanac 2013*, Catherine Friend's *Hit By a Farm: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Barn*, and Kristin Kimball's *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*. They are memoirs and stories written for a generation engaged in or just initiated with the local-food movement. Their stories are honest and romantic, compelling and convincing. They tell how the authors first became interested in agriculture, a career and lifestyle completely different from their previous occupations.

In *The Dirty Life* and *Hit by a Farm*, Kimball and Friend were introduced to farming by their partners. "Melissa spent her days walking farm after farm helping farmers deal with soil and water erosion problems, and quickly discovered a deep kinship with these independent men and women who worked so closely with the soil, with animals, and she couldn't stop talking about it," writes Friend (2006, 14-15). "After I stopped pretending I was doing research and recognized that some big life shift was under way. I scrapped the book idea and spent long weekends on Mark's farm. No heels, no notebook. Two new worlds were opening up to me," writes Kimball (2011, 24). Or as Ramsey writes, "We love this life — we have to — but sometimes we can feel that we don't own it, that it owns us and grips us in a way that will never shake us loose" (Ramsey 2013, 55).

Transitions Toward Intentionality

As the authors begin to farm, they are no longer aspiring farmers. They become engaged in the intentionality of working with the land. Kimball writes, "For the first time, I could clearly see the connection between my actions and the consequences. I knew why I was doing what I was doing and I believed in it. I felt the gap between who I thought I was and how I behaved

begin to close growing slowly closer to authentic” (Kimball 2011, 158). These contemporary writers very much echo the earlier Helen and Scott Nearing, well-read and well-traveled Americans who, at the worst of the Great Depression, found that they no longer wished to participate in an exploitative society (Nearing and Nearing 1970, xv). The Nearings found strength in planning their lives. They took detailed records, which helped them make future decisions and form a model that others could replicate. The Nearings each found it important to share the steps that they took, realizing that one of their most critical hurdles was finding good land.

The Nearings idealized Jeffersonian independence and Marxist craftsmanship, which values usefulness and simplicity. In rural Vermont, they found freedom in being bound to a subsistent life, dictated by the seasons. “Vermont life liberated us as consumers from the limitations, restrictions and compulsions of the city market,” they write (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 148).

Their Vermont farm offered them autonomy from New York City’s cost of living, which is only payable with cash and which has to be earned under conditions imposed by the city. The city person lacks wholeness, they believed, as the city person is bound to the manufacturer’s schedule. They write: “The power age economy has substituted the specialized machine and the assembly line for the craftsman, and has transformed many a skilled worker into a machine tender, with a resulting concentration, not upon excellence, but upon volume of product” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 149). From this displacement, not only has the individual lost self and agency but the ability to participate in the economy to which the individual is tethered. The Nearings chose a semi-subsistence economy as the Great Depression harmed millions of Americans, who “did not lose their jobs through any fault of their own, yet they found themselves workerless, in an economy based on cash payment for the necessities and

decencies” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 22). Instead, they opted for a life where their “necessaries came mostly from the place, on a use basis” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 146).

After twenty years of living an intentional life in Vermont, which included raising the majority of their own food, building their own stone buildings, and spending half of their time in leisure, the Nearings wrote, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*. This manifesto describes their quest to answer three questions: Where to live the good life?; How to finance the good life?; and, How to live the good life? (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 7). They wanted to build a life that could be marked with achievement where, they could say, “People of moderate intelligence, little experience and slender means can build with stone if they have time, patience and the inclination” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 81).

The Nearings believed that a planned and organized life allowed for a wholesome life, which was harmless to others (Nearing and Nearing 1970, xv and xix). They sought to offer through this handbook and their life, a counter to the prevailing belief that accumulation is the pathway to happiness. “Civilization,” said Mark Twain, whom they quote, “is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 147). And while they act in deliberate cause against the dominant American economic system, in which their neighbors participate (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 11), they are participating in one of the most resonant American tropes, frontierism (Nearing and Nearing 1970, 85). This expression is noted in the first sentence of the “Preface”: “This is a book about a twentieth century pioneering venture in a New England community” (Nearing and Nearing 1970, xv). Acting nearly forty years after Frederick Jackson Turner’s declaration that there was no longer a Frontier, and seemingly out-of-step with mainstream American culture, they seek to reveal that an idealized America can still be shaped from the landscape.

“The idea of getting my own farm just a few months ago was a fantasy...I had no real plan to find or buy land, and yet here I was, four short months later, being asked if I wanted extra

title insurance and being handed a set of keys," writes Woginrich (2011, 182). After raising animals on rented property, where she lived, Woginrich sought property of her own as her lease ended. The desire to farm, the "disease" as she writes (Woginrich 2011, 8), led her to enroll in a "Beginner Sheep Raising Class" through the University of Vermont Extension office (Woginrich 2011, 33). "Then it hit me: Most of these people already owned land. I was squatting on someone else's backyard and trying to will it into production," she writes (Woginrich 2011, 36). The search for her own land came as Woginrich's landlord sought to return to the homestead she rented. "My options seemed pretty cut and dried. I could save money and wait until I was closer to retirement age and buy a small farm responsibly. Or I could just jump into it" (Woginrich 2011, 118). Searching the nearby area for a property that fit her existing operation and budget proved difficult until she found a small farm in an adjacent county (Woginrich 2011, 164-165) which, she was able to finance through a USDA Rural Development Program loan (Woginrich 2011, 174).

Woginrich's experience as a lessee is similar to Kimball's in that it took time and patience; yet it was spurred by the desire to find a home. "The farms we saw were selling for \$25,000 per acre, and the soil was nothing to brag about," Kimball writes (Kimball 2011, 37-38). After moving from New York City to her partner's family farm in Pennsylvania, the two sought their own land that they could farm. "What we needed, Mark said, was a big piece of good land that we could live on, that we could farm exactly as we wanted to, with the possibility of building a permanent home there" (Kimball 2011, 42). Following several months of looking for a place to farm, they met a man who held several hundred acres in New York. "He was the father of a friend of Mark's sister, and by the end of our first meeting, he'd offered us a free lease on a big piece of good land he owned way up north on Lake Champlain. We were welcome to farm it any way we saw fit, and he was open to the possibility of having us build a permanent house and farm there. It was nine months to the day from the time our search began" (Kimball 2011, 43).

The Importance of Owning the Farm

The farm became a part of the authors: “A farm is a form of expression,” Kimball writes, “a physical manifestation of the inner life of its farmers. The farm will reveal who you are, whether you like it or not” (Kimball 2011, 159). For Friend, the farm outside of Rochester, Minnesota, was a place that “needs us,” “abused and over-farmed for years, the soil depleted beyond belief...We could do anything with it” (Kimball 2011, 19-20). They sought to rebuild a fractured environment on fifty-three acres, bought with money from a family member. The deep connections that these authors hold with the idea of landownership and its possibilities are underlined in the preface of Wendell Berry’s 1986 edition of *The Unsettling of America*:

I recently attended a meeting at which an agricultural economist argued that there is no essential difference between owning and renting a farm. A farmer stood up in the audience and replied: “Professor, I don’t think our ancestors came to America in order to *rent* a farm.” ‘Nough said (Berry 1970, viii).

Within these statements and much of Berry’s work, he expresses a “deep rural” framework of the land (Halperin 1990, 58). Through this lens, the land is layered, steeped in nostalgia, authenticity, and sovereignty. As Rhoda Halperin writes of “deep rural”: “Land is property, and landownership confers independence as well as a sense of place” (Halperin 1990, 58). This ideal is positioned deep in the American ethos. For instance, Berry invokes Jefferson and “the old idea” of the Homestead Act (Berry 1970, 13-14) and his thoughts echo the America that Alexis de Tocqueville characterized in 1835 when he wrote, “The social condition of the Americans is eminently democratic” (de Tocqueville 1984, 35). It is an ideal that finds strength in personal and collective sovereignty, “assuring self possession: the landowner is his or her own person, has secured a definite identity, is ‘beholden to no one,’ has acquired a measure of autonomy and independence,” as Stephen Foster writes (Foster 1988, 169).

Food Sovereignty and New Agrarians

Sovereignty matters greatly when we consider the sources of our food. Berry connects how we treat the land with what we consume (Berry 1990, 147). Our food, what sustains us, “involves our freedom,” he writes, “We have neglected to understand that we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else. The condition of the passive consumer of food is not a democratic condition” (Berry 1990, 147). The sustainable agriculture community promotes this idea and actively works to connect consumers with the source of their food in a different way than before.

Yet there are still significant challenges. We continue to hold the belief that every American can achieve the American Dream, can form their own destiny, can own their own land. However, we are far removed from that idea. Instead, as discussed, we live in a radically shifting landscape. Our planet is rapidly reacting to the over-consumption of fossil fuels and our food is very much to blame (Pollan 2006, 183). The local food movement represents an indicator of a moment of change, of challenge, and of protest. Henry Tarmy draws comparisons between the Depression-era soil conservation group Friends of the Land and the new farmers of the twenty-first century: “The need to do more is urgent. The record is plain. Over vast areas we stand confronted with defaced landscapes, depleted water supplies, grave dislocations in the hydrologic cycle, and an all but catastrophic degradation of soil and Man,” he quotes in his essay (Tarmy 2013, 125). “A new breed of cats has arrived,” he writes, calling emerging farmers, “inheritors of the Friends of the Land’s vision for an agricultural system that builds soils and communities rather than destroying them” (Tarmy 2013, 125). Yet, as Woginrich, Kimball, and Friend write, finding land takes time.

The transitions that these authors describe can be a challenging process. As discussed, not being from a farming background is a barrier. So, too, is finding land to farm and building the cultural, economic, and social capital that is often required to do so. “Unless you are already

wealthy, or extremely lucky (or hooked into your local Farmlink chapter!), securing land for your new farm is difficult and will only become more so as more and more new farmers enter the search for land,” writes agricultural-activist Antonio Roman-Alcala, who argues for land reform where land is repurposed for the agrarian-collective good (Roman-Alcala 2013, 125).

Yet now, Philip Ackermen-Leist writes, a change is occurring, a movement is developing: “It’s happening all across the country already in a way that demonstrates like no other recent social phenomena the extraordinary diversity that defines the United States” (Ackermen-Leist 2013, 292). The new farmers that compose this movement appear different from the older farmers that they replace. Perhaps, this is linked to the somewhat different challenges that that these new farmers face compared with earlier generations, which allows them to express different attitudes and work within a different structure than traditional farmers. These new attitudes include radical forms of farming, such as urban agriculture (Hamilton 2011, 130), and distinct forms of educating farmers, such as internships and apprenticeships (Hamilton 2011, 131). In the former instance, emerging farmers are often cast as not from a farming background, though individuals from a farming background may often hold similar characteristics and challenges as they transition into a different form of agricultural production. Neil Hamilton also cites the ethnic and spatial diversity of the emerging farmer movement in the United States. And in “Approaching Beginning Farmers as a New Stakeholder for Extension,” Meyer et al. found that participants in Kentucky’s KyFarmStart program also held diverse backgrounds in regards to age as well as income (Meyer et al. 2011, 29). Participants in Colorado State University’s Building Farmers program were also found to “come from corporate backgrounds such as marketing or technology, but want to transition into a new, more rural lifestyle that creates value-based linkages in their community, or they may want to transition into a new business model” (Meyer et al. 2011, 28).

On the landscape, change occurs in different places and affects different groups with varied degrees. Between 1997 and 2002, Basu and Chakraborty studied farm loss in Florida. What makes this work significant is the scale of their research; their identification of female farmer's resiliency and the reasons for limited farm loss by this demographic; and, their finding that farm loss occurs in different spatial patterns. Their research, drawn from data taken from the Census of Agriculture and the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, describes the spatial distribution of farm loss (Basu and Chakraborty 2008, 227). Coupled with data that describes predominant farming types within this area and population growth, their research reveals that multiple effects contribute to farm transitions within their study areas. It becomes clear that some areas gained farms, which counters the prevailing myth of rapid American farm loss and calls for further research into what forms of farming are actually being lost.

Furthermore, Basu and Chakraborty's research suggests the diversity of farmers and the external markets in which they participate are both important to consider. They found that the more female farmers within a county, the less likely farm loss will occur in that county; and, the greater farm profits within a county, the more likely farm loss will occur in that county. The authors suggest that this calls for further research into the globalization of agriculture because large conventional farms with greater profits are associated with farm loss; however, small-scale farms are associated with farmland gains (Basu and Chakraborty 2008, 232). Their research also suggests resiliency in female farm operations. For instance: What are female farmers doing differently from farms with high profit margins? As described by Hoppe and Korb's "Characteristics of Women Farm Operators and Their Farms," created for the USDA, female farmers utilize different practices than male farmers, opting for specialized, non-traditional agricultural products, which may have more limited effects upon the environment than large-scale, intensive agriculture (Hoppe and Korb 2013, 9). Female farmers' trend toward small-scale agriculture is a result of female farmers' continued marginalization within the

conventional-agricultural system and their demographic differences from male farmers, despite their steady growth when compared to male farmers. Data collected from the 1982 and 2007 Census of Agriculture, by the USDA's Economic Research Service, reveals this: female farmers have significantly increased their share of the nation's agricultural output in every class designated by the ERS (Hoppe and Korb 2013, v). Yet female farmers are different from male farmers; they hold different educational attainment levels, choose different farming practices, and are continually marginalized by federal policy by these choices, or forced choices.

The small farm and alternative agricultural practices, cited by Ackermen-Leist and Hamilton, face similar barriers, which is also supported by the work of Lenihan and Brasier. Policy is geared toward large, intensive farming not to the diversity of small scale farmers that do not wish to or are prohibited from participating in large, industrial agriculture. Place matters to these farmers. They take specific steps, keeping records and educating themselves about best practices, so that one day they may purchase land. This allows them sovereignty and control over their operations. But as Foster, Halperin, and Berry write, sovereignty means more than landownership. It allows the farmers the ability to work toward a more regenerative environment, encapsulating the deep connection with the Earth that first drew them to farming.

Blue Ridge Appalachia and Its Agricultural Landscape

The mountains of the southern Appalachians represent a commodified, fractured landscape which presents a unique challenge for a sovereign, resilient food system. It is an area that Appalachian sociologist John Stephenson writes, "is popularly regarded as quaint, old-fashioned, nobly primitive, authentically American, spectacularly beautiful, slightly backward, individualistic (ruggedly), serene, ecologically pristine, clean and pure, remote, safe, wild, natural, historical, rustic, and simple, to name just a few of the traits ascribed to it" (Stephenson 1984, 191). While many of these descriptions are contradictory, they are enticing and varied enough to fit a broad consumer narrative. This reorganizes how the landscape, a rural one with

a diversity of farm operations, is understood. Farm loss represents a significant characteristic of the region transitioning even further toward a tourist economy, putting at risk the sustainability of a sovereign food system.

Blue Ridge Appalachia is a landscape with many different types of farms with varied sizes. In 2012, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project's (ASAP) Local Food Research Center published, *Food and Farm Assessment for a Five-County Region in the Southern Appalachians: Alleghany, Ashe, Watauga, Wilkes, and Johnson County*, a report on the changes in agricultural production in the five Blue Ridge Appalachian counties; the challenges and assets of this region's food system; and, spaces for alternative infrastructure improvements to leverage local agricultural production for a greater economic return to the region. Created for Blue Ridge Seeds of Change, a Heifer International project, the data was drawn from the 2002 and 2007 USDA Agricultural Census. This research parallels Basu and Chakraborty, as it promotes a regional agricultural focus and identifies differing patterns of farm size within the region (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project 2012, 2). It also understands these differences as connected to the farming practices predominant within different sections of the geographic area (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project 2012, 4-5). For instance, when Wilkes County (mostly off-the-mountain) is compared with the rest of the region (mostly on-the-mountain), the diversity of the area's agricultural production and land use practices becomes evident (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project 2012, 5). Both areas contain poultry and Christmas tree operations, two very different monoculture practices. However, poultry represents an outside-share in Wilkes County and Christmas trees a large share of the other counties. While both of these hold a significant role in the region's agricultural output, both occur predominantly in different geographic zones of the region and account for different appearances on the landscape. A cluster of chicken houses looks different from several acres of identical-looking, evenly spaced trees.

Furthermore, this report highlights the nuances of agriculture within the region (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project 2012, 4). It is a region that yields non-food farm products like Christmas trees as well as small-scale diversified farms. This is important as each affect the landscape very differently. This study suggests that changes associated with some crops, may not represent changes within the larger system, just as Basu and Chakraborty found that farm loss occurs in different places and for different forms of farms and just as Hoppe and Korb found that different farmers exhibit different behaviors.

In Blue Ridge Appalachia the types of farms most likely to be lost has not been documented. However, between 2002 and 2007, 472 farms did cease operating. A total of 30,321 acres in Watauga County, North Carolina, and five comparable Blue Ridge counties were lost as farm operators retired or sought off-farm occupations (“2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Alleghany County,” “2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Ashe County,” “2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Avery County,” “2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County,” and “2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Wilkes County”). As land transitions from agricultural production to development usage, the land’s price increases. In Watauga County, this affects every resident’s housing costs. For example, Watauga County holds the second highest percentage of cost-burdened households in North Carolina, measured by how much a family spends each year on their housing (Rural Data Portal).

The Appalachian Landownership Task Force previously documented this inequity in its 1983 work *Who Owns Appalachia? Landownership and Its Impact*. This research represents a comprehensive and easily accessible discussion of landownership tenure in Appalachia, historically until 1980, covering 55,000 parcels or 20 million acres in eighty counties (in six states) (Geisler 1983, xi).

Within the survey, Watauga County is highlighted for its changing landscape, as second-home development replaced farmland; “The pressure on farmland created by second-home

development and resorts may destroy what was once the most stable element in a diversified local economy” (The Appalachian Land Ownership Council 1983, 87). Between 1969 and 1974, 30.3 percent of farms, representing 12,338 acres or 16.2 percent of the total farm acreage was lost to development in Watauga County. At the same time, sixty-four percent of the County’s economy relates to tourism, which is noted to have been taken from “percentage of service receipts in the county based on hotels, motels, trailer parks, campgrounds, amusement, and recreation (based on 1972 Census of Service Industries).” When all of the examined North Carolina mountain counties are combined, during the studied period, lost farmland totals 150,000 acres or more than 27,000 farms, more than a third of the farms in these counties (The Appalachian Land Ownership Council 1983, 88).

