

BROADENING THE CONCEPT OF CIVIC AGRICULTURE: THE HISTORY OF CIVIC  
FOOD SYSTEMS IN PROGRESSIVE ERA GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

BY

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## ABSTRACT

### BROADENING THE CONCEPT OF CIVIC AGRICULTURE: THE HISTORY OF CIVIC FOOD SYSTEMS IN PROGRESSIVE ERA GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

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A decade ago, Thomas Lyson coined the term civic agriculture to describe how food production and distribution can be embedded in communities through citizen participation (2000). The majority of literature that followed tended to frame civic agriculture as a wholly contemporary phenomenon, most pronounced by the increasing number of farmers markets in the United States since the 1970s. Farmers markets and community gardens existing prior to this resurgence are portrayed as either historical remnants that lost their importance during the rise of supermarkets in the 1920s or simply sources of reasonably priced food in times of economic crisis. The results of this local inquiry in Grand Rapids, Michigan suggest that this may be oversimplification. The farmers markets in Grand Rapids were established while the number of grocery stores was increasing. Additionally, community gardens in Grand Rapids were not specifically cultivated for reasonably priced food, but to educate residents about agriculture and food production while beautifying the city. These developments in Grand Rapids can be considered an example of civic food systems, which is a more nuanced concept of civic agriculture that puts as much emphasis on urban populations as rural. This study analyzes historical data using a civic food systems model with a focus on public work and civic markets. It is found that the action of citizens in Grand Rapids exemplified public work in their pursuit to solve community food issues, and the results thereof, at least in respect to farmers markets, created a more civic food system.

## DEDICATION

To my wife Kelly and daughters Piper and Melena for their support and understanding

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## PREFACE

In 2005, I worked with a handful of residents in Grand Rapids to transfer management of the Fulton Street Farmers Market over to the Midtown Neighborhood Association. Interest in the market was strong among community members, but was becoming a burden for the City Parks Department, who were responsible for its maintenance. We saw an opportunity to place the market in the hands of the local community to ensure its future importance as a ninety-year-old, neighborhood farmers market. Although the previous management, which was handled privately under contract, had done an excellent job keeping the market alive through the lean times of popularity in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was becoming apparent that the city no longer was willing to invest in the market.

For three years I acted as the market manager, learning the idiosyncrasies of farmers market politics and economics. During this time, my wife and I were active with a site-specific revitalization plan in the Midtown Neighborhood. This plan found its impetus in an initiative started a few years earlier. Each of the sections in Midtown had been designated as sub-neighborhoods and given a name which reflected their historic nature. These new designations gave residents a sense of place based on who had built the area in which they lived. Although the vast majority of residents had no direct relation to the founders, history gave them a common identity with which to promote and develop their own neighborhood together. The final step in the revitalization project was to improve the oldest section of the neighborhood, known as the Brikyaat, which is where the Fulton Street Farmers Market has operated since 1922.

The Brikyaat section of Midtown is one of the oldest sections of Grand Rapids, but does not have a well-understood history. It was started as an immigrant enclave of Dutch workers who labored in the local brickyards and factories, not a very sexy topic in a city started by wooly

fur traders and made famous by high-class furniture barons. I began an informal investigation into this section of Grand Rapids and was able to piece together some information which had been collected by a local historian (Ippel 1994). I found that the market itself did not have much in the way of written history, however. I initially wanted to better understand how the market started and why it had persisted for so long. I figured this information would be valuable as we moved into a phase of rehabilitation at the market. Having an eye on what has worked for over ninety years would be valuable to better inform how to move into the future.

Initial research consisted of various interviews with elder residents who had recollections of going to all three of the farmers markets which existed in Grand Rapids prior to the 1970s. Every person had fond memories of the farmers markets, but were not exactly sure why they were started and why the other two disappeared. Before pursuing more ethnographic data on the history of the markets in Grand Rapids I began to visit the local archives to better understand the early history of the markets.

What I found in my initial research was a surprise. Grand Rapids did not have any retail farmers markets prior to 1917. This seemed odd. Most of the current scholarship on local food, alternative food systems, etc. tends to have an underlying assumption that the current movement toward food localization, most pronounced by the unprecedented growth of farmers markets, is in essence a type of *relocalization*. Farmers markets are portrayed as the most common traditional arrangement for food provision in cities, dominant until the chain grocer and supermarket took over. My research was telling me otherwise.

I was uncovering what looked like a paradox. The Progressive Era, roughly between 1900 and 1930, was punctuated with a massive growth of chain grocers around the country. At the same time, as was the case in Grand Rapids, there was a growth of publically-owned retail

farmers markets. According to the available data, many of these markets were established in cities that did not have official markets prior. Of course, there could have been unofficial markets on streets and privately owned markets. Still, why would there be a growth of markets right when they were allegedly disappearing in the wake of supermarkets? This question led to an abandonment of efforts to write a history specifically on the Fulton Street Farmers Market. I wanted to look into how and why public retail farmers markets<sup>1</sup> appeared in Grand Rapids, beginning in 1917.

