

Passing Organic Farmland to the next generation, a Southwest Michigan Eutopia

*One of four Pre-conference Field Trips sponsored by the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society
Organized by Laura DeLind, Ken Dahlberg, Maynard Kaufman, and Taylor Reid
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A synopsis by Jon Towne

Windshadow Farm and Dairy Ron and Suzanne Klein
Martindale-Towne Place Jon Towne and Bobbi Martindale
Sunflower Farm Maynard Kaufman and Barbara Geisler
Blue Dog Family Farm Dennis and Shawna Wilcox
Eater's Guild Lee and Laurie Arboreal

Starting out a beautiful, not too hot early summer day, a charter bus left Lansing and traveled to a loose community of “back to the landers” just north of Bangor MI. Led by Taylor Reid, this group of 15, visited 5 “farmsteads” and peeked into the lives of their occupants, each a couple, and attempted to extract a glimpse of what their motivations, goals and strategies are.

A little history is in order.

In 1973, Maynard and Sally Kaufman bought a 100 acre farm just north of Bangor and christened it the “School of Homesteading”. Set in the context of the Oil Embargo and swiftly rising energy prices, Western Michigan University, Dept of Religion faculty member Maynard Kaufman, realized that cheap energy was the foundation of our economy, standard of living and food system, without which, everything including food, could become much more costly. That year Maynard and Sally brought into their lives 8 students who lived on the farm and learned organic farming and food preservation skills, “homesteading”. In this period of the winding down of the catastrophic Vietnam War, new Watergate revelations about government corruption, and a blossoming environmental awareness, many felt that they had to take “life in their own hands”, leaving the perceived fakery of middle class life. So armed with these values, Maynard and Sally passed on their knowledge to dozens of people later in the 70's and 80's. In the period around 1980 they increased their farm size to 160 acres and helped form the Michigan Land Trust which soon acquired a small farm through donation across the street. Maynard persuaded WMU to offer this additional living/leaning homesteading program, which for a few years to follow, introduced many more people to this way of life (more on this later).

Many of these people went on to incorporate homesteading skills and values into their lives in varying degrees, some buying land, others integrating them into their professional and personal lives. But the focus of this field trip was to see the results of Maynard's and his later wife Barbara's “retirement” where they built an off the grid house and also sold pieces of their farm to 3 couples, all of whom, are attempting to get “sustenance” and to make a living off the land in quite different ways. The second farm visit was to the former Land Trust Homesteading Farm bought by a couple from the Michigan Land Trust where “self provisioning” by people with outside jobs continues to be practiced.



Each of the 5 farm visits was to last only 40 minutes, but each the presenters were effective in giving their visitors a picture of what they are about. Here's a summary of each visit and tour.

Ron and Suzanne, in the short 3 years since they bought the “north” 40 acres from Maynard and Barbara, have already created an impressive goat dairy (85 milking at present).

Ron and Suzanne have a partnership with Fennville based Evergreen Lane Creamery (<http://www.evergreenlanefarm.com/>) who make artisan cheese out of their goat milk. Some selections were served at lunch later. Evergreen Lane also takes their kids (goat!) and raises them. They also have partnerships with other individuals who garden for themselves and for Ron and Suzanne.



They have cylindrical tension fabric barns built of recycled materials, which provide plenty of healthy open space for the goats. The grade A dairy parlor is a “building within a building” and is spotless when viewed through the doorway.

With energy saving measures, they have reduced their monthly energy use from 1000 KWH to 600. The home and cheese house (still under construction) were built with structural integrated panels and are highly insulated. A Heartland wood stove heats the house, preheats hot water and serves as a cook stove. Solar water heaters also preheat water for the dairy and home. Photovoltaics with batteries provide power for many functions and provide a partial backup when the power grid goes down. Ron did have to spray milk on the pastures during the recent power outage not having power to run the bulk tank. Ron showed off his Polaris Ranger EV electric ORV equipped with 240 watt PV panel, battery and 110v outlets. Besides running the electric log splitters and chain saw, Ron states it does 85 % of the chores done by their conventional tractor.

Water management on this rolling clay based soils is vital, Ron learned after the drought of last year and the bountiful spring rains of this year. Water storage swales are in evidence managing runoff. Barn area runoff is managed separately relying on specialized vegetation to remove nutrients. Much of this earth moving was funded by a USDA National Resources Conservation Services grant. One swale had a solar powered pump providing drinking water for the goats.



Their pasteurized cheeses are marketed through southwest Michigan restaurants and retail outlets. Ron is very focused on meeting all regulatory requirements of a Grade A dairy, made more difficult by “nonstandard” alternative energy incorporation. No one can say the Kleins' don't have their hands full!



Next, everyone piled in the bus and “journeyed” across the street to the Martindale-Towne place.

(Obligatory disclosure: Yours truly gave this tour)

Jon and Bobbi's place is similar in size but is a result of different goals. Jon and Bobbi both work off the farm and use the 36 acre farm to grow vegetables and beef. Jon presented a history which is intertwined with that of the other farmsteads. In 1976, Maynard and 2 others including a wealthy philanthropist, formed the previously mentioned Michigan Land Trustees of America with the goal of improving and attempting to make universal, access to land and food production. Soon a farm was bought and donated to MLT, becoming this 36 acre Land Trust Homesteading Farm. In 1978, through Maynard's guidance, a Homesteading Practice” program started as a class at Western Michigan University where, following the model of the School of Homesteading, people came to live and learn small scale farming and “self provisioning”. Up to 10 students participated at a time and the program in altered form continued through 1984. Jon was an instructor for some of that time period. After this, and for some years, permaculture became a focus and a Permaculture Design Course was held on the farm. A permaculture plan was devised, some of which was followed in succeeding years. Later in 1994 Jon and Bobbi bought the farm from MLT at market value. Money from this sale continues to be used to fund MLT projects.