Within the present food system there are, as Rich Allen and Ginger Harris of the USDA write, with the release of a new USDA agricultural census each five years, “new alarm bells sounded about the advancing ages of farmers and what it will mean for farm structure and farm succession” (Allen and Harris 2005). It can be chilling to fear the unsustainable nature of American agriculture, as the average age of farmers increased each year since 1978. What choices will be made within the food system to accommodate an aging farmer class? In Blue Ridge Appalachia, this is the trend since 1992. Between 1992 and 2012, the average age of farmers in Watauga County moved from 55 to 59.7 years old (“1997 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County” and “2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County”). And in Alleghany County between the same time period, the average age moved from 55.9 to 60.3 years old (“1997 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Alleghany County” and “2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Alleghany County”). One of the choices being made is the consolidation of farms. This means that the average size of farms increases, while the number of farms decreases. For instance, in Watauga County between 1992 and 1997, full time farms decreased twelve percent while the average farm size increased twenty-two percent

("1997 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County" and "2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County"). And while both the number of farms and average size of farms increased in Watauga County between 2007 and 2012, the average size far outpaced the creation of new farms (an eighteen versus a four percent increase) ("2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Watauga County"). Doing this kind of analysis and forming generalizations from it can be tricky. As Allen and Harris, as well as the other scholars previously mentioned, note a farm means many different things. For instance, "Principal farm operators of farms 49 acres in size or smaller and those with farms of 500 acres or more had average ages less than the 55.3 overall average. The highest average ages (57.0 years or higher) were for the 3 size categories between 140 and 259 acres," Allen and Harris write (2005).

Nonetheless, farm loss often has a snowball effect on the landscape. Zollinger and Krannich provide compelling documentation of farmer anxiety and arguments for community-based conservation interventions. They write: "Increased non-agricultural land use near farming operations has the potential to cause negative changes in the farming operation. Insofar as farmers perceive negative changes, satisfaction with the area as a place to farm is expected to decline. As this satisfaction decreases, the expectation of continuing the farming operation is also likely to decline" (Zollinger and Krannich 2002, 445). Or as Sharon Zukin writes, "The shift of cultural perspective prepared the way for a shift of economic perspective" (Zukin 1991, 256). The farmers' notions of place, how they perceive their barns for example, alters significantly from a place of work to a piece of capital. While they may have viewed the barns as sources for their retirement income all along, the dramatic redistribution of this value throughout the region significantly reorders the composition of the landscape. There is an irony and an opportunity within this challenge. Ann Kingsolver writes that a paradox emerges with the increase in tourism: "Enough land will have to remain both affordable and in the hands of

long-term local residents to (1) sustain the very sense of rural community that newcomers are investing in, and (2) sustain the residents—of all incomes—themselves”

(Kingsolver 2011, 146).

Tourism fuels this paradox and remains a highly valued sector of the local economy for many, like the Watauga County Economic Development Council. This group reported \$175 million in expenditures related to tourism in 2009, which resulted in a tourism-payroll of \$40 million (Watauga County EDC: Key Sectors 2015). While the region holds incredible agricultural diversity in what it produces and in the size of its farms, its farmers are rapidly aging, leading to the likelihood that farmland will continue to consolidate or be fractured into small lots due to their appeal as second-home locations. This shift radically reorganizes the landscape where first-generation farmers seek access to available farmland. While this may be a boon for some sectors of the economy, such as the service and construction industries, it calls into question whether a sovereign food system can be a part of our sustainable community if land is not set aside to farm.

Margins and Moments: Recommendations for a Reparative System

To reform the regional and national landscape, it may be beneficial to reform the federal structures that bind new farmers. In *Citizen Action and National Policy Reform: Making Change Happen*, Gaventa and McGee specifically cite the nation-state as a powerful force, quoting Houtzager and Moore: “The territorially defined nation-state today remains the only actor able to extract the vast resources from society that make possible significant distributive and redistributive policies, and the only actor capable of providing public goods on significant scale” (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 4-5). However, as it currently exists, the nation-state is a tool of neoliberalism. It is very much inhibitive to the reinstatement of small farms or diverse farms. To find spaces from which to work, Gaventa and McGee write that there are moments of “collective action,” moments when “political opportunities exist, and mobilizing structures are present, and

when issues can be framed appropriately” (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 11). One such moment occurred in 2010 as USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack spoke before Congress:

Let me suggest one idea that this committee might consider...Why not set as a goal for the 2012 Farm Bill the ability to add at least 100,000 additional farmers in the area of the small farming and commercial operations? Why not establish advisory councils in communities across the country to identify, recruit, encourage and assist young people to consider a life of farming? (Hamilton 2011, 128).

This moment represents a “political space,” an “opportunity structure” or as Grindle and Thomas define it: “Moments in which interventions or even events (that) throw up new opportunities, reconfiguring relationships between actors or bringing in new ones, and opening the possibilities for a shift in direction” (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 12). And in 2014, the Farm Bill passed after several years of congressional gridlock. The bill designated over one hundred million dollars to new farmers as well as \$72.5 million dollars to crops like vegetables and fruits and markets like farmers’ markets and regional food hubs (Williamson 2014). These initiatives build upon programs first authorized in the 2008 bill to assist new farmers, like the Transition Incentive Program which pays retiring farmers to rent their land to new farmers.

However, for real change to occur Gaventa and McGee write that these spaces are only one of three parts required for a movement to take hold and grow. These spaces operate and are “shaped by the contexts in which they are found,” which lends the spaces diversity and the operators ingenuity when forming a movement against neoliberal homogeneity, where there is no room for diversity (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 12). To cultivate these spaces, Gaventa and McGee prescribe that the agents should form “collective organizations...networks or coalitions” (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 19), as the movement gains momentum. As this occurs, specialists should be sought out, they write.

This belief differs from Daly and Cobb's disdain for specialization and Berry's belief that: The first necessary public change is simply a withdrawal of confidence from the league of specialists, officials, and corporation executives who for at least a generation have had almost exclusive charge of the problem and who have enormously enriched and empowered themselves by making it worse (Berry 1977, 219).

However, in Gaventa and McGee's strategy, the power within the political structure that they describe remains in public hands. Individuals with state-designated legitimacy must be employed by the public to lend the movement credibility as the public takes and retakes control of the system.

Gaventa and McGee write that "The framing of the issue is central to generating mobilization, to the way citizens coalesce around it and act on it, and to the overcoming of opposition" (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 25). This tactic resonates with the work of Gibson-Graham et al. And, it mirrors the emphasis behind Matthews, O'Leary, and Rex's recent work in western North Carolina, as discussed, a space layered in multiple placed values. Between September and December of 2007, the researchers completed a study of resident and visitor attitudes toward farmland and rurality in four southwestern North Carolina counties. Eight hundred residents, selected at random, completed a survey, which was also "available to visitors who subscribe to the Asheville Convention and Visitor's Bureau newsletter, representing 1,200 individual's responses (937 residents and 307 visitors) (Matthews, O'Leary, and Rex 2009). This survey complimented several area farmer focus groups.

Made available to the public through a website, the survey asked residents and visitors whether they would be "willing to make a financial contribution of any kind, even if they were not willing to pay the amount shown in the question" (Matthews, O'Leary, and Rex 2009, 15). From this question, 66.7 percent of visitors favored giving money toward conservation efforts, while only 54.3 percent of residents favored contributing. While the "Estimated Average Annual

Willingness to Pay” for each group is different, the dollar amount that each group is willing to contribute is similar. Visitors were willing to pay \$195.41, \$10.77 more than residents. This finding would have even more of an impact if the number of farmers willing to participate in such a program was also delivered in a similar quantitative manner. The study does present these attitudes through its focus group findings; however, perhaps the farmers would be interested in paying to conserve property surrounding their own farmland.

The researchers tactfully complemented this data with varied conceptions of rurality by each group, residents and visitors. For instance, 62.2 percent of resident respondents were concerned about development, while 58.4 percent of visitors were (Matthews, O’Leary, and Rex 2009, 19). The importance of this study is that it finds value in the competing benefits of the landscape. It highlights how each group interprets the same place. Matthews, O’Leary, and Rex show that each group considers farmland through a different framework: more residents view woodland as farmland than visitors and more visitors believe that “farmland provides recreation (for example, apple and pumpkin picking, horseback riding, etc.)” (Matthews, O’Leary, and Rex 2009, 6-8).

This data presents development as a challenge to sustained rurality. It pits visitors against residents, by classifying responses as it does and through its findings. Visitors perceive rurality differently than residents. Yet each group believes that rural spaces are important. The study reveals that there is a strong, even voluntary, economic incentive in maintaining farmland. And despite the opposing ideas of what a farm is, these frames should be seized upon by organizations working to preserve rural spaces and rebuild a sovereign foodshed.

The principle challenge remains to organize a radical shift in the political structure. As Coe and Mayne write, “Campaigners are increasingly recognising that securing policy change is not enough to achieve lasting and sustained changes in people’s lives” (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 29). To sustain a movement toward its goal, to make the process resilient and effective, it

should be carried out within many different spheres, public and private and locally, regionally, and nationally (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 9). Berry presents a significant indicator of this structural change by emphasizing that he sees change happening from the bottom. He also recommends policy changes, striking hard against neoliberalism through taxation. "As our present economy clearly shows, the small can survive only if the great are restrained," he wrote in 1977 (Berry 1977, 220). "To assume that ordinary citizens can compete successfully with people of wealth and with corporations as our government presently tends to do, is simply to abandon the ordinary citizen," he continues. This, he writes is just as American as independence and very much insures human sovereignty and equity. Again, Berry invokes Jefferson, "The Earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on... It is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of the state" (Berry 1977, 220).

Conclusion

Small-scale farms are flexible models that are adaptable, reparative, and hold a closer value to the resiliency of their landscape and local community than conventional large-scale farms. This matters as we acknowledge the harm that we have committed upon the earth and seek to heal our planet.

It matters as we continue to consider the challenges before emerging farmers. However, it is important to consider how a sovereign food system appears, to urge for change, and seek it out in the political spaces available to us. This can appear daunting, radical, and filled with unknowing. However, perhaps, as Ruth Levitas writes, "The solution is not to call for more and better utopias, more and better images and maps of possible futures. These will follow when we have better analyses of the present which identify possible points of intervention, paths and agents of change" (Kingsolver 2011, 147). And so, perhaps it is to best to begin with an understanding of how first-generation farmers become successful in Blue Ridge Appalachia to

invoke Wyatt Frass's "Introduction" of the Center for Rural Affairs' *Profitable Practices and Strategies for a New Generation*: "This booklet brings you the stories of people making a difference in rural America....The people we introduce you to here have the vision and courage to try something new, despite the risks. They have taken control of their fate and are working to make things better" (Frass 2002, i).

CHAPTER 3: ASPIRING FARMERS: “A SHIFT OCCURRED”

For the farmers that I interviewed, their epiphany to become farmers is directly connected with the established farmers they encountered after high school. The farmers that I interviewed would often meet these established farmers at farmers’ markets or through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements. Something in these interactions went beyond an economic transaction. The non-farmers would become hooked. They would become not just concerned with where their food derived, but would become aspiring farmers. They would spend time on established small farms as interns or apprentices, learning and naming these established farmers as mentors.

While many of farmers that I interviewed spoke of early childhood experiences living near or visiting farms, none farmed as they do now. As stated, something occurred that ignited the possibility for them to pursue sustainable agriculture as a lifestyle. This begins a similar pattern for all of them where, they then sought an education in how to be a successful farmer. They found mentors, successful farmers whom the aspiring farmers could turn to for advice and support. These relationships were often fostered within their community, a place that values a reformed food system. However, the strength and impact of their mentors occurred on the farm. What is most important to note is that the aspiring farmers were motivated and encouraged by working examples of successful sustainable agriculture enterprises. These are considered *successful* in that the farmers were making a living, mostly from their farm work and the farmers’ commitment to see others make a living from their own farms.

“Living Examples”: Introduction to Farming

Growing up alongside a farm or visiting one as a child did not singularly spur any of the farmers that I interviewed to become farmers; however, it certainly influenced their impressions of American agriculture. What did significantly influence their decision to become farmers were their interactions with small-scale farmers. They found them through a consumer-producer relationship when the would-be farmers were teenagers or young adults. The working farmers appeared to lead a life that was satisfying and complete. The would-be farmers quickly realized that they desired to join in, to become a part of the sustainable agriculture movement.

First Encounters with Agriculture

Several of the farmers that I interviewed grew up alongside working farms or have relatives who operate farms. Landowning farmers and partners, Jason Roehrig and Avery Shiloh described their earliest memories on a farm as a place of play. Roehrig said:

My grandfather was a commercial dairy farmer in Pennsylvania. Certainly my earliest memories on the farm were just playing. The only work I did there as a kid is that we would put up hay. So I would remember being up there in a wagon. There, they do a train with a tractor and a bailer, and a wagon all hooked together. I can remember, little six-year old Jason catching the bail as it shot out of the bailer. It was a sign of masculinity, manhood that I could stand there and get hit by a bail and get back up (Roehrig 2014).

Likewise, Avery stated, “The early part of my childhood was spent in an old farmhouse. Where we lived was not a part of the working farm. My parents bought the house from a man called Grandpa Brown, that’s what we called him. He had an active farm down the road. They still used the barn, and we used to play in the barn all the time. They had a rope swing” (Avery 2014).

These early experiences represent, “A lot of just playing,” as Roehrig said (2014). Jordan Johnson, a farmer who leases land, held similar experiences, stating, “These farms were not

necessarily monoculture, but very simple, not very diverse, usually a lot of land for cutting hay and raising cattle for milking. So, I can remember those places,” Johnson said, “But, you were there to deer hunt. A farm was where there were some cows to me and hopefully some woods to hunt. You didn’t really link that location with food” (Johnson 2013).

Other first-generation farmers that I interviewed spent little or no time on farms as children. Kathleen Petermann remembers her first visit to a working-reenactment homestead farm near her childhood home in Greenville, South Carolina. “I loved animals, and I definitely like romanticized it through reading the *Little House on the Prairie* books and all the horse books and all the farm kid books. That was like my thing,” she said (Petermann 2013). While aspiring farmer Tony Randolph stated:

Honestly, I had never thought about what a farm was or how food was grown until I was like a freshman in college. I guess my mom took me to Earth Fare one time. And, I started to eat healthy after that. Then, she took me to the farmers’ market. So eating good food and then meeting these down-to-earth people, making connections, piqued my interest in something that I would like to do too (Randolph 2013).

Raised in Greensboro, North Carolina, Randolph’s introduction to agriculture is very similar to the paths described by other first-generation farmers. Jordan Johnson stated, “My wife really cared about where our food came from. Not actually where it came from, but more the quality of the food. She was really big on nutrition. So, it just happened that the type of quality of fresh food that she wanted came from small scale organic farms and stuff like that, grown locally” (Randolph 2013). Johnson described the path of learning he wanted to become a farmer from starting with a small garden and raising chickens under a limited budget. “In the process of doing that, I fell in love with farming on a small scale. I was like, “This is really satisfying. This is really enjoyable. Well, this makes sense. I would rather have a job that I really like and devote my life to it, than just settle just because I need to be employed””

(Johnson 2013). Avery stated that she, too, began farming as “a step toward self-sustainability” (Avery 2014). Farming as an enterprise emerged not merely as a career choice, but represented something more. As Avery said:

I think what I originally wanted to do was to homestead. I think that this is pretty common. I don't know that I saw it as a career move, initially. I don't know what else I was going to do. I don't think I had it thought out. But, then when you land in the central part of North Carolina, you have these living examples of people making their full-time income from the farm and they're doing just fine. They're not rich, but they're doing just fine. They're making a middle-class living. And, immediately that became our goal. 'Oh, you mean we can live and work on the farm and grow our own food and not have to go into town and work and be able to do that?' That sounded way better (Avery 2014).

Likewise, Caroline Hampton became captivated with the living examples she encountered as she sought to eat local food. When she was in high school, her family took out a CSA share on a local small farm. This was Hampton's first experience with the CSA model, which allows customers to buy a farm's produce at the beginning of the season. Each customer receives a weekly box filled with different vegetables and value-added products from the farm. “It was this couple. And I think it was with that experience I was immediately taken with that lifestyle. The thing I realized is that it's beyond just a way to make money, it's a way of life. I was so immediately interested in the way that they were living” (Hampton 2014). Much like Randolph and Johnson's introduction at the farmers' market and Avery's introduction in the community where she lived, Hampton had an epiphany. She became an aspiring farmer. “I was like, 'I'll help you guys out this summer. I'll do some volunteering.' I never did get out there,” she said, “But, I really attached myself to that in my mind. That would have been my senior year in high school” (Hampton 2014).

Values: Small-scale Agriculture and Just Food Systems

Each farmer found that this choice represented his or her true self. As stated, this decision represented more than a career, but an embodiment of their values for how we should interact with the earth and each other. Scholar Neil Hamilton writes that this new generation of aspiring farmers holds a different connection with each other and the land than previous farmers have. He discusses this change, writing that new farmers hold “a commitment to organic farming, reliance on direct marketing, different views on the proper care for livestock, and less enthusiasm for new ‘silver bullet’ technologies,” compared to previous generations” (Hamilton 2011, 129). These actions represent a counterweight to what scholar Edward Cox describes as the “growing list of concerns regarding the sustainability of the current agricultural system in the United States” (Cox 2010, 369). Cox writes that “lack of access to land for beginning farmers, consumer concern over ‘factory farming,’ and a dwindling quality of life and human resources in rural communities” (Cox 2010, 370) compose pressing issues felt at-large in the United States. However, “The energy, passion, and enthusiasm shown around better food, urban agriculture, new farmers, and related issues is deep and growing,” writes Hamilton, “All share an interest in how their work with food and farming can create brighter futures for their families, for consumers, for communities, and for the nation” (Hamilton 2011, 123).

