

Farm Journal: Chronicles of a Farming Change Agent

BY MICHAEL TABOR, LICKING CREEK BEND FARM

For almost 50 years, I've been keeping a farm journal — notes to myself on what works or fails with growing fruits and vegetables without chemicals on our farm, Licking Creek Bend Farm. (It's actually required by most certifiers who grant their "seal of approval" to consumers and the public.) Each of my journal entries starts by detailing the work of the day — a typical day on our 60-acre sustainable farm, which has been "worker run" for several years.

Here's a sample:

I worked applying sticky glue to the decoy apples to catch any stray plum curculio and other insects that might emerge. So far, only one 'smiley face' bite spotted on the trees and very little "CAR" (Cedar Apple Rust).

I'll spend a chunk of time today hand-spraying applets and pears for additional protection — with surround (liquid clay). Very minimal rain since the last spray. A little psylla on one of the pear trees I have to get with surround. Plus various errands today in Hancock and McConnellsburg but it's early and I still have plenty of time. (From Journal #48, 5/18/21)

When my former wife Martha and I started 48 years ago, there were only a handful of organic vegetable and fruit farmers in the Washington-Baltimore area. Licking Creek Bend Farm was part of the movement to bring produce from a rural area to the city. For these nearly 50 years now, including the last 35 with my wife and partner, Esther Siegel, we've run one of the oldest neighborhood farm markets in the DC

metropolitan area in Adams Morgan (and are now also in Brookland and Anacostia), featuring produce grown less than 100 miles away.

Two years ago, when the pandemic hit and we could not invite folks to visit the farm, I decided to broaden the farm journal concept to include my memoirs and political and spiritual commentary on the way I've lived my life. I've been an activist most of my adult life. So, we're talking more than just opinions and theories, but outrage, engagement, action and change. I was a Jewish boy from the housing projects in Brooklyn, New York, and ended up an independent, socially active organic farmer. My farm journal, which still includes daily farm entries, records it all.

I'm involved in a writer's process each day. I rise at 4:00 am. I write by hand — I've never advanced to the digital universe — then I give my writing to Esther, who types them into her computer. As I waken, my



Mike protesting at the G8 Summit in May 2012.

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mind allows me gentle access to hidden memories I've blocked or put aside for future awakening — the formerly "closed portals" — then I begin writing.

My past writing has been for a political purpose, meant to stir the consciousness of readers to take some appropriate action. When I moved to the DC area from New York in 1963 to attend grad school at the University of Maryland, I realized the region was segregated. I became active in the civil rights movement — mostly in CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. We picketed stores, banks, movie houses, and housing that would not hire people of color or permit them equal access. That also involved getting arrested when we "sat in" and refused to leave segregated facilities.

In the summer of 1964 I went door-to-door in a Black voter registration campaign west of Durham, North Carolina, largely on dirt roads. In these rural Southern communities, poor Blacks and whites sometimes lived next door — maybe a few hundred feet apart.

At one home, the white family saw my denim bib overalls and CORE button with a white hand shaking a black one and immediately knew what I was doing. Guys were drinking beer in a nearby pick up truck with a gun rack and I knew it would be foolish to try to run. I had a co-worker nearby but he was out of sight. My best defense, I thought, was humor.

When they asked me, "Why are you goddamn White Yankees down here to make trouble?" or something like that. I said, "I'm not a white Yankee, I'm a Brooklyn Dodger. And a Jew." My attempt at humor (and honesty) didn't go over well because one guy came after me with a baseball bat — and I have no memory of what happened after I got hit in the head.... but what I do know is they [each] contributed to my determination to follow my path toward social justice and civil



Mike Tabor with his wife Esther.

rights. (From Farm Journal 3/29/21)

We also challenged the churches and synagogues that agreed with the theory of civil rights but refused to act, or wanted laws passed or time to "study the problem". I became as upset with liberals as with the segregationists.

Many years later, when one of my children attended public school and I found the hallways crowded with junk food and soda machines, others and I campaigned to remove the machines, as well as to feed students with healthier food in the cafeteria. I did not get much sym-

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Farm Journal...

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pathy from PTAs or the school administration (the machines were a cash cow for schools). We did manage to get the vending machines with sodas and unhealthy treats turned off until after school.

Once, when speaking at a Maryland State meeting of nutritionists, the state director of nutrition cautioned those entrusted with protecting children's health, "Remember, Mr. Tabor is a 'change agent'", a term I hadn't encountered before.

So, I suppose that's what I am. A change agent.

My journal offers stories and beliefs from my perspective for those who learn from, debate and challenge racial injustice, GMOs and pesticide-laden food, work toward food justice and more. My life's been lived by finding allies who agree on these progressive positions and working with them for positive change.

...This morning in Takoma Park, we'll volunteer with Small Things Matter, a local non-profit which supplies enough food to help feed 400 families in our community. We volunteer 2 to 5 hours a week, but dozens of our neighbors spend 30 to 40 hours a week raising money, picking up the food, baking, cooking and securing free or discounted supplies and food from local businesses. Along with the adults, dozens of school kids volunteer. This goodwill is duplicated all around our county and country as a response to the hardships cause by the Covid 19 pandemic. (From Farm Journal 4/2/21)

Farm life is hard, but farming during a pandemic has presented new challenges. This season many farms, as with other businesses, have experienced an unusual challenge in hiring staff. Our farm, for



Licking Creek Bend Farm staff and volunteers work their stand at Brookland Farmers Market.

example, is live and work, worker-run. The staff does the hiring. Through daily meetings the staff knows what needs to be done and together figures out how to get that work done. The work is hard and because of timing to plant, nurture and harvest for market and CSA days, some days are stressful.