The inclusion of gardens with the farmers markets was a serendipitous development. I did not think about gardening until some letters accidentally tumbled out of a folder I pulled out of a box in the City's archives. They were letters from residents asking the City Comptroller permission to garden on vacant lots around the city. These were written during the First World War so I figured that they were part of the War Gardens or Liberty Gardens which were popular at the time. Further database research suggested that community gardens were important in Grand Rapids prior to the War as they provided reasonably-priced food, but also to improved agricultural literacy among the youth. The markets, however, are the main focus of this work, as this is the area where historians have not made much progress. Additionally, the story in Grand Rapids leads to further analysis as to the role of women in starting the first farmers markets in the United States which were started in opposition to a larger, industrialized food system, an

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms "public retail market" and "retail farmers market" throughout in reference publically-owned farmers markets. Farmers market is defined by the USDA as "A common facility or area where several farmers or growers gather on a regular, recurring basis to sell a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and other locally-grown farm products directly to consumers." See Burns, A. F., and D. N. Johnson. 1996. *Farmers' Markets Survey Report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service, Transportation and Marketing Division, Wholesale and Alternative Markets Program.

*alternative* if you will. This work was originally a narrative without a strong analytic framework, meant simply to construct a story. Data continues to pile up, and I hope to continue my initial pursuit of providing Grand Rapids a history of its farmers markets in the future.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The retail [farmers] market will become an institution in Grand Rapids. The turning over of vacant city lots to householders [for gardens] is also a splendid idea. These things show the spirit of Grand Rapids. It is the most constructive thing that can be done in this community. Eva McCall Hamilton 1917 (City Retail Market)

Over 5,000 farmers markets have been started in the United States during the last two decades (USDA 2011). At the same time, there are currently over 18,000 community gardens (ACGA 2011). Thomas Lyson considered these to be part of what he called “civic agriculture” (2000). According to Lyson, civic agriculture is the embedding of food production, processing, and distribution in local communities (2004). The way to these food arrangements is local problem solving through civic engagement (Lyson 2005). Lyson and other supporters claimed that farmers markets and community gardens which have resulted from this civic engagement are wholly contemporary. Earlier farmers markets are viewed simply as leftovers of a time when farmers markets were ubiquitous and community gardens were simple measures to provide emergency food security (Lyson 2004; Allen *et al.* 2003; Hartsfield and Henderson 2009; Gillespie *et al.* 2008). This study suggests that the historical foundation for such assumptions is lacking, however.

This study begins to question the perception that civic agriculture is solely a current concept. There may be instances of civic engagement prior to the last few decades which also led to more localized food systems that could be defined by civic agriculture. The results of this local inquiry in Grand Rapids, Michigan show that early twentieth century citizens worked together to establish and promote spaces for direct marketing and urban gardening which did not previously exist, building a more civic food system. Retail farmers markets were established during the late 1910s in reaction to new forms of food distribution consolidation, providing food



security by lowering prices through direct marketing. However, they also had peripheral non-economic benefits which may or may not have been intentional, such as providing spaces where residents could purchase fresh food in a collective atmosphere which brought agricultural sensuality into the city. Community gardens were begun a few years earlier to intentionally reintegrate agriculture into the urban landscape. Improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables through community gardens became more important as the escalating war made food production and conservation a priority.

The work which started and continued these developments can be considered a form of civic agriculture in that local residents demanded spaces for, and worked together toward direct marketing and urban gardening, thereby regaining partial control over a distribution system that no longer was governed at a community level. This inquiry is informed by a more nuanced concept of civic agriculture which considers civic engagement public work. It is argued that the action of citizens in Grand Rapids during the time period known as the Progressive Era<sup>2</sup> (roughly 1900-1930) exemplified public work in their pursuit to solve community food issues. The results thereof, at least in respect to farmers markets, were what have been termed civic markets, defined by localized governance of food systems (DuPuis 2006).

In the summer of 1917, the city of Grand Rapids opened the Leonard Street Farmers Market, its first publically-owned retail farmers market. For the first time in over twenty years a space existed in the city where urban dwellers had the opportunity to purchase farm-fresh fruits and vegetables directly from farmers. The opening of the Leonard Street Farmers Market was

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term Progressive Era simply as a designation for a time period. As has been rightly argued, much of the “progressive era” was not very “progressive.” Eugenics and campaigns for coercive sterilization of “defectives” by economic and social leaders is an example. See Leonard, T.C. Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era. 2005. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 19(4): 207-224.

part of a larger effort by a group of citizens, led mainly by politically engaged women, to improve the food security of every household in the city and bring citizens closer to food and agriculture. Along with two other markets, including the current Fulton Street Farmers Market (figure 1), various gardening initiatives were promoted during this time not only to increase food security in light of high food prices, but also teach residents how to grow, process, and also enjoy food and flowers. These farmers markets and gardens resulted from mass meetings, social research, direct political involvement, public education, and other forms of civic engagement aimed at promoting not only working class household access to healthy, safe, nutritious food, but also self-reliance on a local level, which are defining elements of not only community food security (Kortright and Wakefield 2011), but also civic agriculture.

Civic agriculture eschews neoclassical reliance on consumer choice in promoting food system localization. Instead, it promotes a food system model defined by active democratic involvement of producers and consumers in solving community issues (Lyson 2004, 2005). Within this model, local markets not only support small to medium-sized farmers, but also actively connect those who eat food to the people and places from which their food originates. Consumers are not passive actors, simply expressing their civic duty through their pocketbooks and forks, and producers are not growing for a market of which they have no control. Rather, they operate together as dynamic “food citizens” with an active voice in how food makes its way from farms to plates (Wilkins 2005).

Civic agriculture is expressed in institutions that connect “food citizens together in place,” such as farmers markets, community gardens, and community supported agriculture (Lyson 2004; 2005). These arrangements, part of what have been termed alternative food initiatives or local food networks, are considered to be modern, arising over the last few decades,

beginning in the wake of 1960s social activism (Allen *et al.* 2003; Gillespie *et al.* 2008; Hinrichs *et al.* 2004).