Petermann expressed this sentiment by describing how she became interested in agriculture:

My route to becoming a farmer was that I was really into farm worker justice issues and immigrant economic policy. That was really what I was thinking as far as social justice activism, an advocacy thing, but then I got more and more interested in food specifically and I think that was reading into my interest in farming. For a long time, I thought I was going to be a veterinarian. So, that was like coming back in a way. It seemed like the most appropriate combination of all of my interests, passions. I am still really passionate about

social and environmental justice activism. And, I've always loved being around animals and being outside. Farming seemed like the most justifiable way to address all the things that I'm passionate about. It seemed like the root of the world that I want to create (Petermann 2013).

Two of the farmers that I interviewed sell their produce through High Country CSA, a multi-farm CSA that offers a cost-share program for low-income families. The farmers acknowledge that the cost-share model is, as Roehrig explained, "something that appeals to us about the High Country CSA. The true reason that we do is because we can do so profitably. But, it's appealing" (Roehrig 2014), Avery continued:

Which is part of sustainability. Any way that we can find to stay profitable, stay afloat, which is profitable because we pay ourselves, but also attend to that goal of sustainability which is social justice. We think part of social justice is paying your employees and paying yourselves. And, that's part of it, but also reaching out to lower income people anyway that we can see to do it we're open to doing it (Avery 2014).

The partners also appreciate the Boone United Methodist Church's efforts to redirect unsold farmers' market produce toward local food banks. "That is incredibly valuable to us. We want that surplus to get to the people that need it," said Roehrig, "But getting to the local food bank when they're open, when they're taking stuff, it's difficult. So, it is super, super helpful for people to come to us. And, they're volunteering out of the goodness of their hearts. They're always thanking me for the produce. And, I'm like, 'You have no idea. We're grateful that someone gets it'" (Roehrig 2014).

However, the farmers that I interviewed expressed a conflict between their desire to help form a just food system and their own economic sustainability. Jordan Johnson spoke of this balance and the need for a radical transformation within our consumer behavior. He stated:

It starts with consumers. It takes a huge paradigm shift. A few years ago, I didn't care what I ate. Food was just fuel for the tank, you know, because I had to eat it because if I don't, I die. But now, I know not all food is equal and depending upon what we consume can dictate a lot of things. We need to start revaluing things, like money and status and things like that when it comes to agriculture. The type of food that I produce, I guess it could be argued that it's not accessible to all people. Being a farmer by itself is a lifestyle that takes a lot of sacrifices. I'm not going to make the types of sacrifices that I've seen other farmers make just to make food accessible. If I want to be charitable and give food to someone who genuinely needs it, I will; but, I'm not going to devalue what I produce just so it's more affordable for everybody. Because eventually, I'll go out of business (Johnson 2013).

The first-generation farmers that I interviewed are, as Johnson stated, very much aware that they represent a new model that must distinguish and redefine the existing way that we consume food. This new model is radically evident when looking at Avery and Roehrig's small farm in Wilkes County, North Carolina. While their diversified organic farm occupies a little over four acres, the average size of farms in that county were 114 acres in 2012 and an incredible majority of those farms were run by men, 905 versus 67 farms run by women (2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Wilkes County). Since moving to the area in 2008, the partners have provided a model for other emerging farmers in the area, employing farm apprentices every season.

When the farmers that I interviewed visited their local farmers' market or participated in a CSA share, they became introduced to a different form of agriculture. It was not the dominant monoculture model from which most Americans consume their food. It was something much more intimate and transformative. This experience spurred their own desire to form healthy

and just lives. However, it was through the examples of working farms that truly awakened their desire to become farmers.

Education: In the Classroom and on the Farm

The first-generation farmers that I encountered came to envision a career in agriculture after high school. To learn how to farm, each sought an on-farm internship or apprenticeship or took courses in sustainable agriculture. Many on-farm experiences derived from post-secondary sustainable-agriculture programs, which held relationships with area farmers. Eighty percent of the farmers that I interviewed took a sustainable agriculture course either at a university or a community college. And, two-thirds of the farmers hold relationships with Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development program, which is illustrative of the broad influence of the program on the local sustainable-agriculture movement and my own connection with the institution. However, for each farmer it was through their on-farm experience that they gained the technical skills to pursue agriculture. It was on the farm that they met mentors, who operated working models of successful enterprises.

Finding Working Models of Successful Enterprises

As stated earlier, the central part of North Carolina represents a community of these working models. Three of the new farmers that I interviewed moved to Blue Ridge Appalachia from the central part of the North Carolina, where, as Hampton stated, "There's a really nice farming community out in the Pittsboro, Chapel Hill, Orange County area" (Hampton 2014). Hampton grew up in this area. It is where she first encountered small-scale agriculture and where she attended UNC-Chapel Hill. Like the farmers that I interviewed, Hampton graduated with a four-year college degree. This experience afforded her the opportunity to work on a local farm. "After my freshman year of college, I decided that I wanted to look for farm work in that area," she said, "I ended up working in Orange County for a farm that is one of the forerunners of organic agriculture in that area and they are a big seller at the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

And so, that was my first time working on a farm. Right after I had had that initial experience with the CSA. This became the reason why I wanted to look into that and have that work experience” (Hampton 2014). Tony Randolph also began working on a farm in his first year of college at UNC-Greensboro. “I started volunteering on a farm in Siler City, North Carolina, which definitely caught my interests because I wanted to work outdoors with people and basically have an alternative way of learning outside of the classroom,” he said (Randolph 2013). However, unlike Hampton, Randolph left college for a brief period, saying, “The schools that I had seen doing agriculture, you weren’t able to work on a farm. You were busy with school and then you’d be able to go out and work on a farm. So, I had to quit” (Randolph 2013).

Randolph’s observation and decision conveys an important belief held by all of the farmers that I interviewed. They very much value their time spent in the classroom, learning about sustainable agriculture; however, they place a higher value on time spent with experienced farmers. After Randolph left UNC-Greensboro, he worked on a diversified farm in Hot Springs, North Carolina, for the summer and fall seasons. This immersion, living on a farm, left a powerful impression upon his desire to become a farmer, he said, “That was a lot better than the occasional going out to the farm and coming back home. I was 24-7 being a part of it” (Randolph 2013).

Post-Secondary Sustainable Agriculture Education Programs

On the mountain farm, Randolph heard about Appalachian State University’s Sustainable Development program and its teaching farm. He spoke with the program’s director and learned that students were “able to live on the farm year-in-year-out and go to school. So, I was like I’ll definitely attend college if I’m able to do that,” he said (Randolph 2013). Randolph soon moved to the farm, living and working there until he graduated with an Agroecology degree in 2014. Jordan Johnson also recently graduated with a degree in Agroecology from Appalachian State University. “I think, just going through the Sustainable Development department exposed me to

issues that I may not have given much thought had I not been in that department,” he said (Johnson 2013). But like Randolph, he places more value with his time learning alongside experienced farmers, stating:

To be honest, had I just gone through the Sustainable Development department and tried to jump into farming, I would have been in trouble because the program puts so much emphasis on theory and science and philosophy and such, which has its place—to stay committed to this, you have to believe in what you’re doing—but the question is: How do you equip these young people with the knowledge that when they leave higher education, they can go into something feeling confident? (Jordan 2013).

“It’s a good way to get some kind of connection because the professors are really involved in the local food system,” said Kathleen Petermann, also a recent ASU Agroecology graduate (Petermann 2013). “You get to hear about all the events going on. They’re really good about trying to get students out to Cove Creek Farm Heritage Day and going to the farmers’ market. That was kind of where I started,” she said (Petermann 2013). This led Petermann to an internship with Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, where she met farmers and organized a cooking demonstration booth at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market.

When Avery and Roehrig returned to the United States from serving in the Peace Corps, they sought to live in central North Carolina because Central Piedmont Community College holds a sustainable-agriculture program. “Overseas, I looked for internships on farms all over, from Georgia to North Carolina, which was probably the northern limit, all along the Appalachian Mountains. We landed in the central part of the state because of that program,” said Avery (2014). “Then, when we got there, we found out that there is a successful farming community that provides jobs for aspiring farmers. People can get paid work,” said Roehrig, continuing:

Aspiring farmers can get paid-work to learn about farming. A lot of places will do internships and that's great if you come from a background where you don't need an income to live, but it's not the situation that we were in. We couldn't do free-work. When we first got together, we had \$6,000 and a Pontiac Grand Prix with like 3 months left on the transmission. So, we wouldn't have been able to live multiple years on nothing. The paid work was important" (Roehrig 2014).

"We immediately started taking steps," Avery said, "Meaning we took business classes, because what we are are entrepreneurs, and worked for those successful farmers" (Avery 2014). As

Roehrig responded:

The community college class was important. The mentors were important. And the successful models were important. That needs to be differentiated from an instructor at an institutional farm. The community college instructor was a great grower. He was really tremendous at growing anything. But, he wasn't a businessman, which was part of the reason that he was the instructor at the farm because commercially, he wasn't going to be a successful farmer even though he had growing skills that were just unbelievable. The successful commercial farms were really critical, and when I say commercial farms I'm talking about people like us, people use commercial agriculture with a negative connotation. But, if you sell something, that's a commercial activity (Roehrig 2014).

From their experiences in a higher education setting, the first-generation farmers that I interviewed were able to develop their initial fascination with small-scale sustainable agriculture. They were able to spend their summers, in some cases, working on nearby farms, forming lasting relationships. And, they were able to better articulate why they believe sustainable agriculture is personally and systemically important. However, each, including those working and living on Appalachian State University's teaching farm, placed an incredible emphasis on their experiences working alongside seasoned growers.

Finding Mentors and Holding Internships

As each individual became more interested in food and farming, each initiated connections with established producers at their local farmers' market or with a CSA, which led the first-generation farmers to become even more involved in agriculture. Johnson stated that he would frequently ask farmers questions at the market about best practices for his garden (Johnson 2013). And through a summer internship with Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, Petermann began coordinating cooking demonstrations with local food at the Watauga County Farmers' Market (Petermann 2013). "I was contacting farmers every week and sourcing stuff from them and doing pickups and stuff," Petermann said, "So, I could at least put faces with names and learn a little bit about what they're doing and where they're located." For Johnson, these connections led to a mentorship relationship with Avery and Roehrig (Johnson 2013). "They have a small scale, diversified organic farm. And, I worked there a couple years ago as an internship slash job to get college credits and to get some more hands-on experience in crop production. So anytime I have a question, about crop production, I call them," said Johnson.

This very much differs from Hampton's path to finding her mentors. After college, she became connected to an on-farm apprenticeship and subsequent mentorship through the internet. "I had moved to Chicago and was looking for something new after college," she said, "I had thought about doing urban ag stuff in Chicago and there actually is a good urban ag movement there, but mostly it is volunteer based. And, I got there in the winter so it was a bad time. I immediately began looking for something different. I began looking at different websites and Good Food Jobs was where I ended up finding this particular farm in rural Minnesota" (Hampton 2014).

After spending a growing season on this Minnesota farm, Hampton still holds an intense relationship with her mentors, just as the other first-generation farmers described. "They are probably the biggest mentors to me and the people who really solidified it for me that I wanted

to do this as a career. It was actually the second time that I worked on a farm,” she said, “After I graduated from UNC in 2011, in 2012 from May to October, I worked for this couple because they have a pretty short growing season in Minnesota. That was even more intensive because I was there for the whole season. I was just really immersed in what we were doing” (Hampton 2014). This experience had a profound impact upon Hampton. She continued:

All three of us farm workers that season ended up pursuing agriculture in different ways. I think my mentors on this farm in Minnesota have had that influence on a lot of people. They’re in their early 30s and come from the same background, being people, who were not in a farming background growing up, but started to do that in their 20s, coming out of a liberal arts college education. And they’ve become very successful. So, they’re one of the people that I really think of as someone that I’d want to model myself on. And, they’re the ones that I’ve gone to with my questions the most. Though certainly anyone that I’ve worked for would certainly be willing to do that for me (Hampton 2014).

While Johnson and Hampton held internships or apprenticeships with small farms, noting that this directly influenced their decision to become farmers, Petermann has not held one. Instead, she participated in the Farmer Incubator and Grower (FIG) project as one of its first aspiring farmers. Located in Watauga County, this program seeks to provide a space for aspiring farmers to discern whether they would like to become farmers. A limited number of participants work small plots alongside each other, sharing infrastructure, and leasing land together. Petermann took over an open FIG project slot after a friend found a farming opportunity in another region (Petermann 2014). “I kind of regret not doing an internship,” she said, “I’ve never worked with anyone else to see through a season. I’ve only done the FIG thing and that was sort of bookended by school, and so the entry in and entry out were choppy.” As she assumes stewardship over a working farm, which also operates as a nonprofit-educational farm, she stated, “I could still work with someone else and see what they do. I’d like to gain that

experience I think. And probably if the current farmer was staying up here, I would do that sort of thing: live with her and work with her, just to see the ins and outs, like I think I have an intuitive sense of things, but I've never seen it done."

As someone who has had a farm for multiple years, Johnson hosted interns during this last season; however, "It's something that I need to think about over the winter," he said in the fall of 2013 (Johnson 2013). "Because it didn't really work this year. To be honest, I think there's a lot of people, not just young people, older people too, who have a very romantic notion of what farming is and they approach it really idealistically," he said (Johnson 2013). To form a more realistic understanding of what an internship and a farming lifestyle's expectations would be, Johnson said that he would ask future interns questions like, "Where do you spend the bulk of your money, you know, without making someone feel uncomfortable. Or, how do you react to adversity, how do you react to hardship? Because, I mean, you just have to expect it (Johnson 2013).

Hampton also stated that she "would like to know whether aspiring farmers have had any practical experience. It's interesting and cool to me that there are a lot of schools out there that offer an education-based, sometimes a major program within a college, for doing sustainable agriculture. But, I think having relevant experience on a market farm if that is what you're trying to do is necessary for wanting to go into farming" (Hampton 2014). Furthermore, she notes that she would like to have more experience on the "financial side" or in running a small business. This becomes very important, she said, as she considers how and where to market her product and manage interns or employees. "Especially, financially and also knowing how many jobs are rolled into running a farm," she said, "You know when you're running a small farm, you're going to be running a small business" (Hampton 2014).

As previously stated, when Avery and Roehrig moved to central North Carolina, they became immersed in a well-developed small-scale sustainable-agriculture community. Small

scale and sustainable agriculture complement each other in this community, they found.

“People were making a living off relatively small acreage was our model,” a sustainable model, Avery said, “Because we didn’t have land, we knew we weren’t going to be farming a hundred acres because we couldn’t buy a hundred acres” (Avery 2014). Roehrig added: “Right, coming up with a million bucks to buy a 150-acre operation in North Carolina, we just knew that we were never going to see a million bucks” (Roehrig 2014). And so, the partners were able to model their farm on the farms that they worked with in the area as paid farm workers.

“Working for farmers was super valuable. In fact, a lot of what our farm looks like, a lot of our systems, looks like the farm that I worked for because that was direct,” said Avery, “I did it on his farm, that’s what I learned how to do, and that’s what we do. And, it’s not bad to emulate those successful ones. And, then a lot of trial and error too. Isn’t that the process of becoming a farmer?” (Avery 2014).

In regards to sustainability, Avery and Roehrig very much consider themselves a part of a movement. For instance, they identify groups that began farming in central North Carolina at different time periods, each progressing, coming before and after them. Roehrig said, “We had a cohort of folks who entered into the Pittsboro sustainable farming community at the same time that we did. A lot of those people are farming now. And then, there are people who came to Pittsboro after us are farming now” (Roehrig 2014). Now as residents in a new community, with its own first-generation farmers (who represent different stages), they would like this pattern to continue by, “demonstrating a model where two people who didn’t have anything could make it work,” said Avery (2014).

This mirrors the mentor example that Hampton found so intense when she worked in Minnesota and why Johnson still considers Avery and Roehrig mentors as he develops his own systems on leased land. Hampton, Johnson, and Avery and Roehrig all found stability in the previous generation’s place as small-scale farmers. “They were the pioneers, so they were out

there like figuring it out for us,” said Avery of the mentors they found in Chatham County. “Why were they more successful than other farmers of their generation?” she asked, “Maybe perseverance and probably when they were starting out, a willingness to suffer through it, live on nothing” (Avery 2014). To which Roehrig added:

One characteristic of the people that I would say is that they didn’t have something to fall back on. Like farming is too much work to do it if you have an easier option. So a lot of people who get in and get back out in a few years, one of the reasons that maybe they do is because they didn’t have the die-hard this is what I have to do or maybe they had an off-farm job and it’s easier to not get up at 4 o’clock on a Saturday morning to go to the farmers market. Maybe it’s easier to have an off-farm job and take care of things that way. And, the two people that I’m most familiar with had a very competitive personality. They’re going to win at farming if that’s something that they can do. Super open loving people, but they’re not going to fail at anything ever. I play cards with them, it’s a cutthroat group in certain respects (Roehrig 2014).

“In certain respects,” Avery responded:

They’re very open with information. We still borrow equipment from them, and they’re willing to help us out. It’s some kind of like striving to be the best at what they do. And that probably would be true of anything they do besides farming. But, people get into farming because of some kind of independent spirit. And, people that get into this kind of farming definitely have an entrepreneurial spirit, and they want to run their own show. Smart people (Avery 2014).

Avery and Roehrig’s mentors taught them how to run a successful business, something that they are very willing to show other first-generation farmers. Furthermore, they took business courses and “We did some practice farming, where it was low-risk, we borrowed equipment and borrowed land essentially and did a half-acre and did a mini-farming operation

and went to the farmers' market. That allowed us to get some real numbers to plug into our business plan and test out different marketing strategies to see what suited us. That was invaluable," Avery stated (2014). And, they continue to seek out resources from that community, despite living several hours away. "We're still tapped into the community in the central part of the state, our mentor farmers. Definitely we turn there," she said, "There's a listserv that's started by the extension agent there for sustainable and small farms. I get that and I can pose questions to that. The web is a vast resource" (Avery 2014).