Jon and Bobbi continue to use the farm for growing food, and also to sell beef. Examples of permaculture structures and practices are the multitude of trees planted (thinnings make up a good percentage of firewood used to heat the house) and a runoff pond which greatly increases the complexity of the farm ecosystem. They eat hazelnuts, chestnuts, persimmons and even a few pecans from the trees planted. A short walk by the group highlighted some of the components of the nearby farmscape.



Next the group went to the “center” (both geographically and in the sense of “originator”) of this community of “eutopians” by visiting Maynard and Barbara's Sunflower farm. This “off the grid” farmstead was built in 2001 and has been their home since. A description of this place can be found on the MLT website: www.michiganlandtrust.org. On this tour, Maynard gave a history, much of it was summarized at the beginning of this article. He helped found the Organic Grower's of Michigan soon after moving out to Bangor in 1973. While OGM is no longer in existence, in 1991 he helped found MOFFA, Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance, which is

still very much in existence and active. In fact, Lee Arboreal just joined the Board of this organization. In later and recent years Maynard and Barbara have been concerned and active with issues concerning climate change. They continue to focus on energy and are involved in the anti fracking movement and testifying at many hearings and forums against nuclear power. In the last few years, Maynard authored the book: [Adapting to the End of Oil Toward an Earth Centered Spirituality](#) available from Amazon and elsewhere.

Their energy efficient house has many alternative energy features and is well insulated. The masonry stove at the center heats where passive solar leaves off and is Maynard's pride and joy. The heavy brickwork allows the stove to retain heat for 24 hrs or more after the clean short lived fire goes out. Solar panels heat water for domestic use while helping heat the house with hydronics built into the floor. Outside 10 100 watt PV panels are mounted on a passive "tracker" which follows the sun by a delicate balance powered by the sun's heat turning liquid freon in the surrounding tubing into its lighter gaseous form. This provides much of the power in the warmer seasons. In addition 2 wind generators provide the remaining power needs year round. A discussion followed about the "dumping" of solar panels by China suppressing PV manufacturing in the USA while making solar panels cheap making it a good time to buy PV panels. Solar energy also powers the photosynthesis occurring in the vegetable gardens, fruit trees and vines present around the house.



Maynard expressed his sense of satisfaction in selling significant portions of his farm to a younger generation. As a teacher, passing on his experience has always been a life work.

Ken Dahlberg, an organizer of this event and MLT chairperson said a few things about MLT including a plug to visit the website www.michiganlandtrust.org where all the newsletters since 1979 are available to read along with many other resources. MLT has been instrumental in helping found the very successful Harvest Festival at Tillers International and the Greater Grand Rapids Food Council.

Lunch at Maynard's and Barbara's was provided by Lee and Laurie Arboreal with grilled goat burgers and choices of greens including Laurie's "massaged kale". Several cheeses from Evergreen Lane Creamery were featured. Being hungry after this was not an option!



The bus then pointed towards Dennis and Shawna's Blue Dog Family Farm. Even though it originally was part of the "School of Homesteading" property, it is the most remote, the bus having to go around to the back, go down a long driveway then over the railroad tracks. This 28 acres is bordered on one side by the tracks and by the Black River on another. Dennis relates how in 2002 he was looking for a farm and met Maynard. They walked over his 160 acres, and Dennis was attracted to the part behind the tracks because the river

and the woodland were included with it. Dennis immediately began growing vegetables and started a CSA (a subscription based Community Supported Agriculture). Dennis and Shawna continue the CSA on their 7 acres in cultivation but also sell at the Bank Street and Texas Township farmers markets in Kalamazoo and the People's Food Coop there. Dennis states they are the only certified organic seller at the Bank St Market. They are just starting to sell wholesale to B&B Organics and Whole Foods in Mishawaka, IN.

Their newly and largely self built house is nestled in the edge of the woods. Like Maynard's and Barbara they are off the grid, using photovoltaics and a wind generator to provide electric power. While focusing on greens, many other vegetables are grown. "Hi Tunnel" greenhouses extend their growing season.

Dennis and Shawna are also invested in educating others by having an apprentice program. They presently have two and a paid worker. They try to structure the education as ½ outside food production and ½ inside food processing. Don't hesitate to visit www.bluedogfamilyfarm.com and sign up for one of the classes they offer!



Lee and Laurie Arboreal with daughter Iris bought the original farmstead in 2003. The large Victorian brick house with many outbuildings were the core of the original 100 acre farm the Kaufman's bought back in 1973. In the last 10 yrs besides adding a son, Leif, to the family they have grown in many ways, adding new buildings, serving 200 families in their CSA, and growing and marketing new crops and products. They are aptly named Eaters Guild, because the diversity and connections are many and seem to evolve with experience and their needs. For example they switched from raising broiler chickens to free range turkeys utilizing turkey's innate foraging skills. They stopped having cattle, focusing more on goats. Lee has a saw mill and is able to provide his own lumber for fencing and construction. He talked about "rescuing" a large fallen tulip tree down the road and utilizing the logs, one of which had a 43 inch base, to make fencing. This year they are dabbling in growing grain for their animals.



Besides their CSA, a lot of produce goes to Farmer's Markets such as the South Haven Market and to Whole Foods. Laurie milks their 12 goats and they are in the process of putting in a certified cheese kitchen. Laurie makes different goat cheeses. They have always had interns participating and living in this living/learning environment. Many continue on including one who bought a local farm. Lee and Lauri also hire locally to help with their crops.

The quality of the questions asked and the comments that the visitors made at each of the five sites suggested that they were not only very interested, but very appreciative of the chance to explore this Southwest Michigan Eutopia. For all of us involved, it also felt like a very memorable day.