Figure 1. The East Side Market in 1927, now known as the Fulton Street Farmers Market. (Photo: Grand Rapids City Archives, Parks and Recreation Department, Photographs, City Markets, Series No. 22-10, Box No. 3/d/1, 004182, 810.004182, C045.004182).

Although community supported agriculture is a relatively new idea, farmers markets and community gardens have a much longer history in the United States. However, farmers markets in the early twentieth century are simply not acknowledged as important alternatives, but remnants of a time when direct marketing was the norm, or as Lyson claimed, when “most cities

had at least one farmers market” (2004: 91). The “archetypal new farmers market” began in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s following the Direct to Consumer Marketing Act. These markets are elevated beyond a simple agricultural market to a place of “alterity or ‘otherness’ in relation to the commercial food retail sector,” (Smithers and Joseph 2009: 239; Brown 2002; Hinrichs *et al.* 2004).

Growth of Public Retail Farmers Markets in the United States: 1800-1947

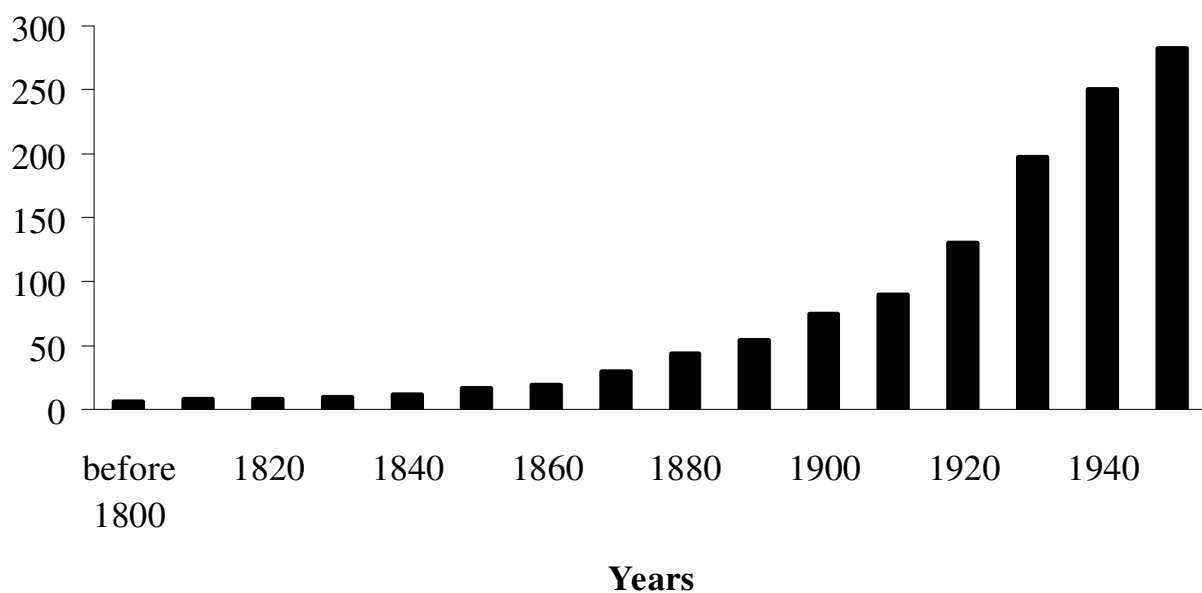


Figure 2. The number of publically-owned retail farmers markets grew all the way through the Second World War. Data from Wann *et al.* 1948 and adjusted using Ulrey 1936.

Farmers markets are generally accepted to have lost importance when advancements in transportation, along with chain grocers and supermarkets emerged in the first half of the twentieth century (Gillespie *et al.* 2008; Lyson 2004; Gerbasi 2006). Chain retail grocers did increase 2800% between 1910 and 1930 across the United States (Mitchell and Sherman 1955). However, as farmers market historian Helen Tangires pointed out, (2003: 205), “That grocery stores, and later supermarkets, replaced the public market obscures a larger, more complex

history.” Chain grocers and supermarkets may have grown at a startling rate, yet national data suggests that the number of farmers markets also grew during the same time (figure 2), many times in cities which may never have previously had a retail farmers market (Wann *et al.* 1948).

Contemporary community gardens have also been recontextualized to have a different meaning than their historical counterparts. Community gardens prior to those started in the last few decades are generally looked at as stop-gap measures used to provide cheap food in times of crisis such as wars and depressions (Henderson and Hartsfield 2009; Hanna and Oh 2000). According to Lyson (2004: 96), modern gardens are set apart as “more than just sources of almost free food for poor and low-income people.” Current community gardens are viewed as spaces that bring people together to do more than grow food, but also develop deep and meaningful cultural and social ties, while also beautifying the urban landscape (Salvadir-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). Why do scholars assume that people in the early 1900s came together at community gardens for only economic reasons? Why is it assumed that farmers markets were a given in cities, and that where they existed they were simply remnants of a local food system and not an important alternative?

Answers to these questions are in the theoretical and historical foundations of civic agriculture. Lyson drew heavily on the disciplines of rural sociology and agricultural history (Lyson 2004). Agricultural historians have split the development of agriculture into epochs of technological advancements and developments on the farm. These are used as signposts in their timeline. Simply viewing the history of agriculture as a series of developments based on farm efficiency ignores much of what actually influences how and what farmers grow. Farming as food production, not simply as grain and meat production, is the elephant in the room looming over the agricultural historian as he or she pores over statistical records of inputs and yields

(Coclanis 2005; Fitzgerald 2005). The way food is distributed and processed has had, and continues to have, definite impacts on both urban eaters and the rural communities that produce food. However, the distribution of agricultural products other than grains and meat has been virtually ignored in the history of agriculture.