For Randolph, his experience living and working on two small-scale farms in western North Carolina allowed him to better understand the challenges before first-generation farmers. "I would see the farmers worn out. There's a lot of stresses too. Some of it's stress and some of it's the physical labor part of it" (Randolph 2013). As he continues to work with experienced farmers, he would like to seek out more alternative-farming models to "learn from those mistakes early, to not get in the same ruts, like diversifying too much, while at the same time doing it on your own, owning everything." He stated that he's interested in holding an off-farm job and gradually becoming a farmer, saving money and eventually trading a non-farm job for a farming lifestyle, as he's seen farmers do. He's also interested in holding cooperative relationships with other farmers, whether in landholding or in equipment investments, and learning more about storage crops, like grain instead of high quality vegetables, which he said is the predominant growing model for emerging sustainable farmers. "If you can get advice you should take it," Randolph said, "because we've all made mistakes and that's bound to happen, but it's nice to skip a few steps and ask them for advice what mistakes they've made" (Randolph 2013).

Aspiring Farmer Conclusions

The first-generation farmers that I interviewed described a community of supportive and experienced growers. They found individuals open to sharing their knowledge, their scars and

triumphs. And while Avery and Roehrig have only farmed in western North Carolina since 2008, they represent a clear example for newer farmers in this area. They own their own land, have installed significant infrastructure, sell their produce to multiple markets, pay their farm workers, and work full-time on their farm. “I think that we’re most proud of the fact that we make our entire living off of the farm because that’s so rare and that’s something that distinguishes us,” said Avery, “Also that we pay our employees. It’s not like they’re making a lot, but they are making eight bucks an hour and living on the farm so they don’t have expenses and there’s no rent or utilities or anything. There’s probably a difference, but I hear us saying that a lot, “That we’re a hundred percent full time farmers” (Avery 2014).

They feel like a farming community is building around them, working the land as they are and much like they saw as new farmers in central North Carolina. “It’s definitely more rapid there than it is here,” Avery said (2014). “There isn’t a critical mass of successful operations in this area (northwestern North Carolina) to give people the model of what a successful operation looks like,” Roehrig added, “But at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market, when we first got here there was very, very little competition. But now, there’s probably eight or ten fairly serious vegetable vendors at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market where, I would have said that when we first looked at it seven or eight years ago there was maybe one if you added up a couple of folks who were like serious vegetable dealers” (Roehrig 2014).

When I spoke with Avery and Roehrig about the impact that their mentors had on their own development as first-generation farmers, they very much emphasized their own commitment to forming a successful sustainable-agriculture community in Blue Ridge Appalachia. For them and the other farmers that I interviewed, they each believed that they were a part of a radically different movement than the dominant food system. They operate small parcels, grow many different varieties of vegetables, incorporate animals into their enterprises, and sell directly to consumers who value knowing where their food derives. While

this alternative form of agriculture is prevalent in other places, their actions are very much informed and propelled by social networks, encouraged by Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development program, the Watauga County Farmers' Market, and area extension agencies and nonprofits. For instance, having just moved to the area, Hampton stated, "I've been really amazed, being around here so far. Anyone that you introduce yourself to and explain what you're trying to do, they're really willing to try and give you help" (Hampton 2014). Furthermore, within this welcoming environment, they found mentors. These relationships were underpinned by the sustainable agriculture farmers' shared values concerning the earth and social justice.

CHAPTER 4: BEGINNING FARMERS: FINDING LAND AND FINANCING A FARM

When Matt Cooper began growing his own food in the North Carolina mountains, he began to realize, “This is really fun. I’m going to do as much of this as I possibly can,” he said (Cooper 2014). His garden developed into a desire to become a farmer. He farmed for others, and then sought to have his own enterprise. When he did so, Cooper transitioned from an aspiring farmer to a beginning farmer. This change allowed him to make decisions about how he would farm, but it also required him to acquire his own land.

The farmers that I interviewed often acknowledged this challenge and their desire to form their own home place in Blue Ridge Appalachia. This desire first appeared in their decision to grow their own food and to become self-sufficient. It then appeared as they sought to acquire land, where they could install significant infrastructure and perennial plants. All of the farmers that I interviewed followed this path, although some are further along than others. At the time of our conversations, five worked or interned for other farmers, growing their own food or engaging in self-sufficiency activities. Four operated their own enterprises on rented or leased land, making their own decisions about what to produce and how to market their produce. And three owned their own land and were, at the time of our conversations, considering how to make their farm more sustainable as they aged.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a lack of education or network of mentors represents a significant barrier. So, too, is finding land to farm and forming the cultural, economic, and social capital that is often required to do so. How the farmers that I spoke with acquired access to land is a discussion of their strategies to acquire economic and social capital in a new community. None of them were born in northwestern North Carolina, all having moved

to the area after high school. Yet all of them wish to own land and farm their own space in this area. What follows are examples of how these individuals found land to lease or own and financed their ability to farm.

Finding Land to Lease

Each of the farmers who leased land in the High Country, came upon the land through personal connections. While each held different conversations with their landlords, all formed agreements—spoken or written—where they described their farm plans and how much they would pay for the use of the land. Each relationship evolved differently. Some landowners held different expectations than the farmers. Other relationships were more cohesive. However, in each leased-land circumstance, the farmer treated the farm as a temporary situation with the eventual goal of owning his or her own land. They very much understood this period as a trial where they would develop their niches and markets; they would learn how to farm on their own.

Incubator Farms

As Jordan Johnson held an internship with a farm in a neighboring county and finished his degree, he sought to find a farm, understanding that the largest challenge ahead of him was land acquisition (Johnson 2013). He knew his neighbor held land and “The relationship was fostered simply because that gentlemen was my neighbor, and I felt comfortable enough knowing him to approach him to just kind of give him a broad idea of what I was hoping to do and see if he couldn’t make available some land for me to be able to lease or rent.” His neighbor showed him some land near their homes the next week. “We didn’t get into the specifics of how this relationship would work, but he said, ‘I’m not using this here, but I am using this; you think you could use it?’ And, I’m like, ‘Yeah, sure.’” Johnson then created a contract, “laying out each other’s responsibilities and what we expected from each other” (Johnson 2013).

He considers this property his “incubator farm.” He has been able to add infrastructure, such as a high tunnel and a greenhouse, as well as experiment with different crops and livestock rotation methods. “The farm is not mine per-say. It’s really somebody else’s property that they’re letting me use,” Johnson said, “Other than labor, I don’t have a lot invested in this land. I don’t have a mortgage riding over my head. So, the landowner has been really generous” (Johnson 2013).

Johnson’s path is not unique in how he sees the land he now farms. “The long term goal is to acquire my own property,” he said, “So, I can make those permanent investments into it that I’m realizing are really important if you want your farming enterprise to survive. But, I don’t know what the future of this property holds. While I’m on it, I’m just trying to steward it well and make it as productive as I’m allowed to, you know” (Johnson 2013). He is also not unique in how he acquired access to it. The first-generation farmers that I interviewed all held previous relationships with individuals who lent them land to either lease or borrow. And each who now farms under their own farm name, began on someone else’s property which, they each treated as an incubator farm. Some of these relationships, like Johnson’s, were formed from spending time in the community, others emerged through their mentors, others were relatives.

After returning from New Zealand, where he spent time WWOOFing, Matt Cooper started a community garden in Boone (Cooper 2014). “Then, I eventually propelled myself where I found a little land to utilize. Since then, I’ve been on the same track,” he said. Cooper recently bought his own farm, continues to lease land adjacent to the FIG Project, serving as a mentor, and is president of the Watauga County Farmers’ Market. However, he first began farming on a $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre tract in Boone that belonged to his wife’s relatives, treating the parcel as his incubator farm. “That agreement and relationship fell through,” he stated, “the agreement was just verbal, basically we’d work together and split everything in half.” After the first year, Cooper approached the landowner again:

I did my homework. I tried to negotiate. I said, "Here's how much an acre of land leases for, here's how much you hire someone to use a tractor." Basically, I had a total of \$1,200 that I would owe them after a season's over, an estimate. And, they were like, "Naw, we still want half." And, I'm like, "That's pointless. I'd work at \$4 an hour if I do that." They would not budge (Cooper 2014).

He then learned of land made available by the Valle Crucis Conference Center, which Maverick Farms also tended and sought to create the FIG Project on.

"The agreement with the church was simple. They just charge 300 bucks for an acre, at least this acre, and I just pay them when I can in the season," he stated, "They're very flexible. And now, I lease an acre and a half from them and the story carries on" (Cooper 2014). He has farmed this property for six years, growing vegetables. While Cooper does not hold a contract with the Conference Center, he feels comfortable in his relationship with his current landlord. "The church is just solid. I don't need to worry about them kicking me out," he said, "If I was just using some random person's land, yeah I would want to have a contract." And, since he's developed a relationship with the group, they allowed him to enlarge his operation:

I worked in that one acre the first year and I knew that I wasn't ready to expand. In my second year, I did really well. I can't remember whether if it was in my second or third year, where I requested an expansion. I did know that there was a level of having to prove myself. I knew that I'd done enough of my responsibility. Now, let me knock on their door and see where they're at. And, they were fully welcoming. As long as you're productive, they have land to share. I knew that I needed access to more than one acre if I'm going to pull this off. I've heard stories of other folks doing it on one acre and I think it takes probably several more years than I've been doing it but, getting access to more land was also appealing to me (Cooper 2014).

Cooper has since transitioned to even more land, recently buying a nearby farm. However, being able to farm on the Valle Crucis property allowed him the opportunity to explore different markets and crops and develop relationships within the community. Of the individuals that I interviewed, several began farming in this specific small community, often because of their relationship with Maverick Farms.

Farm Incubator and Grower (FIG) Project

“After the third year,” Cooper stated, “I started to hear through the grapevine that ASU got 300 acres and that they would be moving. Maverick Farms had the idea that one of the flaws in our area was that there wasn’t a lot of access to good land. They started talking with someone at ASU, who liked the vision of the FIG idea” (Cooper 2014). Now, Cooper serves as a mentor for FIG, assisting new farmers to become more successful. “We are giving access to new farmers and to farmers who may know what they’re doing, but don’t have access to land or lost access to land,” he said, “The twist for me is that now I have my own land, which is beautiful because I don’t need all of this. Now, I can free up this land that I’ve been utilizing. Just see how this year goes. If it’s too energy draining, I can pass it over because I don’t need to farm it. It’s not my land. I’ve got my land.”

Caroline Hampton is one of the FIG farmers that may succeed Cooper on the leased land. Together and with the other FIG participants, they grow potatoes and winter squash on a small plot of land between Cooper’s acres and the FIG parcel. She, too, spoke of her experience farming on land owned by the Valle Crucis Conference Center and her plans for the future. “I would like to stay at FIG for at least another season after this year,” she stated (Hampton 2014). “I’ll have to see if that’s a good fit for me. My mentor at FIG has a lot of connections and knows of people who have offered him an acre at this place and an acre at that place. And, the Valle Crucis Conference Center has more land if they see that we’re being productive with what we have right now.”

As she works within the FIG model and considers finding her own land, Hampton values the connections that the organization brings within the community (Hampton 2014). “I think that it might be really beneficial to me to continue with FIG. Working with FIG might offer some other places to get onto land to start doing something off of the FIG site, which might be a graduation within the program.” Like Cooper, Hampton learned of Valle Crucis through Maverick Farms, stating:

Finding out about the FIG Farm is kind of a funny coincidence of a lot of things. I was apprenticing in the fall of 2013 for the Center for Environmental Farming Systems in Goldsboro, North Carolina, at their small farm, as an educational apprentice. I had been thinking that this would be my final apprenticeship. Because I felt at that point I was trying to get enough education for myself. I didn’t want to work for anyone else any more. So, I was thinking my next step was to try and find a way to do a little something this year. And move to western North Carolina in the next couple years. While I was at CEFS, we wanted to take a western North Carolina agricultural tour. I ended up looking for places to go and visit, like the ASU student farm and Maverick Farms. We found FIG farm through that. It ended up that the person at Maverick Farms had been the maid-of-honor of a friend of mine’s wedding that I had been to in September. It had ended up being this big coincidence of things (Hampton 2014).

Learning that there was an opening at FIG for new farmers, Hampton accelerated her move to become a farmer. By being accepted into FIG, this shared model allowed her to forgo purchasing big capital items like a tractor, a greenhouse, a cold storage, or wash station. “If I had to pay for all those things,” she stated, “I’m unsure of how much it would cost. Quite a bit.”

Kathleen Petermann’s path to becoming a farm manager, farming under her own name, echoes Cooper and Hampton’s as she too participated in the FIG program (Petermann 2013). It is also, like many of those that I interviewed, due to the close ties she held with a mentor. In the

spring of 2012, she assumed a position with FIG after a friend left the region, leaving her seeds to use on the property. FIG operates under a commons-plot system, where participants grow mixed vegetables, herbs, and flowers. The program, begun by Maverick Farms in 2012, allowed her the opportunity to first experience how she could grow food commercially. As she continued to develop a relationship with FIG and Maverick Farms, she was approached to become the farm manager of Maverick Farms for the 2014 season, under her own farm name, Waxwing Farm. Petermann described her ties with these individuals as “definitely a friendship. I think we have a lot of mutual interests and passions too. So for this particular situation, it was really important to have a close personal connection” (Petermann 2013). Where Petermann farms is also where she lives, which differentiates her from the other farmers who lease or borrow land. Holding a close relationship with the previous farmer and landowner was important to her, and as Petermann stated, made the transition easier. “There’s a lot of talk about what I expect from them because it’s their place and their house; like how involved she is going to be and what I can rely on her in terms of advice or help, what the communication strategy is going to be like,” Petermann explained (2013).

From these conversations, Petermann stated that she’s “really excited to have someone to help me plan the season. It is really good to have someone who is really experienced with the land before just jumping in. I can’t imagine not having that conversation if you have access to that conversation, so that you can inherit it and treat it well” (Petermann 2013).

Johnson, Cooper, and Peterman all held conversations with their landlords about the use of their land. From these conversations, trust emerges or, like Cooper on his initial parcel, it does not. Farmers hold a strong reputation within the community because the community values its agricultural history, holding land as an incubator farm to establish a presence can prove beneficial when searching for access to land. This occurred for these three farmers. As Johnson stated:

I think the reason that the landowner made this land available is because he understood that, you know, getting out of school, he saw that I wasn't a very idealistic person, I had a work ethic, I was really interested and passionate about what I wanted to do. And, the only thing that I needed to make that dream a reality was land. And so, he is kind of just letting me utilize it, almost as if it's my own land. It's a pretty good relationship (Johnson 2013).

Without knowing the landowner and being about to have conversations with him about Johnson's vision, he doubts that the landowner would have made the land available. "If I was a stranger," Johnson stated, "the landowner wouldn't know, he wouldn't care what I was interested in, simply because he wouldn't know. But, because we had a relationship, and it wasn't a deep or anything like that—he trusted me and saw that I was genuinely interested in what I was pursuing" (Johnson 2013). Likewise, Petermann stated that, "I hope farming on Maverick's property is a springboard for me to finding a permanent place because I'll get to meet more people and see those connections being made. Hopefully through those connections, I'll be able to find my place" (Petermann 2013).

Finding Land to Own

Each of the three first-generation farmers who owned land that I interviewed emphasized the time and energy that they had spent searching. Initially, they all leased land in western North Carolina, establishing networks and becoming familiar with the area, scanning any available lead, for at least two years. They felt drawn to the area and knew that they wanted to stay. "I went to school in Kentucky and I fell in love with Appalachia. I always wanted to be back in southern Appalachia," said Shiloh Avery (Avery 2014). "We were living in Pittsboro, looking online at real estate purchases," stated Jason Roehrig, her partner, he continued:

If we found something that looked promising, we would call a realtor and arrange a visit. And in ten days, some property would sell in that interval, just because that was

how property was at the time. And, sometimes we would schedule the trip and come out here and it would be totally worthless land that didn't have the attributes that we wanted. At some point, we realized it totally wasn't working (Roehrig 2014).

During this time, they farmed in Chatham County. "We got there in 2002 and we moved to Granite Falls, North Carolina, in 2007, five years longer than we meant to say," said Avery, "Jason had a job, we got a practice farm, and we thought we would directly move onto land that we bought. But, it took us longer than we thought. It took us three years to look for land. It took us a lot longer to find land in an amount that we could afford. It was being snapped up" (Avery 2014).

"We needed to move out here and just rent some place until we could find land, Avery stated, "And so, we did. We moved to Granite Falls. We actually started working on a land deal there. We spent six months working on a land deal there. The guy felt that there were too much capital gains taxes that he was going to have to pay" (Avery 2014). "We were like, 'You could charge us a lot less and wouldn't have to pay as many taxes,'" Roehrig followed (2014). The couple then pursued a new lead near their rental property in Granite Falls, when they found their dream farm:

We were working on a land deal that was actually across the street, different owners. We were going to buy a little seven hundred square foot house that we were living in at the time, which happened to be for sale, too, but with different owners. We were six months into that deal, and they threw some crazy restrictions on there. So we walked away. Then within ten days, we saw a new property in the paper. This one was actually on the market, with a realtor, listed. We drove out to the property, put one foot on, and said, "We are home. If that creek doesn't flood, we are home," is what we said I think. We knocked on the neighbor's door, and I guess they reassured us that the creek doesn't flood that often (Roehrig 2014).

This path mirrors challenges experienced by Matt Cooper when he sought to find farm land to purchase. “My wife and I sold our house that we had two years ago,” he said, “Then, for the past two years, every single week, we looked at places. For the last year, we looked every single day, using every single avenue looking for land or homes to buy. We travelled to Ashe County, all over Watauga, a little bit of Avery” (Cooper 2014). Like Avery and Roehrig, Cooper used his established networks and stressed the patience required. “We found it through our own hard work, diligent, every single night, going through the frustrations of are these pictures deceiving again or are they not because almost every single picture in the MLS is deceiving,” he said (Cooper 2014). “None of those other two deals that we spent a year on were like traditional,” Avery said, “We put an ad out in the paper or we wrote the landowner, all this crazy stuff to find land” (Avery 2014).