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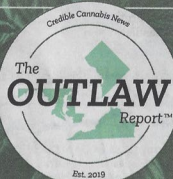
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up Charmaine Peters, our 14-year farm manager. She spent mid-November to the end of March working in the DC area, painting, re-organizing homes and even relaxing a bit. This is how the farm has been operating for the last 15 years or so. Without both of them, we wouldn't be farming.

Before coming to the farm, Charmaine worked in a decently paying DC non-profit. New farm staff will start in mid-May. Their day will begin at 7:00 am with a 30- to 45-minute breakfast and staff meeting, discussing the day's tasks: crops needing to be nurtured, making decisions and other items to keep the farm running and meeting its goal of bringing healthfully grown produce to mixed income neighborhoods in Washington, DC. (From Farm Journal 4/2/21)

We're a farm that believes that food, housing, jobs and healthcare are necessities and that a country as rich as ours should provide those to everyone. We are part of several subsidy programs and food pantries that provide fresh produce from farms to families across the DC metropolitan area.

While farming is hard work, there is also downtime, time to swim in the creek, go for hikes, explore the region, cycle along rivers and countryside. It can be quite meditative and spiritual. There is something "organic" about tending the field, planting, nurturing and harvesting. It allows one's mind to empty of the "noise" in our heads. And in the quiet and stillness of the farm, you can focus on being out in the fresh air, the only sounds being the bees, birds and rustling leaves. You take pleasure in helping plants grow into nutritious food and then interacting at the market with the people who will eat the food you have grown, knowing that what they consume was grown without harmful chemicals. The experience of working at markets enables staff to meet the customers and enjoy the fruits of their labor.

The average workers the last several years have been college educated women in their late 20's to early 30's wanting to learn the farm trade and have time off from office or restaurant jobs. We once had a professional "stripper" in her 20's... Another young woman who worked the farm travelled around the world with friends during the winter and then returned to the farm the next season. Seasonal farming is a grounding experience, offering lots of time to think about the future and save money to travel off season. (From Farm Journal 4/14/21)

If you are interested in farm work, and can handle the hard, but rewarding work, try to volunteer at a farm for a week and check it out. The work is seasonal, which in our region means April - November. Most farms offer several different types of positions that range from unpaid internships to full employment. Some farms are "live and work" and others have day positions. Salaries can start from around \$500 - \$1,000/month including insurance, room and board and incentives to return the next season. [See sidebar].

For those who want to put words to actions but can't commit to farm work, think of volunteering at a farm stand, especially one that serves the limited income communities. For example, at our markets in Adams Morgan, Brookland and Anacostia, we offer food in exchange for volunteering. Try helping once, and if you like it, become a regular. It's a wonderful opportunity to meet lots of interesting people, and to discuss recipes, different produce and nutrition, and issues of mutual interest and concern.

I've decided to keep writing...until my words and energy run out. Some appropriate conclusion, as I turn 79.

For more information about our farms in the region, and volunteer opportunities, contact info@lickingcreekbendfarm.com. All staff needs to be in good shape, non-smokers and able to eat a vegetarian diet and have a current driver's license. If you're an early riser, there's time for yoga, meditation and running.

CASA memberships are available on Saturdays and Tuesdays at our Adams Morgan Farmers Market, Brookland Farmers Market and Takoma Park (address given with membership). Copied from Michael Tabor's Farm Journal are available at the Takoma Park Spring Food Co-op, or at their farm markets. Look for Mike

Several farm organizations can refer potential farm workers and volunteers to jobs. Here are just a few:

1. In MD, CASA (Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture) www.futureharvestcasa.org
2. MOFFA (Maryland Organic Food and Farmers Association) www.marylandorganic.org
3. PASA (Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture) www.pasafarming.org
4. Pearlstone Conference & Retreat Center www.pearlstonecenter.org

Here are some specific farms to check out:

1. Licking Creek Bend Farm www.lickingcreekbendfarm.com
2. Eco City Farms www.ecoffshoots.org/programs/bladensburg-farm/
3. One Straw Farm www.onestrawfarm.com
4. Wilson College Farm www.wilson.edu/fulton-farm

Licking Creek Bend Farm Markets in the DC Area

1. ADAMS MORGAN FARMERS MARKET
Columbia Rd and Euclid Streets, NW
Every Saturday through December 18, 2021
8:30am - 1:00pm, rain or shine
2. WARD 8 FARMERS MARKET
At the parking lot behind Martin Luther King Elementary School, 3200 6th Street SE, just off of Alabama Avenue.
Saturdays, through October
10:00am - 1:00pm, rain or shine
3. TUESDAY BROOKLAND FARMERS MARKET
At the Brookland Metro, under the bridge at 10th and Octa.
Every Tuesday through October
10:00 - 1:00pm, rain or shine