The social framework of civic agriculture relies upon the seminal works of C. Wright Mills, Melvin Ulmer, and Walter Goldschmidt, all of whom focused on the effects of the corporatization of agriculture on rural communities following the Second World War (Lyson 2004; Lyson and Guptill 2004). Therefore, the effects of commoditization in the food system prior to World War Two tend to get overshadowed by those created in the wake of the chemical and biotechnical revolutions of the last sixty years. Additionally, rural populations are the main focus, giving short shrift to the key consumers of agricultural products: urban dwellers.

This study ignores on-farm agricultural developments, of which a massive canon has already been created. Instead, it focuses on how distribution of agricultural products affected the final consumers of food in an urban area during the early part of the twentieth century. The focus is not on rural communities, but on the urban eaters of food, as they are just as responsible for, and deserving of, a just and sustainable food system, which brings up a slight critique of the term civic agriculture. A more useful term would be civic food systems.

The term civic agriculture is too narrow. Civic agriculture relies heavily on interdependence between producers, consumers, and everyone in between (Wright 2006). Therefore, it would be better to speak of civic food systems in place of civic agriculture, as the actions of distributors, processors, and eaters are just as important as those of farmers. Arguably, over half of those responsible for a more civic agriculture are not technically involved in agriculture. For example, could not a food citizen be a baker who pays living wages to her

employees, purchases local wheat directly from a farmer, is active in the local neighborhood association, and distributes the extra bread to those that cannot afford to purchase “artisan” bread? Citizens like our baker friend are not directly involved with agriculture, but they are strengthening their local food system through civic engagement. A civic food systems perspective gives a more holistic viewpoint to local, alternative food research, by not separating agriculture from food.

To support this broader concept of civic food system, I present three historical case studies which demonstrate that community problem solving around food in Grand Rapids during the Progressive Era did indeed come out of and support civic engagement. First, an overview of how fresh produce distribution became dominated by wholesalers and grocers between 1880 and 1917 is presented. Direct marketing between farmers and urban dwellers became nearly obsolete in Grand Rapids during this time. The other two case studies describe how people in Grand Rapids regained some control over the fresh produce distribution system in light of this consolidation. This they achieved by either reconnecting with farmers or becoming more self-reliant through gardening, communally or otherwise. In the first of these two studies, politically active women in Grand Rapids engaged in public work to influence the establishment of retail farmers markets during World War One. The second study outlines the vigorous promotion of school, backyard, and community gardening between 1900 and 1920. These gardens focused most on educating children, beautifying the city, providing for the home larder, and cultivating a meaningful connection to the soil.

A review of some of the literature on civic agriculture is first given to construct a civic food systems model. This is followed by a methodology and methods section which outlines why this study was undertaken, where and how sources were found, and how they were verified

and analyzed. The three case studies are then described and discussed. Finally, the paper is concluded with a call for a locale-by-locale construction of food systems history in the United States, both to help improve the historical assumptions of agrifood scholars, and more importantly, inform current citizens of their historical legacy in their pursuit for place-based food systems.



## CHAPTER 2

### FROM CIVIC AGRICULTURE TO CIVIC FOOD SYSTEMS

The term civic food systems is developed here for use as a framework to analyze food distribution in early twentieth century Grand Rapids. The concept of civic food systems is not a replacement for civic agriculture, but gives it more breadth, as it places as much emphasis on urban communities as it does on farming communities. The ideas of public work and civic markets, within the concept of place-based community development, are used to further expand Lyson's definition of civic agriculture. These notions allow for more emphasis on the roles non-farmers play, and benefits they derive from constructing civic food systems.

Civic agriculture is defined by local markets serving local consumers which ideally link together producers and consumers through direct marketing of value-added agricultural products (Lyson 2004). Civic agriculture is labor and land intensive, small scale, and relies upon local knowledge (Lyson 2005). All of this is placed in opposition to the larger, conventional, commodity-driven food system, which is defined by long-distance markets, both geographically and socially, as well as a reliance upon large-scale, technologically advanced farms that reduce farmers to "workers" (Lyson and Guptill 2004: 372). The way to a more civic agriculture is community problem solving through civic engagement, which Lyson considered "fundamental" to civic agriculture (2005: 94).

With this definition, the role of non-farmer tends to be reduced to a simple consumer who participates by merely making economic choices. Such atomistic reduction does not allow for meaningful civic engagement. Additionally, there are not benefits for the urbanite beyond a heightened awareness of rural well-being, or maybe gaining some agricultural literacy and entrepreneurial skills through urban gardening and marketing (Lyson 2004). Still, Lyson did

allude to further action by those not directly involved with agricultural production. He claimed that within civic agriculture every person “has not only a stake but also a voice in how and where his or her food is produced, processed, and sold” (Lyson 2004: 77). This explicit reference to the agency of eaters gives room to further develop the non-farmer role in civic agriculture.

Being a food citizen is more than purchasing food through the system defined above. Measuring civic engagement through economic transactions only, no matter how sustainable or just the product, has been described as “shallow” (DeLind and Bingen 2008: 144). A deeper civic engagement among local food actors has been suggested within the concept of public work (DeLind 2002). Public work has been defined as “a normative ideal of citizenship, combining self-organized governance and cooperative labors across differences to solve problems and create collective resources” (Boyte 2011: 642). From a public work perspective, community problem solving, then, is accomplished through self governed, cooperative, and collective work between people with differing perspectives.