When searching for land, all of the first-generation farmers considered the attributes of the property. “We visualized and drew out on paper what we wanted,” Cooper said, “And we got it man. We honestly have a picture. We have it framed. It shows the pasture, the springs. We have it all. We even wrote that we wanted a good neighbor. We have a farmer neighbor who has equipment and shares it with us. It’s far out” (Cooper 2014).

Avery and Roehrig also made a list of qualities that they searched for in a property. “People would totally sell you fifteen or twenty acres in the mountains. And, they would tell you that it’s flat and you would get there and not be able to stand up on this. The people had a totally different perspective on flat land from what we had,” said Roehrig (2014). “We wanted enough flatish, more or less, tillable land. We thought three or four acres,” said Avery (2014). They also considered other attributes:

When we got serious about a piece of land, we brought out a tape measure and laid out where we thought we could fit our fields. Then if we could find good soil, that’s great and we ended up with really good soil. We were serious about those two land deals the

place that we ended up with had pretty good soil, one place had a water issue. So, water. One of the big reasons we were so excited about this land is that it had an existing well with a really good refill rate. It's like thirty gallons per minute or something like that. So, that is a big plus. If you don't have an existing well, being able to see surface water is good because you know you're going to have to irrigate. That's important. We get enough rain over the course of the year, but it doesn't come when you need it. We've definitely seen people who buy land that doesn't have water on it, put in the well and not get what they need. A water source. Good soil. You can have lesser soil, but just starting out, having forgiving soil is a good thing. And then, flat, cleared, not that clearing land is not an option, but we really wanted it to be cleared (Avery 2014).

"That was really an environmental consideration, we didn't feel like we needed to clear forest because there's already enough cleared land out there," followed Roehrig (2014). "Then the other thing would be distance to market. We knew Boone would be our primary market, but we wanted to be down off the mountain to have a seasonal advantage. We targeted Caldwell almost exclusively and we weren't ruling out Wilkes, which is further from our secondary market, Hickory, but the same distance to Boone," said Avery (2014). The metrics that Avery and Roehrig used to evaluate their current farm site ranged from soil conditions to potential markets. This required a significant amount of time, searching for the best property. It also required a significant amount of experience, begun when they were working with more experienced farmers, to know what to look for in a potential farm site and how the land impacts different aspects of a farm enterprise.

Financing a Farm

Each farmer that I interviewed implemented similar strategies toward initially financing their "farming habit," as Caroline Hampton put it (2014). All held second-jobs to build confidence and capital. Several applied for grants to fund infrastructure improvements. And

those that purchased land did so with a mortgage. “When I got out of the military, I had some money saved up that I was hoping to use to buy land with,” stated Johnson, “I realized that if I was going to stay here, I was never going to be able to save up enough to pay cash for a piece of property. So, let me take that money to invest it in capital to have a small farm. It takes money to get this thing started” (Johnson 2013).

Flexibility and Thrift

At the time of our interview, Petermann prepared to become a farm manager and considered what resources existed in the current operation and the immediate expectations that would be placed upon her (Petermann 2013). For example, she expected to invest \$600 in seeds and plants. While there is infrastructure on the property, she needed to find investments for the coming season. As each farmer that I interviewed held internships or close relationships with experienced farmers, each carefully estimated how much startup capital was required.

However, none fully knew what this amount would be and thought of this first year, and first few years, as a trial period. Considering his own incubator farm, Johnson stated that one of the benefits of leasing land is:

You’re able to do a lot more experimenting as you’re establishing a system. This is only my second year farming full-time. And, I’m still learning a lot. There’s a pretty steep learning curve when you don’t come from a farming background. So, this type of setup is good for me because I’m learning what I like to do, what I don’t like to do, what’s profitable, what’s not, how to most efficiently and effectively manage the land, and run a viable farming operation. And again, there’s not as much risk as if I owned the land (Johnson 2013).

However, he stressed saving, “You just have to be very thrifty and very, a real good steward of your funds. So, when spring does roll around, you’re not broke. CSAs are also a great way, and probably the most realistic way, that farmers can get start-up capital at the beginning of a

season” (Johnson 2013). When asked what questions he would have for a person interested in becoming a farmer, he responded:

I would probably ask these people questions about how they will react to hardships and maybe, how they manage their money. That’s pretty important because, again, you’ve got to be very thrifty if you’re going to be a farmer. It’s a lot of hard work with very little monetary return. So, I would probably try to ask them questions like, “Where do you spend the bulk of your money?” You know, without making someone feel uncomfortable. I’d try to say, “How much money do you need to survive each month, each week?” (Johnson 2013).

Johnson’s thoughts mirror his mentors’, Avery and Roehrig, as Johnson, too, wants to form an example: “I want to create a model to show people, that will hopefully inspire people” (Johnson 2013).

Grants

Grants represent a complicated financing option for many beginning farmers. “I try to avoid grants at all costs,” Johnson stated, “Not that there’s anything wrong with them; however, a farm is a business and you have to run it like it’s a business. That’s what I’m trying to do on this farm” (Johnson 2013). Johnson believes that grants are unsustainable. “I don’t want to be a hypocrite,” he said, “I received a grant since I started this operation, which helped me get a hoop house, allowing me to grow tomatoes in an area where it’s really hard to grow tomatoes.”

Hampton is similarly placed on an incubator farm; however, she shares many of the resources available to her. This presents a different challenge and opportunity for her when she considers available grants. “I’ve been thinking about how to make people care about my farm as an individual, versus trying to make people care about what FIG is doing,” she said, “I think there are some good ways to procure resources as far as FIG Farm. I’m looking at grants, so that we could possibly build a hoop house out here, which could be so beneficial. I would only have

use of it for a few years and then other people would have use of it, but I would have the experience of being involved with that project in building a hoop house” (Hampton 2014).

Avery and Roehrig provide the most unique example in the diversity of funding sources that they seek out. For instance, they recently received a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve their drainage ditch. “They don’t like to call them drainage ditches, but grass waterways,” Avery said, “The NRCS was a huge, huge life saver last year. We’re this little, tiny farm. We thought we were crazy. We had this giant equipment out here to fix them” (Avery 2014). “The NRCS paid like eighty percent of the cost,” Roehrig followed, “We had to come out with some money out of our pocket to pay for it. And, we were like what are we doing?” (Roehrig 2014). “Then the next year, maybe in August, we watched those things work,” Avery said, “That’s why we did it, thank goodness. Then we had this year where it rained a lot, which would have been much much worse” (Avery 2014). They have also received grant funding for other infrastructure improvements, like a fourth high tunnel. “If it’s out there, we’ll take advantage of it,” Avery said (2014). “We keep our eyes open,” Roehrig responded. However, for one of their high tunnels, they received a loan from a bank. “That was a bank where we were primarily doing our banking,” Roehrig said, “And, we actually had the cash flow that they could see that we could pay it, just on our cash flow” (Roehrig 2014). Avery followed, “We made this little enterprise budget plan thing. It was beautiful” (Avery 2014). “They didn’t care, they just saw that historically we had the money to pay it back,” added Roehrig (2014).

Community Investments

To begin farming, each person that I interviewed noted that startup loans from a bank were not an option because they lacked experience farming their own land. This required the farmers to seek out unique investment strategies, which frequently relied upon their social networks. Roehrig explained their strategy:

We had some savings. Shiloh and I both worked off the farm, starting in 2002 and then we bought this place in 2007 and during that period we were saving money, primarily using those savings to put a down payment on the land. That money went to the land and then the mortgage made up the rest of that for the land. The irrigation, the tractor, the buildings, the seed trays that we plant our crops into, we raised money from share holders. Initially, I think we had ten share holders including myself and Shiloh that all bought into the farming operation. And, those were friends and family, investing primarily because they wanted us to be successful. They had a fair amount of trust that we would pay them back. They knew that we would do our best to pay them back and they were not investing money that they couldn't afford to lose. Nobody was so in, except for us, that they were desperately needing this to be successful. And, this was a little bit before the crowd funding method began to pop. Shiloh's former mentor used this system to get the cash to start their operation. It's not debt because we're under no legal obligation to pay that back. That equity, that money. If you consider that debt, then we're under a much heavier debt load. I think we're down to six partners now. We've managed to acquire the shares of several of our partners. Our goal is buy out any of those partners that would like to be bought out. Some of those partners will take those shares to their death because they don't really care whether they get the money back. But, we want to buy out anyone who wants to be bought out (Roehrig 2014).

This method parallels the crowd-sourcing method Hampton used to begin farming. In January of 2014, Hampton initiated an Indiegogo campaign to raise \$5,000 through the online platform (Hampton 2014). Anyone who visited the website could watch a video to learn about Hampton, her new farm venture, and the reasons why they should invest in her project. And, as Indiegogo limits project periods to only a few weeks, the short time frame energizes participants to rally contributors to their cause.

“My vision for the future is a world of local communities that are self-reliant, providing for their own basic needs within their community,” she wrote on her website page, “To me, this is real sustainability, and what I am working towards as a small farmer. I also feel passionately about the health benefits of eating fresh vegetables, and I want to educate consumers about the produce I grow, and what is special about the way that I grow it” (Hampton 2014). Hampton’s appeal for funds fit her place in a new community and a public interested in funding sustainable agriculture projects. Lacking an extensive social network in northwestern North Carolina, the web platform allowed her to solicit funds from other locations. “I think there’s an interest in sustainable agriculture,” she said, “But in the end, it’s really not that sexy of a cause and people are not that interested in supporting it as a basis of not knowing you as a stranger. Most of my donations have come from people that I know” (Hampton 2014). From this campaign, Hampton was able to raise \$5,288 from 129 individuals. To reward contributors, she offered items for different giving levels, ranging from a “thank you” to an herb bouquet to a weekend at Maverick Farms. However, as she knew many of the contributors, they viewed the cause as an investment, similar to the equity investors that Avery and Roehrig utilized.

The amount raised through Hampton’s campaign matches what she planned her farm’s startup costs would be: \$5,000 (Hampton 2014). This includes \$800 for seeds, \$600 for rent at FIG, a little over \$500 for a booth at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market (which she shares with Petermann). It also includes: row covers, organic pesticides and insecticidal soap, compost, potting mix, and seed trays. For some of these items, she purchased in bulk with fellow FIG participants, sharing the expense.

Johnson also recently completed a Kickstarter campaign. As an online platform, Kickstarter operates as Indiegogo does, rallying financial support for diverse causes, offering rewards, and providing a space where individuals can share their project ideas. Johnson sought to purchase a tractor for his farm. “For several months, I studied successful and not so

successful Kickstarter campaigns,” he said on a visit to his farm (Johnson 2014). His campaign raised \$28,450 from 219 “backers”, over \$3,000 more than his ask. Johnson’s campaign differs significantly from Hampton’s in its size and in his development as a farmer. After farming leased land for several years, he realized that he could no longer continue without a new significant infrastructure improvement. This positions him closer to Avery and Roehrig, his mentor farmers, and less like Hampton, someone just beginning.

Planning: Forming a Future

As the three farmers who own land that I interviewed further developed their enterprises, they formed plans that will significantly alter how they farm. These plans center around their desire to always be farmers, despite their age. “I’m going into my sixth or seventh growing season,” said Matt Cooper, “I wear other caps as well. I’m also a licensed counselor in the state of North Carolina. I’m a landscaper. I’ve been doing carpentry work lately. But, I like that. I like to be diversified in job skills. That’s sort of what attracted me to farming. It’s not always the exact same. I like to be challenged. No way could I go into an office every day and look at the same walls” (Cooper 2014).

To build a more sustainable model that can keep him on-the-farm, Cooper seeks to establish new systems on the property that he recently bought. “What I’ve learned for myself is that the key is you need your own space because then you have the freedom to do exactly what you need to do for yourself,” he stated, “I can bring in the animals now. I can bring in the mushrooms, which bring in a nice amount of money. And, I can bring in the fruit” (Cooper 2014). These new products, he stated, require less physical effort. “It’s such a beautiful thing to know that later on down the road here, I’m not going to need to do landscaping and counseling. I’ll be able to get to this place that I’ve thought about since my early twenties, which is living totally self-sufficient.”

Avery and Roehrig are considering the same line of planning:

We achieved our initial business plan and the steps for the near future would be to develop a business plan that would get us to that next level. That will probably require another infusion of capital to make additional investments in land and infrastructure to support that land and to get some perennial plants in the ground. Rather than bootstrapping to get us to where we want to be fifty years from now, in the next five years, we will make some significant investments. Right now, we really only have the potential to double that acreage with the additions of livestock and perennials. That would put us way closer to that livelihood than we have right now (Roehrig 2014).

This planning significantly marks the phases of the first-generation farmers' development. New first-generation farmers look to their immediate mentors, who hold land. And, experienced first-generation farmers look to farmers nearing old age. During my interview with Johnson, he stated that I should also interview an older farmer, who has operated a small-scale organic farm since the 1970s. Johnson stated:

He's from that back-to-the-land generation. I would talk to him because he's been able to see the area change. He's made it work and has been here a long time. So, he has a faithful consumer base. My wife was born and raised here, and she remembers being a little girl and going to the Farmers' Market with her mom, buying produce from him. It's cool because I'm there now, and he's still there you know, doing his thing (Johnson 2013).

Likewise, Cooper stated that he looks around at older farmers at the farmers' market and in the sustainable agriculture community and says, "You guys are in your fifties and you're doing this. Alright. That means that there is hope, there is opportunity. It is viable" (Cooper 2014). This matters for these two farmers as they think about their own young children, and their futures. "I want to put this stuff in motion," Cooper said, "The greater part is that I'm leaving something

behind for my kids or someone else that knows what's up and wants to survive and eat well and have a good life" (Cooper 2014).

Beginning Farmer Conclusions

Each of the farmers that I interviewed—whether they own land, rent, or aspire to be farmers—desire to own a farm. Doing so, allows the farmer greater independence in the decisions that they can make and contributes to the stability of their enterprise. However, it is a difficult journey. Cooper, Avery, and Roehrig spent over five years farming leased land before they purchased their own property. And when they did, they spent a considerable amount of time every day for over a year, searching classifieds and their social networks for leads. They each had a list of attributes for this final property and each was careful about finding the correct parcel, understanding the risks involved. And each found this property through the open market, whereas the common connection to leased land was found within the farmers' social networks.

Without significant amounts of capital, each farmer that I interviewed developed unique strategies to finance their enterprises. These involved drawing from their social networks and sharing resources with other farmers. It also involved grants, though all understood that these were most effective for significant infrastructure improvements and not a central part of their business plans.

To become a farmer, each took a risk. No farmer that I interviewed grew up in northwestern North Carolina. Each came to farming with a vision, refined it, and sought out strategies to enact it. This required persistent planning; however just as important, it required a community supportive of sustainable agriculture. The farmers found mentors who showed them how to find land and capital and champions within the community that were happy to invest in their farm, happy to help them begin to farm.

CHAPTER 5: EXPERIENCED FARMERS: MANAGING A PLACE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

“Sustainable is such a hard word,” said Caroline Hampton, “We’ve read articles about what sustainability really means and nobody can really pin it down” (Hampton 2014). For Hampton, sustainability means a “closed loop” system, where “it would be economically feasible to be growing food for your community and keeping that money within your community.” It would mean that “all of your inputs come from within your community if not from your own farm.” It’s what she calls, “My big dream.” Hampton’s words are similar to those of Lee Carleton, another FIG farmer. “To me, it means that you can continuously use the land to provide for you, provide an income for you. I think sustainability is like if the world outside of my valley stopped, I would be okay. I wouldn’t have to bring in manure or chemicals or anything,” she said, “I could produce where I am and leave it better than when I got it” (Carleton 2013). Hampton and Carleton’s statements echo those of all of the farmers that I interviewed. They each believe that sustainability is a personal and a community goal that encompasses every facet of their operation, from energy consumption to financial feasibility to knowing that no one in their community is hungry.

Furthermore, all of the farmers that I interviewed believe that their community is becoming more sustainable and resilient. This occurs as they adopt and form innovative strategies to build stronger markets and employ new methods on their farms that can insure their long-term future. They believe that this is very much based in the cooperative relationships found in their community. “I see it everyday. I see it in my community of farmers. I think that working together as a community is going to keep something sustainable, rather than relying on outside resources,” said Carleton (2013). She sees it when farmers and customers

trade goods, time, and equipment. Carleton is not alone. All of the farmers that I interviewed, spoke of their collaborative relationships with other farmers and their belief that there are fundamental steps that should be taken for their community to become more sustainable.

Niche products and specialization represent the most common strategy pursued by all of the farmers. Each understood that they hold a specific strength in growing certain products, whether through past experience, potential market rewards, land suitability, or personal interest. And, each farmer is actively pursuing significant plans on their farm or in their market-orientation to build a sustainable enterprise around those niche products. To this end, they align their land-use patterns with their life plans, installing long-term infrastructure on their property and searching out the latest market patterns. Many of these are unique, however, many are also echoed throughout the sustainable agriculture community in which they participate. What is most common throughout is their attention to detail and record keeping during the season and from season-to-season.

As each farmer spoke of their strategies to form a sustainable agriculture community and farm operation, each farmer also spoke of the paradigm shift that they believe must occur for their community to truly hold a sustainable agriculture system. Each farmer desired to farm full time, though each understood that in order to do so, the market needed to realize the actual cost of what the farmers produced and that the quality of produce needed to consistently match investments. "I think that the biggest challenge is that there are a lot of people, who are strong supporters of the local food economy, but there are also a lot of people who say, 'That's too much. You charge too much,'" said Carleton, "I've seen people turn their noses up at carrots and then they'll buy a \$50 wreath. I want more people to understand the true cost of food and why it's important to support your local growers" (Carleton 2013).