The result of this work as it pertains to civic agriculture is not only a more equitable food system, but also an appreciation for learning and sharing through negotiation by offering every person in the food system a stake in how and where food is grown, processed, and distributed. Food citizens do not work individually to build these markets that have a more socially embedded nature, but uncover and solve multiple community problems through consensus found in collective negotiation and cooperation. As Laura DeLind and Jim Bingen (2008) noted in their exploration of place and civic culture, it is not only “civically engaged individuals,” such as local political leaders and grassroots activists, who construct a more civic food system. It takes the work, or better yet, interdependence of many “regular” people engaged in public work to construct a civic culture that can support a food system which is equitable and appropriate for all

actors. The results of civic food systems will then tend to be a more civic agriculture as those involved with agriculture must also have an equal voice in how the food system operates.

Melanie DuPuis and Sean Gillon (2009), in their research on local, organic food production and distribution in California, described how this equity in the food system can play out in the economic marketplace. They coined the term “civic markets,” which takes the concept of social embeddedness past the transactional stage, and focuses on market governance through civic engagement on a local level. All markets depend on some sort of social embeddedness, which necessitates civic engagement on some level. Civic markets, then, rely upon the notion that no economic transaction can occur without some sort of negotiation on a social level, and modern economics are just as socially “embedded” as any other more “primitive” economic system (Granovetter 1985). This engagement, or market governance, makes rules that are fair in the eyes of those that have access to control it. Civic markets are unique because they promote “openness, inclusion, and transparency,” (DuPuis 2006: 9) as opposed to the private, individualistic, out-of-town nature of global value chain governance.

In the conventional food system, power is not centralized in any particular place, but sits in networks of corporate firms. The power used to control markets, or market governance, is traditionally defined as “the authority and power relationships that control the diffusion of technology, standards, and brands between firms within the value chain” (Gereffi *et al.* 2008: 7). DuPuis and Gillon took this concept which is normally applied to the global market, scaled it down to a local level, and replaced the term “firm” with citizens (2009). Local markets for food producers can be created, they claimed, where governance of value chains is in the hands of the eaters and producers, and everyone in between. These new markets are not necessarily separate, or in opposition to, the larger market, but are another option within the entire food system.

Civic markets result from work of consumer groups, political leaders, farmers, processors, and basically everyone else who could benefit or be damaged by the market. By giving all individuals a say, a stake in the collective wealth is created through negotiation. Eaters are elevated beyond *consumers* and farmers are more than *producers*. They are also governors of the markets, having not only a voice in how food is made and distributed, but also a relationship beyond callous, impersonal, cash transaction. This does not mean civic markets do not value the individual. They do, both economically and socially. It is collectivism and cooperation *across differences* in individuals which define the public work that creates civic markets.

Food citizens do not join governing groups simply out of obligation or through a sense of volunteerism. Nor do they participate with an aim to dominate discourse on what they see as fair, but to form consensus as to what is equitable. DeLind and Bingen (2008) suggested that a more civic agriculture embraces the conflicts inherent in a healthy civic culture. A civic culture from this perspective is built upon communication, persuasion, consensus, and diversity (Almond and Verba 1989). Civicness, then, is more than the either/or notion of a liberal, individual protectionism versus a communitarian ideal. Public work operates and thrives within both of these concepts, embracing differences among individuals which can lead to unique negotiations of commonality

William B. Lacey (2000) argued that in a truly civil society, all work would be public work, because it would construct the time and place where one lives. In other words, value in work would not be defined by capital (of any kind), but on how one's actions actually construct the community, be it turning a screw, preaching a sermon, or painting a mural. Therefore, it is in what is learned and shared as a community, a civic culture, which has value in and of itself.

Negotiating a trip to the local farmers market with elders in the neighborhood can be public work. Simply informing a neighbor that the market is accepting food entitlements can be public work. Cleaning trash and pulling weeds at the community garden next to your house as part of the regular routine of maintaining your own yard can be public work. Day-to-day activities are just as important as formalized group activities in promoting a civic (agri) culture which values the common wealth of the community.

The rules and regulations of farmers markets and community gardens are less formalized than those of the larger food system, and citizens can realistically engage themselves in the public work of creating and adjusting governance. I found as a market manager of a busy farmers market (echoed by DuPuis in her observation of the markets in Santa Cruz), there is continual alternation between conflict and cooperation concerning the governance of these spaces, which rely upon negotiation on the community level (2006). Conflict, for example, can come from lack of space for farmers, the need for diversity on the market, or outside pressures from the local community such as overflow parking issues and litter. This conflict can become amplified, ironically, when the physical space is owned by an official government<sup>3</sup>.

The issue of ownership brings up the important distinction to make between public work and public works. Public works are paternalistic services which government is obliged to supply for the populace. This does not mean that public works cannot be spaces for public work. A garbage collector may pick up a bag that is slightly too heavy or not tagged properly because she or he feels that keeping garbage off of the streets is not just a job, but improves the well-being in

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<sup>3</sup> I found this to be true when the Grand Rapids City Commission had governing authority over the Fulton Street Farmers Market, although the vast majority of commissioners had never even been to the market. This spurred the development of a market committee made up of farmers and community representatives and a rewrite of the rules giving this committee and the manager final decision-making power.

a community. Still, public works does not necessarily equate civics, and ownership of any kind can affect the civic nature of a farmers market. According to Kimberly Chung *et al.* (2008), it does not matter whether a physical space is private or public, it is the work done in that space which makes it “public.” The public space of public work is ephemeral. When the farmers decide not to come back to the farmers market, there is no longer a farmers market. When the gardeners are kicked out of a neighborhood to make way for condominiums, the garden no longer exists, even if the sunflowers keep popping up each year. This is a significant point to make when analyzing historic marketplaces. Public ownership does not necessarily equate with a civic institution.

Community gardens and farmers markets, private or public, can do more than strengthen local economies and/or stave off economic hardship. They also have the ability to enrich cultural and social landscapes of places through the work and experiences they support (Baker 2004; Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004; Tiemann 2008). For example, Lauren E. Baker (2004) found in her study of community gardens in Toronto that immigrants saw gardens as spaces where they could bridge the places they had left with the places in which they now live through the transplantation of cultural specific gardening techniques and plants. Laura Saldivar-Tanaka and Marianne E. Krasny (2004) discovered that among Latino gardens in New York, the culturally-specific spaces created in these gardens such as the *casitas*; which are agricultural resting shelters, kitchens, and community centers based on the communal houses from their home countries; gave a shared identity of place within the diverse socio-cultural landscape of the city. They are spaces which definitely improve food security for low income people. However, the principle reasons for building and maintaining these spaces are anything but economic.

Some farmers markets also strengthen sense of place and community. Drawing upon the work of Ray Oldenburg (1989), who felt that Americans are losing the “great, good places” for informal social interactions such as coffee shops and corner pubs, Thomas K. Tiemann (2008: 471) designated some farmers markets as “third places” where we can get together for “ritualized revelry” with our neighbors. Indeed, I would spend hours in the market office at the Fulton Street Farmers Market talking with neighbors, who may or may not be shopping at the market. Farmers markets draw people together who may never interact in a public space, strengthening their collective sense of who their community is. The *who* is much more important than the *where* when talking about place. Of course, the designation of a third place is not apparent at all farmers markets, just as not all patrons, farmers, and other actors are involved in public work at a farmers market. As these last few examples have shown, civic food systems can have peripheral benefits beyond healthy and accessible food, sustainable agriculture, and robust local economies.

Vibrant, beautiful rural *and* urban communities can come out of a strong civic food system which promotes farmer/eater direct links and a sense of shared place in spaces where food citizens cultivate vacant lots, backyards, and schoolyards. Lyson’s definition of civic agriculture emphasizes the embedding of agriculture in rural communities (2005). A civic food system embeds agriculture within all communities, rural or otherwise. It also embeds decision-making within communities. This decision-making extends beyond the rural/urban divide. As Wynne Wright (2005) suggested, civic agriculture depends on interdependence between urban and rural populations, suggesting the equality of non-agriculturalists with others in promoting a sustainable food system.

This study looks almost exclusively at non-farmers. Still, the decisions made by residents in Grand Rapids around food did affect those in the surrounding countryside, most

notably in working toward spaces where small farmers could sell directly, thereby capturing more of the retail dollar. Although fully understanding their perspective would necessitate a much longer project, my results suggest that these connections were strengthened at the markets through farmer/eater relationships, both economically and socially. Civic food systems, then, offers a more complete model for looking at local food systems by placing the role of urban dweller equal with that of rural food producer. Additionally, the concepts of public work and civic markets give more precision for uncovering civic aspects in particular food production, distribution, and consumption arrangements.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study adds a localized, qualitative perspective to earlier work that has been done to explore civic awareness on local levels in Progressive Era America<sup>4</sup>. The most popular example of late is the entire chapter Robert Putnam spent exploring the incredible rise of social clubs and other civic organizations during this period in his seminal work on civic engagement, *Bowling Alone*, (2000). He saw this growth of civic clubs as a reflection of new communitarian-style politics bent on solving the social problems of a freshly technologically advanced, industrialized nation. Putnam followed up his quantitative look at social capital with a qualitative study of the way civic engagement looks on the ground (2003). Using ethnographic methods, he recorded the stories of a dozen communities around the country. Indeed, this may be the only way to truly find a holistic understanding of civics. How can one capture the feel of civic engagement without including the stories of people? As Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein (2003: 6) wrote, “We believe that stories, with their specificity and ability to express the complex realities of specific people and places and their possibly unique ability to express thought and feeling simultaneously, are the appropriate medium for capturing a sense of how social-capital-creation works in real life.” While their voices may be separated by nearly a century, feelings and thoughts can still be expressed by those living at the beginning of the twentieth century, albeit through historical reconstruction, in the stories they have left behind for us to discover.

Most historical research of the pre World War II food system in the United States is either on a national scale (e.g. Brown 2002, Pyle 1972), or focuses on large, metropolitan areas

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<sup>4</sup> Most relevant to the study here would be the work done by Donofio 2007 and the studies of women’s clubs in large cities. See Belanger 2009.

(e.g. Donofrio 2007, Tangires 2003). Many diverse, local-level studies can improve our understanding of the history of food systems in the United States, as food production, distribution, and consumption are geographically specific. Patricia Allen *et al.* elegantly observed, “The local is not everywhere the same” (2003: 63). A stark example is found when comparing New Orleans with Los Angeles in the early 1900s. New Orleans had over ten retail farmers markets by 1918. Their age was unknown. Los Angeles, on the other hand, did not have any retail markets until well into the twentieth century. This is an example of the uniqueness of local food distribution which is effected not only by local production, but also cultural and historical impacts (Rogers 1918).