Within the sovereign food system that the farmers I interviewed seek to build is a local alternative to the economic leakages found within the dominant food system. Money remains

local, and the community becomes enfranchised. The community holds the decision making ability to understand from where its food derives. The consumers know the local food system's strengths and shortcomings, the seasonality of food and how much its farmers can grow. The community knows its farmers and their families and gains agency in deciding how the environment which surrounds them can best be used. Individuals hold conversations with growers and producers about land management practices, recipes, and the community in which they live. This closeness and agency cultivates a more healthy community. Environmentalist Bill McKibben found that "A team of sociologists recently followed shoppers around supermarkets and then farmers' markets... On average, the sociologists found, people were having ten times as many conversations per visit (at the farmers' markets). They were starting to rebuild the withered network that we call a community" (McKibben 2010, 139). When this happens, local farms are more efficient and innovative, he writes, "The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that according to its latest census smaller farms produce far more food per acre, whether you measure that output in tons, calories, or dollars. Better yet, those small farms are capable of getting far more productive with each passing season, because they can take advantage of new information, new science, new technologies" (McKibben 2010, 168).

Yet, the small farmers that I interviewed face significant challenges in their alternative practices, which cost more on the scale that they grow. "I know ways that I could make more money farming, but it would involve me compromising my values and the integrity of what I'm producing," stated Jordan Johnson, who described his small meat-chicken operation in comparison to a national corporation (Johnson 2013). "I don't want to compromise the integrity of what I'm producing just so that I can make money at it. If I'm going to raise pasture, all natural chickens, how do I do that where I can sell as much of it as possible and keep my business going, without the product devolving into the very thing people are trying to get away from, which is why they are supporting me," he said (Johnson 2013). This requires Johnson to

market his product in a way that highlights how his chickens differ from less expensive ones. And, it positions him closer to his customers, who desire conversations with their growers and greater knowledge about the food that they are consuming.

Shiloh Avery and Jason Roehrig of Tumbling Shoals Farm see a shift occurring among their customers and within their sustainable agriculture community, where everyone is becoming more actively engaged in better understanding their food. To them, it begins with farmers developing great products. However, they frame the challenge as a systemic one where sustainable farmers seek to build their entire livelihood on-the-farm, unlike common agricultural practices. Avery said:

I don't blame the consumer. They don't even realize that the farmer has to have an off-farm income, they don't know that. I think across the board, in conventional farming, somebody had an off-farm job, maybe the wife or maybe somebody sells insurance or something that. For me, it has always been the farmer perspective that needed to change. And, I see this shift, this perspective changing, as a very positive thing and it will probably result in everybody paying a little bit more for food, which is probably not a bad thing (Avery 2014).

"And as farmers we need to accept that we have to be the best growers in the world," responded Roehrig, "We can't be like third-rate growers and expect to make a living because people like to have a third-rate grower living next door, which means taking advantage of all the modern innovations and not rejecting scientific improvements just for the sake of doing so" (Roehrig 2014). This exchange matches a desire expressed by all of the farmers that I interviewed. Each held a firm belief that they were a part of a shift toward a more professional and serious farming community, where farmers could just farm and not rely on off-farm income.

"The energy is there to grow the agricultural system in our area, as far as new folks coming along, current folks around, and folks that aren't even from here that would like to come

setup shop,” said Matt Cooper (2014). “There is a high demand and pretty low supply of locally-grown products here,” said Jordan Johnson, “I think that as more and more people get turned-on to eating locally and organically that it will peak at some point, where there will be more producers than we would need to supply the demand” (Johnson 2013). And while this has not yet occurred, all of the established farmers that I interviewed are actively taking steps to plan for the future. They are seeking out new trends and market developments, forming new retail systems that engage untapped markets. And, they build infrastructure on their farm that requires less physical energy as they age. These actions rely upon their constant planning and record keeping which allows them to understand how their farms operate from year-to-year and during each season.

Diversity

“This is only my second year farming full time. Even by the end of this year, I’m realizing, ‘Okay, there are some things that just aren’t worth doing,’” stated Johnson, “Diversity is really the only security for a small farmer because some things are going to do well, but some things are also going to fail” (Johnson 2013). Johnson spoke after an incredibly wet year. When asked what was the biggest challenge each farmer faced, all replied the weather, citing the 2013 rainy summer. “I like change and growing a variety of things ensures that,” stated Carleton, “It also makes sense financially for the fact that if one thing fails, something else is going to do okay” (Carleton 2013). She, too, cited the wet summer as an example. “The weather dictates everything,” she said, “If it’s good or bad, it can make or break you. If you can’t make money, you can’t pay for your farm. I would say that rain was a challenge for a lot of vegetables this year, a lot of them. The flowers loved it” (Carleton 2013). As Carleton specializes in cut flowers, the rain worked well for her strategy. “All the tomatoes died,” she said, “But I had a ton of flowers. Having that kind of diversity gives you a good ‘in-case’ if something else fails,” she said, “I have a friend who lost maybe a quarter acre or a half an acre of potatoes at the beginning of the year.

That was her winter income, gone. She's had to diversify on that land and she's doing it with animals. If something fails, you've got to have a back-up" (Carleton 2013).

All of the farmers that I interviewed operate on small parcels of land, however, within that limited space they grow several hundred different varieties of produce. "I have less than two acres in field crops," stated Johnson, "I have one high tunnel that we just do tomatoes in. And, we use another six or seven acres to rotate livestock on, which includes pigs, poultry, turkeys, chickens, ducks" (Johnson 2013). "We grow fifty different annual rotated vegetables, like tomatoes, and when you get into the different varieties of everything, it's closer to a 175," stated Avery (2014). They grow this alongside perennials, like blackberries and blueberries, and four hoop houses on 3.5 acres. Carleton's space is somewhat smaller, nearly two acres on two separate parcels at the time of our interview. "I grow a hundred varieties of vegetables and herbs throughout the year," she said, "The flowers, probably about that many too, wild-crafted flowers, permanent flowers, and shrubs. That's about 200 varieties" (Carleton 2013). This very much differs from the large agricultural operation that her family operates in southern Georgia and the dominant method for growing food in the United States. Carleton explained:

The reason that I don't farm in south Georgia on my family's land is because I've seen how big agriculture has altered the landscape into more of a monoculture and the driven desire to be efficient with every spot of the land. And at the same time, they are taking down fence rows so that they could grow to the drainage ditch, which means no birds, and using GMOs. The most upsetting thing that I've seen in the past year and half is not only have they put in all of these pivot irrigations and taken down the fence rows, but they've logged around the ponds that they take irrigation from. They've taken the trees all for the sake of efficiency and making more money per square inch. That's a big change that I've seen every time that I go back home. And, I know that it's going to bite them in the ass at some point and it upsets me (Carleton 2013).

Whereas this dominant, fossil-fuel intensive form of farming requires large amounts of land with little crop diversity, the small-scale farmers that I interviewed rely on human energy and crop variety. “It’s labor intensive,” stated Avery, “We have a tractor and we do use a tractor for field preparation, but once it’s in the ground, it’s all people labor, hand labor. We hand transplant everything” (Avery 2014).

Niches and Specialization

While diversity remains integral to these farmers’ plans in case of crop failure and because they believe in a sovereign food system that can provide for the community, they also strongly believe in producing certain signature crops that they are known for. For instance, Johnson is becoming known for his pastured animals. And, Carleton is known for her cut-flowers and carrots. “I specialize in growing things and finding things that chefs can’t go without,” she said “I’m good with coming up with things like a rainbow mix and letting it get popular and when the price drops for me, passing it on to people that can handle the bulk” (Carleton 2013). She considers herself a designer as well as a farmer. “I’m a farmer,” she said, continuing:

I grow things, number one. But, I design things as I grow. I’m just good at it. That’s what I’ve always been able to do since I was little. I’ve always been able to just pull things out of the air just from observing what’s been going around with food or design. I’ve always been able to pay attention to that and I look for things that I find striking and beautiful and tasty. I just trust myself and offer it (Carleton 2013).

Carleton enjoys the diversity and intensity of managing multiple varieties within one row. “I pack it in,” she said, “I’ll have three different things growing in one row that is two feet wide. “If you spread it all out, it would take a lot more space. I just do intensive growing” (Carleton 2013). However, she believes that small farmers like her must be known for something. “I think that for a small farmer finding a niche and specializing in it, especially if it’s just you and you

don't have a ton of equipment, is a very good idea. If you have a lot of land and a lot of equipment, I think that you can do big crops that aren't so particular and require so much labor" (Carleton 2013). Through this method, she realized that she can become relied upon for high quality carrots, arugula, and wreaths, "when the season flips over."

Like the shift described earlier, Carleton has also observed how area small-scale farmers become more interested in heritage breed animals and heirloom crops that require more labor and time. "I have seen more pigs. The ones that I've seen doing it the right way are using heritage breeds. They're really good at turning up the land. They're known for that," she said, "People are picking breeds that go with the land; which, I think is great" (Carleton 2013). She cites challenges as the impetus for many of the new strategies that she's observed. "I think that I got the first Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture grant that they handed out a couple of years ago," Carleton said continuing:

I did it for irrigation, creative irrigation and multi-purposing water, which has always been an issue for me. But the next year, because I received that grant I got to read everybody else's grant proposals. I just love the creativity of what people are doing to go about things in a sustainable way. I love seeing that. I love seeing people not throw in the towel because of a wet year. It causes innovation, not starvation (Carleton 2013).

Besides weather, competition can also spur new crops. "Some people are known for their kale," she said, "And that can be challenging because you go to the farmers' market and if something like that is popular, other people will figure it out and that's what keeps you needing to innovate."

Kathleen Petermann also sees shifts toward a more regionally-diverse food system that can accommodate specialized products. She connects this desire with the close food system that once existed. "I would love to see people being able to grow staples or even revive things like dairying cooperatively," she said, "That used to be more present. It's hard to compete price wise

nationally, but to build a more regional market for food is sort of a pipe dream for me at this point. It's hard to tell people about it because it sounds crazy, but I'd love to see that explored more" (Petermann 2013).

Niche opportunities depend upon trial and error for these farmers. They all spend years experimenting with different crops, testing the land and their markets. Johnson stated that after his second year of farming, he is still trying to identify what works best.

Being on my quote-unquote incubator farm here, I'm able to adjust things as I go. A lot of times, some changes that I make here are based upon opportunities that I identify. I think that there's a lot more room for pasture-based livestock. I know there's still a demand here for locally grown produce and such through the winter months when a lot of people have to stop growing (Johnson 2013).

To this end, he has pursued producing more livestock, like chickens, pigs, and ducks. "I've never done anything with animals. But, I think it could be a really nice mix to do animals and vegetables in terms of cash flow and everything," Caroline Hampton said in an interview before the season began (Hampton 2014). Since then, she's managed several pigs as a part of FIG. "After this season I might see a more targeted market that I'll be growing for, which will probably be evolving. I have a lot of interest in medicinal herbs. I've been to a few workshops about that, but that is a whole other set of knowledge, but a direction that I would like to move toward," she said. As she's gained experience with the pigs, she plans to raise more in the next season. Furthermore, she's stated that she's interested in seeing if organic rice can grow in a plot of land that borders Dutch Creek, on the FIG property (Hampton 2014)

Carleton, too, is considering new forms of produce as she transitions away from the property that she's farmed for the last several years. "I'm going to use three times more land at the FIG property, which is a lot. It's going to be a lot of flowers. I'm going to help my partner too. He does more cattle. But, his farm is pretty sloped. I'll continue building up my bulb and

perennial stock of plants, ones that can handle steep slopes and not so much top soil and possibly grazing,” she said (Carleton 2013). She also utilizes off-farm resources for her arrangements and wreaths. “I get my Fraser from local tree farmers,” she said, “A lot of berries that I get are invasive weeds, so I get them from the side of the road. Then, I’m really good at knocking on doors and asking. I have a brochure in my hand and say, ‘Can I use that?’ But, a lot of things are roadside plants that I use for embellishments” (Carleton 2013). This specialization reflects the creativity that farmers like Carleton rely upon on their small parcels as they seek to find a balance between what they grow well and what the weather will allow them to grow.

Markets

The farmers that I interviewed often participate in the same markets. For instance, all of them hold booths at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market, which draws from Watauga and the surrounding counties. All but two operate CSA programs, which offer shareholders mixed-vegetable and value-added products each week based upon pre-season investments. Each participates in direct-to-buyer markets with area restaurants. And many occasionally sell their produce through New River Organic Growers, a farmer-owned cooperative that organizes bulk sales. Each farmer participated in the different markets at different levels; however, all participate in multiple markets with different drop-off or delivery times throughout the week. This requires planning months before the growers plant, so that they can dependably have produce each week. Unsold produce is typically sold by the farmers to restaurants or absorbed from the farmers’ market by charity organizations. Market activity goes beyond the farmers’ desire to sell a product. They are spaces where the farmer is connected to their community. They are meeting places, where farmers organize, exchange ideas, and gossip. They are places where new farmers go for advice, as Matt Cooper stated, “I started going to those meetings, Ag Extension, New River Organic Growers, hanging out, listening to everybody else talk and then when I got stuck, I felt comfortable asking a question” (Cooper 2014).

Multiple Markets

Tumbling Shoals farm, operated by Shiloh Avery and Jason Roehrig, participated in the most markets and in three distinct areas: Boone, Hickory, and Wilkes County. “We do three farmers’ markets a week,” said Roehrig, “We have a 70 family CSA. We sell a little bit of produce to the High Country CSA, and then there are a hand full of other markets that don’t necessarily add up to a huge percentage of our income, but still Shiloh has a few restaurants in Hickory that pick up at the farmers’ market which makes it very convenient. We’re members of the New River Organic Growers, but last year we did \$16.50 worth of total sales” (Roehrig 2014). “Last year was an exceptional season. The year before we did a fair amount,” replied Avery (2014). “The difference between the High Country CSA and the New River Organic Growers is that High Country CSA has already told us what they’re going to purchase for the year so we can plant for them. New River Organic Growers, you just kind of have to have surplus crop in order to sell to them,” stated Roehrig (2014).

This difference between the two markets illustrates the unpredictability of farming. It requires flexibility and knowledge of working with the weather and with emerging consumer markets. While planning for the High Country CSA begins in the winter, planning for New River Organic Growers (NROG) begins within a time frame closer to picking the produce. “You offer your produce to NROG at the beginning of the week, and they tell you whether or not they’ve sold it,” stated Roehrig (2014). This represents a challenge for the farmer. It is riskier than a CSA, which has already bought the product. “If you plant that crop and NROG doesn’t sell it, it wouldn’t take many of those situations for us to not hit our break-even,” said Roehrig (2014). The risk very heavily impacts other elements of their enterprise because the wholesale price is much lower than the farmers’ market or CSA share return. “Our margin is really small. We’re trying to pay for land and pay our employees and pay ourselves on this little tiny bit of land. We

need to get as much for our food as we can. When you wholesale, you're losing some of that money," said Avery (2014). Therefore, they view NROG as a tertiary market, which receives surplus products like tomatoes and peppers. "We tend to grow a lot of those. And, they make enough money to be able to wholesale a few of them," said Avery (2014). For the Tumbling Shoals farmers, these market considerations affected where they chose to locate their farm.

This extensive market network differs very much from that of Kathleen Petermann, who primarily sells her produce through High Country CSA, but also shares a Watauga County Farmers' Market booth with Caroline Hampton, her housemate. This regulates her production schedule and offers a dependable source of income. In 2012, her first growing season, she entered the season late as a new FIG participant. "That was a struggle for me because I came in so late that I didn't have a space at the Market," she said, "I couldn't have done High Country CSA or anything like that. So, I marketed it via Facebook and personal interactions. And, I did end up going to the Blowing Rock Farmers' Market with one of the other FIG participants because he had a space there, which was not lucrative" (Petermann 2013). She cites not being recognized as an established grower as the reason why she did not sell very much at the Blowing Rock Farmers' Market. "It's hard to not be established because customers go to the same farmers all the time. Tourists come back every year, and they see the same people and go back to those people," she stated (Petermann 2013). She also experimented with the idea of a "little mini-market, but that never materialized. I wanted to market to my neighbors because they're like adults with kids, so they're older and would be totally into it, but that didn't happen. I didn't have time" (Petermann 2013).

Farmers' Markets

For many of the farmers that I interviewed, they became interested in agriculture through the connections that they made at their local farmers' market. As Jordan Johnson stated, "You know after living in this area for a while, I began to make connections at the farmers' market

with local farmers, who were basically making a living off larger-scale gardening and raising livestock and such, so that inspired me. I was like well, why settle” (Johnson 2013). “The atmosphere there just fosters relationships, like just getting to meet people,” he said. As Johnson became more interested in farming for a living, he would ask farmers questions.

I knew they could probably give me a straight answer. And, the relationships went beyond me using them as resources. When you’re buying food from someone, it kind of builds a friendship because you’re purchasing something that is essential for you to survive from someone that’s producing something that’s essential for them to survive. (Johnson 2013).

Within this relationship is “trust,” he stated. It is a close-knit community, which several of the farmers stated can be “intimidating” at first. “A lot of us just know each other because it just happens when you’re there,” said Matt Cooper, “When you’re a new farmer and just show up, it’s sort of intimidating because you don’t know many of them” (Cooper 2014). However, this soon changes, Cooper stated, as new farmers learn “who’s talking to whom and find out who is on the board, or whatever, you go through your own complex I guess, but basically if you make it past the first year, everybody is so nice. It’s just all about the person getting involved and them working through, evolving through, their fears.”

“It’s funny because you can definitely tell the type of person at the farmers’ market who has the drive to have some showmanship versus the people who were like I wish I wasn’t here right now,” said Kathleen Petermann, continuing:

Yeah, it is stressful and, having done a couple of markets before it is stressful because you’re constantly interacting with people who just walk up to you and say, ‘Yeah, your stuff looks really nice,’ and I really want to sell you something because I need to make money. I really like talking to people, but this is what I want to do with my life, grow produce. You just have to entertain people. Sometimes if you can’t entertain people, there

sort of not interested. It's weird. It's definitely hard for me to do that (Petermann 2013).