Geographical location for this study was chosen partly out of convenience, as I have lived in Grand Rapids most of my life and access to archives was unproblematic. Additionally, doing your own local history is a form of public work which builds a sense of place. Therefore, it made sense for me to study my own place. However, there are other attributes of Grand Rapids that make it a valuable location for inquiry into local food distribution. Grand Rapids was the only city in Michigan, and possibly the only city of its size in the United States, to have three publically-owned retail farmers markets during this period. The combined number of loads of produce at these markets eclipsed all of the produce sold on the retail markets in Detroit (Ulrey 1936). Also, Grand Rapids was a leading center for the buying and selling of fruits and vegetables because of its location in a high producing agricultural area on the railroad tracks between two large metropolises: Detroit and Chicago. These characteristics may have brought issues of food distribution to the fore, making historical sources more numerous.

This study, then, focuses on one place at one time in the historical record. The majority of data used in this research are qualitative in nature and derived from primary sources. Primary

sources were purposively selected based on relevance to public marketplaces and gardening in Grand Rapids, Michigan between the years of 1880 and 1930. Secondary sources, including two valuable studies of Grand Rapids history offered by Albert Baxter in 1891 and Z.Z. Lyden in 1962, along with some of the latter's notes (Key 1961), helped focus initial inquiry. Although their encyclopedic nature did not allow for much text on how Grand Rapids ended up with three farmers markets, they did offer direction as to when the markets started, where they were located, and the fact that there were none prior. Some informal interviews of local residents and city officials also helped me focus down to this time period. Surprisingly, no work had been done to compile information on why and when the farmers markets were started.

Extending research back to 1880 was decided after uncovering promotional literature by the local Board of Trade (later known as the Chamber of Commerce) which described Grand Rapids as an important center for regional and long-distance distribution of fruits and vegetables (1914). Additionally, Grand Rapids grew from a town of 30,000 to a city of over 160,000 (Gibson 1998) during this period. At the same time, there was impressive growth of fruit and vegetable trading which culminated in what was considered (at least locally) the busiest wholesale produce market in the world in 1897 (Fruit and Vegetable Market 1911). Beginning research in 1880 and ending before 1930 allowed for examination of what led up to farmers markets and gardens. I ended inquiry before the Great Depression to avoid the influence federal food security programs may have had on local food markets.

Primary sources mainly include minutes of official meetings and newspaper articles. Every piece of data was validated as to the author and the context in which it was created. For example, some of the writings came from trade journals and other industry literature. Although the name of authors were not usually provided, as is the case with most journalistic literature

from this period, it can be assumed that these articles are biased toward business owners, most notably grocers and wholesale dealers in this study. Many of the newspaper articles were reinforced through archival research which uncovered letters and official meeting minutes of which the author was explicitly stated, including an official signature.

Some quantitative data was used and presented as descriptive statistics, mainly in counting the number of farmers markets started during the time period of inquiry and also counting the grocery stores in Grand Rapids. These data are not meant to be statistically rigorous, but simply to frame the research question at hand. Quantitative information on farmers markets was compiled through three main secondary sources, including a study by the United States Census Bureau in 1918 (Rogers 1919), a study by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1947 (Wann *et al.* 1948), and a special bulletin put out by the Michigan State Extension Service in 1936 (Ulrey 1936). The first two were brought to my attention by the work done by cultural geographer Allison Brown (2002) who has presented an exhaustive study of the growth and decline of farmers markets between 1900 and 2000, building upon the earlier work done by Jane Pyle in 1972. Grocery data came from simple counts in city directories, which provide a conservative number of establishments, as it may have been necessary to pay for a space in the directory.

Primary literature was uncovered through archival research; local library research; and internet research including Google® Books, America's Historical Newspapers on Newsbank®, and general searches. Primary documents include local official reports and Grand Rapids City Council and City Commission Meetings minutes and papers (The city transitioned from a council to a commission in 1917). Digital copies were made of all reports, minutes, and correspondence. This not only made organization and analysis easier, but also created a digital

archive which will be made available to the community through the Grand Rapids Public Library. Newspaper articles from *The Grand Rapids Press*, *The Grand Rapids Herald*, *The Michigan Tradesman*, and *The Observer* were found through digital searches and cross-referencing of archival sources. Other primary documents such as reports by the Grand Rapids Board of Trade (Chamber of Commerce), minutes of the Ladies Literary Club of Grand Rapids, and publications by local and regional women's clubs were also utilized when possible. Multiple sources were used when available to increase validity.

After casting a broad net to find as many physical primary sources as possible, which included an exhaustive review of period-specific scholarly and popular literature, visits to various archives in the west Michigan area, and email correspondence with other archives further away, purposeful inquiry was narrowed down to Grand Rapids, retail farmers markets, women's clubs, and community gardens. With the fairly recent addition of digitized archives and other virtual sources of historical literature, historical research has become at once easier and more difficult. Therefore, it has been suggested by some historians to share the methods a researcher uses going about querying databases and other electronic media. This is not only informative for readers interested in the validity of a study, but also for those working toward crafting their own foci (Gibbs and Owens 2011). Therefore, a short description of my general approach to virtual sources is offered.

Access to Google Books® and NewsBank® opened up an instantly accessible haystack of which needles could be asked for on demand. However, problems with historical nomenclature became instantly apparent. As Brown found in her research on the history of farmers markets, there are many names that have been used in the past to describe marketplaces, and they are not uniform as to their characteristics (2002). For example, simply typing in

*farmers market* as a search query will offer a multitude of marketplaces in which farmers sell produce, including wholesale markets and other non-direct marketing arrangements. This led to a linguistic primer for the food distribution system.