As a new farmer in the High Country, Caroline Hampton experimented with an innovative method to draw attention to her farm. Instead of establishing a CSA, she offered a pre-season market debit, where members received credits in graduated increments ranging from \$100 to \$300 (Hampton 2014). "The idea came from friends in Minnesota who sold at low-traffic markets in rural communities. They needed a way to turn out customers every week at their market. The benefit of doing something like market credit versus a CSA is that you know that once you've committed those people to buy from you every week, you're going to at least have that traffic coming through," she said (Hampton 2014). At the time of our interview Hampton had not sold at the Watauga County Farmers' Market; however, she believed that this method would instill close producer-customer relationship, which many find attractive in the CSA model. "It makes it so that I have a long-term relationship with those customers and a lot of people who are going to do a CSA are going to want to go to the farmers' market anyway," she said (Hampton 2014). Like all the farmers that I interviewed, Hampton also sells directly to restaurants after the market or when she has produce (Hampton 2014). Matt Cooper, her mentor, listed several places in Boone and Blowing Rock that he visits after a farmers' market. "I just show up, usually after the farmers' market or after a CSA," he stated, "Anytime that I have leftovers, I show up and try not to go home with it. I've realized how much to really take to the farmers' market now, so I don't have an excess problem. But, I'll have an excess problem in the field. So, it's sort of always a juggle" (Cooper 2014).

New River Organic Growers

As mentioned earlier, many of the farmers that I interviewed sell to New River Organic Growers (NROG); however, those that do, do so when they have surplus or when they have a specific market in mind. All of the farmers though recognized the importance of an aggregation system in this area. While Matt Cooper stated that he does not often sell his produce through

NROG, he does believe that it is an important part of the developing local food system:

I've done a lot of my own direct, personal sales to the restaurants here. I don't really understand the chef's world. That's where New River Organic Growers has played a good role for the community because it's an entity that they can say to restaurants, "There's a good selection here. It arrives on time. Why don't you buy local goods?" (Cooper 2014).

Another important element of a regional food-aggregation business is that it allows farmers to work collaboratively. "I know NROG has a potato washer," stated Jordan Johnson, "I mean, nobody needs their very own potato washer. It just makes sense to have one that can be shared" (Johnson 2013). This cooperative arrangement also impacts the liability insurance that farmers hold. Lee Carleton, who frequently sells cut flowers and vegetables through NROG stated, "Being a part of that group, when I sell to Earth Fare, I have to have a \$2 million blanket liability insurance, so that I don't have to shoulder that cost alone. Now, it's through all of us" (Carleton 2013)

In exchange for these benefits, NROG charges twenty percent of the purchase price, paid by restaurants or grocery stores. The farmer receives the other eighty percent. And each year, the producer pays a yearly membership fee of \$65. "It's not bad," said Carleton, "Because if you think about how much time it takes to sell your stuff and if you're selling to a bunch of different places, a small farm can't do all that and grow" (Carleton 2013).

Carleton grows specific items attractive to NROG's network of buyers. This differs from what she sells at the farmers' market each week. "I know that I can do the bulk for NROG and I know that they won't meet my price. It's kind of divided," she said (Carleton 2013). She continued:

What you do is: every Saturday is the deadline. You send the marketer your availability for the coming week, how much you have, and how much you really need to have per pound or ounce or whatever. So, my edible flower mixes, they go to chefs and I pick every

bit. With the cut flowers this year, I knew that I was going to be doing a lot. I planned for it. I sold to Earth Fare. I did bouquets to Earth Fare two years ago and I was not prepared for the amount, and there was also a drought. So this year, by mid-season, I was like, I can supply two more Earth Fares. I was still supplying for the farmers' market and weddings too (Carleton 2013).

Community Supported Agriculture

All but two of the farmers that I interviewed participate in an organized Community Supported Agriculture or CSA program. Through this method, customers invest before the season in exchange for weekly boxes of produce and value-added products. Of those two farmers who do not offer a CSA, one does engage in a reciprocal relationship with an employee that very much resembles a part of the CSA model. "I had one helper who worked for free. She was like, 'I like a lot of vegetables and I see how it adds up. I will work for veggies.' I would hook her up," said Lee Carleton, "Not only veggies, but if I had any extra local meat, I would hook her up. I think having that sort of relationship with your local grower, if you don't have the space, going and talking to your local grower, putting in the time, people will give you stuff. People want to trade. I think it's a good trade too" (Carleton 2013). This relationship mirrors the collaborative relationship found in many CSA programs that offer farm-work days. It also highlights the close connection between grower and consumer that CSAs promote. However, an incredibly important aspect of the CSA model—which, Carleton's relationship did not have—is that subscribers invest in their share before the season begins. As Jordan Johnson stated, "Since I haven't really figured out a way to grow year-around to keep cash-flow steady through the season, we're going into the spring a little light in terms of finances" (Johnson 2013). From the investment farmers are able to buy seeds, fertilizer, or replace equipment. However, there are other reasons that farmers decide to begin a CSA, such as the importance of accessibility to

locally-grown food, the profit opportunities of additional markets, and their own personal connections to the CSA networks.

Johnson held a thirteen family CSA “in the middle of the week from late-May to mid-October” in the 2013 season. “It was my first year doing my own independent CSA,” he stated. However, he previously apprenticed at Tumbling Shoals farm for several years, which has two CSA’s—one through their farm and one with High Country CSA (Johnson 2013).

Tumbling Shoals participates with High Country CSA, a multi-farm program that also offers a cost-share for low-resource individuals, because “It is a part of sustainability,” said Avery (2014). To them sustainability means that they can continue farming, making enough to pay themselves and their employees. But it also means helping others. “We think part of social justice is paying your employees and paying yourselves. And that’s part of it, but also reaching out to lower income people anyway that we can see to do it,” said Avery (2014). “Low-income people have some of the same difficulties that we do,” replied Roehrig, “For really low-income people actually getting to the central point to pick up the food can be a burden. We are very much aware of this. We had a low income person in the middle of the season call in and was like I don’t have a ride down there anymore. I don’t have the gas money” (Roehrig 2014).

To reach these clients, Avery and Roehrig stated that they must first cover their own expenses. “The cost-share program is definitely something that appeals to us about the High Country CSA. However, the true reason that we do High Country CSA is because we can do so profitably, but, the social justice aspect is appealing,” said Roehrig (2014). This effort to market through High Country CSA couples Tumbling Shoals’s advocacy for the organization. Each year Avery and Roehrig ask their own CSA shareholders to donate to the High Country CSA cost-share program. “Not everybody gives, but normally it will add up to one share. We subsidize a little bit,” Avery said, “We like the social equity idea as far as sustainability, but it’s hard to put it

on the backs of farmers. Like, we would probably qualify for food stamps if we applied, though I've never tried. Putting it on the backs of farmers is difficult" (Avery 2014).

This network outsourcing very much resembles the resource NROG holds for farmers as it eliminates the time growers would otherwise spend developing a market infrastructure. However, as the market network grows, there may be aspects of the close relationship with farmers that is lost. This is specifically a concern if the farm's CSA model finds strength in the connections shareholders have with "their" farmer. For instance, Tumbling Shoals attempted to hold a mid-season potluck on their farm several years ago for their CSA shareholders though no one showed up. "I think we got one person, and then it was our employee and his family. We never got a very good turn out. I guess we're far away. I don't know," said Avery (2014). Roehrig replied:

We knew this coming into this market. There are CSA's in their idealistic way, where a bunch of people in the community come together and they're like, "We're going to support a farm!" and the farm is like, "We're going to support you with food!" and there's this aspect of it that goes beyond a commercial transaction. For the most part, we're making a commercial transaction. Where, we're going to get you X value of produce, and they're like we're going to give you exactly X money. And, they're pleased. They want to eat organic. Some of them are very pleased to support a local business, but they feel like that they're getting the value and convenience that they want and feel that the value of being a part of a farm community is really...We're in Wilkes County, so we're not that removed from farming, like it's some romantic vision as it would be in an urban area or even in Boone where people come from all over the place (Roehrig 2014).

"Even in Hickory where they are removed, but we're too far," replied Avery, "It is an hour and fifteen minutes. But, I do see those people every week because I am womaning the pickup spot

there. But, yeah it is more of a commercial transaction model. There's a little bit of that relationship" (Avery 2014).

To further this relationship, Tumbling Shoals sends each member an email newsletter, describing the contents of each week's CSA box, cooking tips and recipes (Avery 2014). "That newsletter is a part of the value that they're receiving," stated Roehrig (2014). "And, it's popular. People actually read it, which is astounding," said Avery, "It's not just another email. And, people are welcome to come out. I might try again. We're also not very good social organizers, which is also part of the problem. I'm like, we plan a potluck which is two weeks out, but people need more warning than that" (Avery 2014).

As Tumbling Shoals offers multiple off-farm pickup locations for their CSA shareholders while also participating in a multi-farm CSA and two farmers' markets, it holds the most complex CSA model and marketing strategy. This reflects the farm's extensive network and sophisticated enterprise. These markets are geographically distributed enough to reach different consumer exposure; this makes them unique and somewhat of an outlier from the other farmers that I interviewed. Tumbling Shoals's markets include Boone (Watauga County), Hickory (Catawba County), and Wilkes County. In Boone, customers reach Tumbling Shoals through the Watauga County Farmers' Market and the High Country CSA; in Hickory through the Hickory farmers' market and the Tumbling Shoals CSA pickup location at the farmers' market; and in Wilkes County in downtown Wilkesboro at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore, south of Wilkesboro at an electrical supply store, and in Elkin. At each location, Avery and Roehrig have formed connections that go beyond an economic relationship. Avery stated:

We have a lot of drop off points. The ReStore pitched the idea to us, thinking that it would increase their foot traffic. The electrical supply store are customers, and they said that others could pick up there. It's convenient for people living south of town. And it's where I go to yoga—a lot of our customers come from my yoga class. We formerly had a drop off

in the eastern part of Wilkes county at a winery north of Elkin. It's a forty-five minute one way, and there weren't enough people to justify the drive. People in that part of the county began asking and we liked the chef, where we dropping produce. We delivered there for a few years and warned them that we were not going to be able to do it this year. They figured out how to make it happen. One of them is going to coordinate and pick it up once a week, which is amazing. I'm still totally humbled by that, but they just pulled it together and said, "Let's make this happen. We want our veggies." (Avery 2014).

While Tumbling Shoals carefully chooses markets based upon their profitability, the diversity of markets represents a challenge. "We really try to sell at the farmers' markets," said Roehrig, "It's a whole lot less stressful than a CSA. You put yourself out there and people come and buy it. The farmers' market in Boone is really solid." (Roehrig 2014). This is why Tumbling Shoals does not offer their own CSA pickup location in Boone. "We want the CSA to be more of a mid-week market for us because we can sell everything that we harvest for the weekend at our two farmers' markets" (Avery 2014).

As previously stated, the Tumbling Shoals market system represents the most sophisticated and diverse I encountered amongst the farmers that I interviewed. Many of the farmers with CSA programs valued the connections made with their shareholders and all found the pre-season investment helpful. Matt Cooper's two CSAs (his own and High Country CSA) signify a farm growing into a model resembling Tumbling Shoals's

"I haven't really pushed hard with my own personal CSA," Cooper said, "I have promoted the High Country CSA. However I've been doing my own personal CSA for three years now and I've mainly been doing it at Chetola" (Cooper 2014). The employees of the resort are offered a deal, where the employer pays Cooper, "And then deducts the payment from his employees that want to sign up. He just takes fifteen bucks from their paycheck a week. So, it makes it affordable and allows me to do what I do. It's wonderful," he said (Cooper 2014). As he

transitions onto his own land, he has considered developing his own CSA. “It’s hard to really sell a glamorous idea when you’re just leasing land, at least I feel. Especially, when everybody else is like here’s my farm, my home, so I can move more into the agribusiness side of things. And, it’s sexy to CSA members because they get to come see the farm. It’s not just this one acre that we drive by on Highway 194,” he said (Cooper 2014).

CSAs represent an important component of each farmers’ marketing strategy. It often instills a sense of connection between farmer and consumer. However, more importantly, it represents a second market with a relatively secure investment. The farmer knows well before the season begins how many customers it will have for this market and can plan what to plant and how much. It becomes risky in a challenging weather year. Single farm CSAs must produce many different types of items to fill their shareholder’s box and must be able to grow enough to fill those boxes. Multi-farm CSAs share this burden. However, the farmers that I interviewed, who participate in a CSA, each acknowledged that it is important to their business model to employ multiple markets, to increase accessibility to locally grown food.

Planning and Keeping Records

All of the traits discussed in this work represent actions that Blue Ridge farmers chose to become successful. Each farmer that I interviewed desired to form a sustainable enterprise. For aspiring farmers this meant reaching a point where they could run their own farm. For beginning farmers this meant reaching a point where they could farm on their own land. And for experienced farmers this meant reaching a point where they could feel certain that their enterprise would continue as they age. All of these actions required planning, making lists and continually revising the lists to meet new expectations. When I asked Avery and Roehrig what differentiated their mentors from less successful farmers in central North Carolina, Avery replied, “Business planning probably. These people were well into their careers, but they

started with a business plan” (Avery 2014). To which Roehrig responded, “Keeping records” (Roehrig 2014).

Avery and Roehrig consider themselves following in the footsteps of these “pioneers.” “They got into this small scale, direct-to-consumer, organic farming before it was cool and they did not have the vast amounts of resources and information that we now have,” said Avery (2014). Yet these more recent farmers relentlessly take notes on everything that they grow: where they plant, how much they plant and yield, and how much they sell because they operate on small margins. “Our expenses are high. We’re trying to make a living off of four acres and we’re paying for land. If you don’t know whether a crop is making you money, how do you tweak your system so that you make it? So, we keep track of everything,” said Avery (2014). To explain why this matters, the partners used okra as an example. Both love to eat okra. However, the variety that they planted did not cover the expense of growing it. Another crop could be substituted, which would yield a higher price at market. They decided to do a variety trial. “We felt that we were at top dollar with our okra, so we couldn’t raise the price,” said Avery (2014). They also preferred not to stop growing it or planting more on their limited space. Instead they invested in landscape fabric, which heated the soil more and their yields increased. Avery stated:

If we weren’t keeping records and didn’t know how little we were harvesting, we would still be growing darn Clemson spineless and not be making any money and that’s going to drag down the income of the farm. You get that a number of times and that’s why you’re not going to make it. But, sometimes people just don’t understand that. You need to have your finger on the pulse of your business (Avery 2014).

The data that Tumbling Shoals maintains on okra is multiplied with the fifty other crops that the farm grows, which includes two hundred varieties of those fifty crops. To hold organic certification as Tumbling Shoals does, record keeping is required. However, it also assists with

their CSA planning. Before the season begins, “We can easily say, ‘We need three beds of this product to come off of our beds in this week to have enough to get it into our CSA,” said Roehrig (2014). Their record keeping method begins in the field where they take notes with pen and pad. This is then transferred to a computer. “We’re astounded that young farmers are resistant to the effort that it takes. It is a lot of effort. We probably spend at least four hours a week dedicated to record keeping, recording it and then Shiloh transferring those records into the computer,” stated Roehrig (2014).

In the off-season, Avery and Roehrig plan for the coming growing season and rest. “We don’t have any plants in the greenhouse in December so that we can leave the farm and travel over night together to see our families. In our finances, we try to fit in at least a week vacation just for us. Or if we can con an employee or customer to lending us their beach house,” said Avery (2014). “From January to February we’re not working very hard. A couple of three hours a day on average. And, we don’t feel bad,” replied Roehrig (2014). This intentional break and yearly schedule emerged after considering the markets available to them and the feasibility of growing in the winter. “We’re going to work hard, go hard in the spring, tapering off less and less as the season goes and then take the winter off, take a month off. And, that works. I mean we get tired but once you’ve rejuvenated over the winter than you have more energy in the spring” said Avery (2014). “One of the deals that we make with ourselves is that we work very little in the winter and we don’t feel guilty about that. The month of December, we don’t really have to do anything at all,” said Roehrig (2014). “Plan,” responded Avery (2014). “Yes, there’s always something to be done,” answered Roehrig (2014).

Experienced Farmer Conclusions

Sustainability represents a significant concern of the farmers that I interviewed. This matters to them as business people and as community members. They very much believe that a sustainable, resilient community requires a sovereign food system. To become sustainable

within their own enterprise, each farmer explores niche products while simultaneously growing a large diversity of crops in case one crop fails. This model is imperative in a CSA model; however, it also gives strength to their system, making the farm more resilient to sporadic weather patterns and market shifts. The farmers seem to replicate this model when it comes to markets. Each participates in multiple markets, offering different selections to each. Furthermore, to maintain each of these complicated systems, the farmers—specifically Tumbling Shoals—highlighted the need for strong record keeping. These efforts intentionally seek to differentiate sustainable agriculture from the current dominant model. The results are felt in the strong relationships each farmer has with their customers. As Matt Cooper stated, “The energy is there to grow the agricultural system in our area, as far as new folks coming along, current folks around, and folks that aren’t even from here that would like to come setup shop” (Cooper 2014). The farmers’ stories here represent steps that they have taken to become successful, to become sustainable.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This research has sought to explain changes occurring on the Blue Ridge Appalachian landscape, as first-generation small-scale diversified farmers become invested in sustainable agriculture; learn how to farm; find access to farm land, and form resilient agricultural enterprises in Blue Ridge Appalachia. Through four chapters, this thesis documents the importance of small-scale agriculture, beginning with a literature review, and then through a discussion of aspiring, beginning, and experienced farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia. Each stage represents an important transition for the farmer. However, the importance of mentorship echoes throughout each. By seeing what others have done, the aspiring farmer becomes engaged in farming as an occupation and lifestyle. Likewise, the beginning and experienced farmer gains strategies and confidence from their mentors and peers as they seek to form a sustainable livelihood in Blue Ridge Appalachia.

Aspiring Farmers: “A Shift Occurred”

None of the farmers that I interviewed were born on a farm. Instead, they became engaged in small-scale agriculture from the perspective of conscious eaters. This grew into home garden plots and then market gardens on rented land. Eventually, some, would buy land and install infrastructure, selling to different markets.

Finding *living examples* mattered for each of the farmers that I interviewed. They sought-out farmers who shared their “growing list of concerns regarding the sustainability of the current agricultural system in the United States,” as Edward Cox writes (2010, 369).

As aspiring farmers, they learned how to farm through formal and informal educational opportunities. Two-thirds of the farmers that I interviewed hold relationships with Appalachian

State University's Sustainable Development program, which is illustrative of the broad influence of the program on the local sustainable-agriculture movement and my own connection with the institution. However, for each farmer, it was through their on-farm experience that they gained the technical skills to pursue agriculture as a career and lifestyle. It was on the farm that they met mentors, who operated working models of successful enterprises.

Food systems scholar Philip Ackerman-Leist answers this question:

Formal education, is of course, only part of the answer. It does provide aspiring farmers with a breadth and depth of understanding not always discovered solely through experience, and it does so in a concentrated and efficient fashion. However, informal mentors and formalized apprenticeships are probably the most vital part of bringing new farmers into the fold and ensuring their success. There simply is no substitute for direct on-farm experience" (Ackermen-Leist 2013, 256-257).

Shiloh Avery and Jason Roehrig formed their farm in Wilkes County based upon the experiences that they had with mentor-farms in the North Carolina piedmont. "Working for farmers was super valuable. In fact a lot of what our farm looks like, a lot of our systems, looks like the farm that I worked for because that was direct," said Avery, "I did it on his farm, that's what I learned how to do, and that's what we do. And, it's not bad to emulate those successful ones. And, then a lot of trial and error too. Isn't that the process of becoming a farmer?" (Avery 2014).

However, to form a more robust local food system in Blue Ridge Appalachia, more mentor relationships should be encouraged in this area. As Roehrig stated, "There isn't a critical mass of successful operations in this area (northwestern North Carolina) to give people the model of what a successful operation looks like" (Roehrig 2014). The trend is moving in this direction, he added, "At the Watauga County Farmers' Market, when we first got here there was very, very little competition. But now, there's probably eight or ten fairly serious vegetable vendors at the

Watauga County Farmers' Market where, I would have said that when we first looked at it seven or eight years ago there was maybe one if you added up a couple of folks who were like serious vegetable dealers" (Roehrig 2014). This is important as it allows more aspiring farmers the opportunity to observe and experience successful operations as apprentices.

Beginning Farmers: Finding Land and Financing a Farm

Each farmer that I interviewed acknowledged their desire to form their own home place in Blue Ridge Appalachia. It appeared in their desire to first grow their own food and become self-sufficient. It then appeared as they sought to acquire land, where they could install significant infrastructure and perennial plants. All of the farmers that I interviewed followed this path, although some are further along than others. At the time of our conversations, five worked or interned for other farmers, growing their own food or engaging in self-sufficiency activities. Four operated their own enterprises on rented or leased land, making their own decisions about what to produce and how to market their produce. And three owned their own land and were, at the time of our conversations, considering how to make their farm more sustainable as they aged.

Chapter Four concerns how each farmer obtained land to farm. These are divided into two categories, those that rent or lease land and those that own land. These represent significant differences because owning land allows the farmer more independence to design their farm to fit their vision.

Each of the farmers who leased land in the High Country, came upon the land through personal connections. While each held different conversations with their landlords, all formed agreements—spoken or written—where they described their farm plans and how much they would pay for the use of the land. Each relationship evolved differently. Some landowners held different expectations than the farmers. Other relationships were more cohesive. However, in each leased-land circumstance, the farmer treated the farm as a temporary situation with the

eventual goal of owning their own land. They very much understood this period as a trial where they would develop their niches and markets; they would learn how to farm on their own. One farmer called his leased farm an “incubator farm” (Johnson 2013).

In Watauga County, a shared-space incubator farm exists for beginning farmers. Called the Farmer Incubator and Grower (FIG) Project, it began in 2013 on land once used as Appalachian State University’s Sustainable Development teaching and research farm. Matt Cooper serves as a mentor for FIG, assisting new farmers to become more successful. “We are giving access to new farmers and to farmers who may know what they’re doing, but don’t have access to land or lost access to land,” he said (Cooper 2014). This space represents a significant advancement in the opportunities available to first-generation farmers in Blue Ridge Appalachia.

Each of the farmers that I interviewed, who lease land, held conversations with their landlords about the use of their land. From these conversations, trust emerges or it does not, and the farmer moves on to a more promising space. Holding land as an incubator farm allows the beginning farmer the opportunity to establish a presence and learn what type of system works best for them. This becomes helpful for them when they search for their own land to farm.

Buying land takes time and energy. Initially, each of the three farmers that I interviewed who now own land, all leased land in western North Carolina, establishing networks and becoming familiar with the area, scanning any available lead for at least two years. They felt drawn to the area and knew that they wanted to stay. Through this process, each farmer also held a second job, building confidence and capital. Several of the farmers also applied for grants to fund infrastructure improvements. And those that purchased land did so with a mortgage. Without significant amounts of capital, each farmer that I interviewed developed unique strategies to finance their enterprises. These involved drawing from their social networks and

sharing resources with other farmers. It also involved grants, though all understood that these were most effective for significant infrastructure improvements and not a dependent part of their business plans.

To become a farmer, each took a risk. Each came to farming with a vision, refined it, and sought out strategies to enact it. This required persistent planning; however just as important, it required a community supportive of sustainable agriculture. The farmers found mentors who showed them how to find land and capital and champions within the community that were happy to invest in their farm, happy to help them begin to farm.

Experienced Farmers: Managing a Place for a Sustainable Future

Each farmer that I interviewed desired to farm full time and for as long as they could. Though each also understood significant obstacles, like the true cost of food and consistent quality, challenge their goals. Nonetheless, they seek to build a sustainable system, not just for their own enterprise, but for their community. To form a sustainable community, the farmers often work together and with their community. All of the farmers that I interviewed, spoke of their collaborative relationships with other farmers and their belief that there are fundamental steps that should be taken for their enterprises and community to become more sustainable. On the farm steps included: niche products and specialization, diversity of products, multiple markets, and record keeping as strategies.

Niche products and specialization represent the most common strategy pursued by all of the farmers. Each understood that they hold a specific strength in growing certain products, whether through past experience, potential market rewards, land suitability, or personal interest. And, each farmer is actively pursuing significant plans on their farm or in their market-orientation to build a sustainable enterprise around those niche products. For instance, Johnson is becoming known for his pastured animals. And, Carleton is known for her cut-flowers and carrots.

Diversity represents a second strategy instituted by each farmer. As Jordan Johnson stated, “This is only my second year farming full time. Even by the end of this year, I’m realizing, ‘Okay, there are some things that just aren’t worth doing. Diversity is really the only security for a small farmer because some things are going to do well, but some things are also going to fail” (Johnson 2013). All of the farmers that I interviewed operate on small parcels of land, however within the limited space they grow several hundred different varieties of produce. “I have less than two acres in field crops,” stated Johnson, “I have one high tunnel that we just do tomatoes in. And, we use another six or seven acres to rotate livestock on, which includes pigs, poultry, turkeys, chickens, ducks” (Johnson 2013). While Avery and Roehrig do not have livestock at Tumbling Shoals, they do “grow fifty different annual rotated vegetables, like tomatoes, and when you get into the different varieties of everything, it’s closer to a 175;” which, they grow alongside perennials, like blackberries and blueberries, and four hoop houses on 3.5-acres (Avery 2014). This represents a sophisticated system, requiring knowledge of each crop and the space where it is grown. However, many small-scale farms in Blue Ridge Appalachia operate toward this highly-diversified model.

The markets available for small-scale farms resemble the diversification of their plants. The farmers often participate in multiple markets and often in the same markets. For instance, all of them hold booths at the Watauga County Farmers’ Market, which draws from Watauga and its surrounding counties. All but two operate CSA programs, which offer shareholders mixed-vegetable and value-added products each week based upon pre-season investments. Each participates in direct-to-buyer markets with area restaurants. And many occasionally sell their produce through New River Organic Growers, a farmer-owned cooperative that organizes bulk sales. Each farmer participated in the different markets at different levels; however, all participate in multiple markets with different drop-off or delivery times throughout the week. This requires planning months before the growers plant, so that they can dependably have

produce each week. Unsold produce is typically sold by the farmers to restaurants or absorbed from the farmers' market by charity organizations. Market activity goes beyond the farmers' desire to sell a product.

All of the traits discussed in this work represent actions that Blue Ridge farmers chose to become successful. Each farmer that I interviewed desired to form a sustainable enterprise. For aspiring farmers this meant reaching a point where they could run their own farm. For beginning farmers this meant reaching a point where they could farm on their own land. And for experienced farmers this meant reaching a point where they could feel certain that their enterprise would continue as they age. All of these actions required planning, making lists and continually revising the lists to meet new expectations.

Moving Forward: A Space to Encourage Tomorrow's Growers

Small scale farms are flexible models that can adapt, that are reparative, and hold a closer value to the resiliency of their landscape and local community. This matters as we acknowledge the harm that we have committed upon the earth and seek to heal our planet. It matters as we continue to consider the challenges before emerging farmers. However, it is important to consider how a sovereign food system appears, to urge for change and seek it out in the spaces available to us.

One space for change may be to encourage mentorship experiences. Each of the individuals that I interviewed value mentors, whether through an apprenticeship or through the guidance of previous landowners or through peer-to-peer relationships with other farmers. Forming these connections strengthen the opportunities available for today and tomorrow's farmers because through cooperation, we can work to solve the complicated systematic challenges that inhibit local food systems.

In the winter of 2014, I travelled to Asheville, North Carolina, with a Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture staff member to meet with the Organic Growers School. This organization directs

WNC CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training). The model first emerged in New York's Hudson Valley in 1994 "to bring together farmers and apprentices throughout the region" for farm tours and get-togethers (Ackermen-Leist 2013, 259). And, it has since spread to many other communities. Each organization is unique, but dedicated to the advancement of tomorrow's growers.

I continued to discuss mentorship and apprenticeships with Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture and farmers in my community throughout the 2014 year. By the fall, several established farmers approached Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture about a need to provide structured education and training for their on-farm apprentices. These informal conversations developed into Blue Ridge CRAFT, which formed with the goals of connecting aspiring farmers with established farmer-mentors in the High Country; providing structured educational opportunities and training to aspiring farmers; and, providing labor-management education and assistance to established farmers. I am now the Program Manager for Blue Ridge CRAFT and a staff member at Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture.

During 2015, Blue Ridge CRAFT established a webpage that listed apprenticeship (internship and farm employment) opportunities for twelve farms and gardens in northwestern North Carolina. The program also began a Workshop & Potluck series on a different farm each month. Each gathering focused on a different topic that the host-farmer holds experience in, like record keeping and whole farm plans, integrated pest management, post-harvest handling, marketing locally-grown produce, pasture management, and how to operate small machinery. As each host farmer led participants on a tour of their farm, they fielded questions from other farmers and their apprentices. These small groups averaged 9 people, which allowed easy conversations to develop during the tour.

After each Workshop farm tour, participants gathered under packing sheds or market tents to eat food from their farms. This was important because as we work together to form a

more resilient and just food system and local economy, it is imperative that we encourage candid, meaningful conversations, form durable and inclusive partnerships, engage best practices, and excite innovation and creativity. In these informal moments, those gathered had honest conversations about our community's farms.

To move the program forward, we are currently developing a feedback system where, we can better know our impact. We also plan to continue to form partnerships with organizations in our region who do similar work. We frequently speak with the Organic Growers' Farm Pathways program, which links its CRAFT network with its Farm Link project. Furthermore, we receive regular invitations from food hubs and farmer networks just outside of our immediate service area to share with them what we have learned and how we can join together to promote positive mentor experiences.

For our own farmer network, we plan to hold Roundtables this winter where, we can continue to speak candidly about farm labor. These may include bringing in farmers who are recognized for their management of farm labor. From these Roundtables, we hope to form greater buy-in for strong apprenticeship programs within our sustainable-agriculture community and develop next summer's Workshop & Potluck schedule.

Closing Thoughts

I entered Appalachian State University's Appalachian Studies program very much interested in gathering places, third places, where community members can share space, feel comfortable, and form relationships. Little did I know at the time, the power place, the noun and verb, would hold over me. Gripping me as I sought to define myself and seek direction. It was through the examination of a small general store that my grandmother visited as a child that I became connected to place in such a meaningful way. The potbelly stove in the center of the store worked to not only gather tourists and long-term residents, but also the distant fabulated

and real memories of others who had gathered there. To me, it is a place where memory and present are difficult to untangle.

The barns on my family's Valle Crucis property represent a similar space. They are not just a location for abandoned farm activity near my small summer garden, but a shared symbol on the Appalachian landscape that is loose, fluid, and open to individual experiences gathered into a cultural narrative. I hear my mother's stories of her childhood summers spent exploring the barns, where her uncles would shear sheep. And I envision my grandmother with her childhood playmates doing the same as I sit in her living room and look at old pictures of the barns.

I find an image of the barn that lies near my garden. The photograph is also published in the memoir of Harding Hughes (2002, 46), one of my grandmother's playmates and a summer resident in the mountain community. My mother, my grandmother, Hughes, and I all see the barn differently. We each describe it through our own experiences, viewing it as a discarded relic, a practical tool, or a place of hidden promise. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls this "The piling up of stories on the landscape" (Stewart 1996, 32). To me, this occurs as an act of placing, an act that relates how we know and value the landscape, the emotions it elicits from us, what we hope to see in the land, and how we make choices about its use and management. Stewart writes, "Things do not simply fall into ruin or dissipate in the winds of progress but fashion themselves into powerful effects that remember things in such a way that 'history' digs itself into the present and people can't help but recall it" (Stewart 1996, 111).

Each day, I know that we move closer toward a more equitable and healthy community. I think that the stories shared in this thesis can represent a guidebook from one place: strategies, failures, and successes that several farmers in my community have used to grow their farms. But they can also be viewed as acts of place where, individuals sought to form their lives in a new community.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

My name is David Walker, an Appalachian Studies graduate student at Appalachian State University. I am exploring how emerging farmers, not from an agricultural background, are transitioning into farming. Your responses to the questions below will help me focus my future research.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Location: _____

1. What is your involvement with farming?

1.1. How did you become involved with that?

1.2. Where did you learn about farming?

1.3. Who were your mentors?

1.3.1. Please tell me about their influence on you. 1.4. Why did you become a farmer?

2. Please tell me about your farm.

2.1. What do you produce?

2.2. Where do you sell what you produce?

2.2.1. How long have you done so?

2.2.2. What are some strengths of this method (CSA, Growers Cooperative, Farmers' Market) and place (Farmers' Market, Farm Store, On-the-Farm Store)?

- 2.2.3. What are some challenges of this method (CSA, Growers Cooperative, Farmers' Market) and place (Farmers' Market, Farm Store, On-the-Farm Store)?
- 2.2.4. How do other individuals in this area sell what they produce?
- 2.3. What are you most proud of on your farm?
- 2.4. What are some of the challenges that you faced this year?
 - 2.4.1. What are some of the challenges of farming?
 - 2.4.2. Where do you go if you need capital for an operational purchase?
- 2.5. Where do you go when you have questions?
 - 2.5.1. Who do you seek advice from?
 - 2.5.2. Who are some important people in the local farming community?
 - 2.5.2.1. What do they do?
 - 2.5.2.2. Why are they important?
 - 2.5.3. Who are some important people in agriculture?
 - 2.5.4. What are some important books or websites that you would recommend?
 - 2.5.5. What are some organizations that assist farmers and promote farmers?
 - 2.5.5.1. What do they do?
 - 2.5.5.2. Why are they important?
3. When do you see other farmers?
 - 3.1. Please describe your connections with other farmers.
 - 3.2. What are some issues (local, regional, and global) that farmers talk about?
4. Do you know any new farmers?
 - 4.1. How long have they been farming?
 - 4.2. How do new farmers, not from a farming background, get into farming?
 - 4.3. Where do new farmers go for advice?
 - 4.4. Where do new farmers go for capital?

- 4.5. How do new farmers get access to land?
 - 4.5.1. Are there ways for new farmers to get access to land without having a lot of capital?
- 4.6. What questions would you ask someone, not from a farming background, who is interested in becoming a farmer?
5. How has farming changed for you since you began farming?
 - 5.1. How has this area changed (since you began farming or moved here)?
6. Where do you see your farm in five years?
 - 6.1. What about in fifteen years?
 - 6.2. How do you see this area in five years?
 - 6.3. What changes do you see in agriculture in five or ten years?
7. How would you describe a sustainable community?
 - 7.1. How would you describe sustainable agriculture?
 - 7.1.1. Why is (not using genetically-modified organisms, organic methods, no till...) important?
 - 7.2. Is it important that individuals eat local food? Why?
 - 7.2.1. Are there barriers to eating locally? Why might those be?
 - 7.3. What are some challenges for communities or regions that want to become sustainable (durable)?
 - 7.4. What are some opportunities for communities or regions that want to become sustainable (durable)?
 - 7.5. What projects are you excited about in this community?
8. Is there anything that you think I should have asked?
9. Who else should I speak with?
10. Please tell me your name and a little bit about yourself.

Biographical Information

Born in Burlington, North Carolina, Dave graduated from Sewanee: The University of the South with a degree in American Studies. He then worked as the Senior Copywriter at CreateHere, a placemaking organization in Chattanooga, Tennessee; as an Editorial Intern and fact-checker at The Oxford American magazine; and, with community groups in Alamance County, North Carolina, to form a textile-community museum and a downtown farmers' market.

Dave is an Appalachian Studies graduate student with a concentration in Sustainable Development and a Geographic Information Science (GIS) Graduate Certificate at Appalachian State University. Where, he held an internship with the University's Edible Schoolyard. Through his research and public work, Dave seeks to assist emerging entrepreneurs and farmers find resources and form partnerships in the Blue Ridge Mountains.