Valuable primary and secondary sources to help improve my semantic shortfalls were books and reports from the early part of the twentieth century which described the food distribution literature (Artman 1926; Sullivan 1913; Erdman 1928; King *et al.* 1919; Phillips 1922; Upson 1926), including the United States Department of Agriculture's Yearbook from 1925 which focused entirely on the production and marketing of fruits and vegetables (Jardine 1926). Reviewing this literature helped sort out terms such as terminal markets, municipal markets, retail markets, community markets, jobbers, wholesalers, hucksters, etc. The most valuable terms I found (this is by no means exhaustive, as I used a multitude of queries) for finding information on retail farmers markets were *public retail market*, *city retail market*, *city market*, *retail farmers market*, *municipal retail market*, *municipal market*, *retail mart*, *city retail market*, and simply *retail market*.

Additionally, the term community garden was not in common usage during this time and trial and error queries led to the use of *school garden*, *vacant lot garden*, *garden club*, *War garden*, *backyard garden* (of which many were not solely for the family but also shared with others, most notably with other schoolchildren), along with *community garden* as search terms. Most of the events concerning gardens were found through these digital queries. Events concerning farmers markets were mostly uncovered in local archives and digital research was used to further validate the data.

All sources were validated for authenticity to the best of my ability, as mentioned above. Document analysis was done to provide idiographic narratives which were analyzed through a

model of civic food systems. No broad generalizations were assumed which could be applied across multiple locales, or even across the entire local community. Some national-level research was conducted, however, and suggested that similar activities could have been occurring at the same time in different places. This is provided in the conclusion section.

## CHAPTER 4: CIVIC FOOD SYSTEMS IN PROGRESSIVE ERA GRAND RAPIDS

### EARLY GRAND RAPIDS: A CITY OF GROCERS, JOBBERS, AND WHOLESALERS

This city has never owned nor conducted as proprietor a market place that was fairly respectable in its appointments and care. In the early days the farmer came with his produce and sold it wherever he could meet a customer on the streets. But as the town and business grew the necessity came for a change. [Baxter 1891: 666]

The above excerpt was written in 1891 in Albert Baxter's history of Grand Rapids. As he stated, Grand Rapids never had an official marketplace in its early years. This was not unique in a city of its size. Although Lyson and others have claimed that the majority of cities had farmers markets up until the rise of supermarkets, available data suggest that this is an oversimplification. Most large metropolises did indeed have farmers markets all the way through the nineteenth century (Tangires 2003), and many mid-sized cities had farmers markets by the mid-1920s. However, they were a new addition to local food distribution in many of these locales. A study of marketplaces in 1918 shows that most of the public retail farmers markets in cities with a population less than 300,000 were less than twenty years old (Rogers 1919). Of course, it would be an unfounded assumption to say there were not other arrangements in these cities where residents purchased directly from farmers prior to these official markets. However, in Grand Rapids, there were none at least for about twenty years at the turn of the century.

The change Baxter alludes to is the enactment of laws aimed at containing transient sales by farmers on city streets. These new laws reflected market governance which was not open and transparent for many farmers and most of the general public. Farmers were allowed to sell on particular streets up until 1896. That year, the city became the proprietor of an official market space, the City Wholesale Market. This marked the end of street vending by farmers. From 1897 to 1917 there was consolidation by local grocers, wholesalers, and large growers of fresh produce distribution in Grand Rapids. This domination came about by pointed efforts of special



interest groups who influenced local produce distribution through direct political involvement, non-political resistance such as boycotts, and local media hegemony. Outlining the governance of produce distribution in Grand Rapids gives historical context to the establishment of retail farmers markets and the growth of gardening initiatives in the first quarter of the twentieth century, strengthening their existence as an example of a civic food system as they were a contrast to the changed food distribution arrangement.

The removal of farmers from city streets not only disconnected farmers from consumers, but also consolidated control of the food system out of the hands of citizens. The voices of small farmers and of those purchasing food were being eclipsed by special interest groups. Grocers, wholesalers, and fruit growers had taken control of most local fresh produce marketing. This consolidation not only affected prices, but placed the population one step further from the production of food and relations with rural neighbors, while possibly lowering the quality of available fresh fruits, vegetables, eggs, and meat. The city seemed to be well-served by its grocers and hucksters, however, and the local sentiment for direct marketing did not become apparent until food prices increased toward the beginning of the 1910s.

Growth in the number of grocers provides one glimpse into the nature of food distribution in early Grand Rapids. A dozen grocery stores were in operation when the city became incorporated in 1850, doubling five years later (Baxter 1891: 653). By 1882, city directories listed over 120 grocers, one store for every 300 people (Polk and Weeks 1882). This trend continued up through the first quarter of the twentieth century. Almost every corner in the city was serviced by one of these grocers, who were supplied either directly by farmers or by jobbers, who were simply buyers and sellers of products mostly for shipment through phone sales but also selling locally. Jobbers and commission buyers, who brokered sales for farmers for a part of

the profit, both sold to wholesale grocers which also supplied the retail grocers. Grocers provided delivery and credit, which relied upon solid relationships with local housewives. Fresh produce that was not purchased at grocers was easily obtained from the numerous roving peddlers known as hucksters, who also purchased from jobbers and wholesalers. This does not mean there was no direct marketing between farmers and consumers, and indeed, my inquiry uncovered evidence of householders buying directly from farmers. However, it was never encouraged, and actually bitterly fought by those controlling the local markets.

Wholesale grocery sales dominated the bulk of the local food landscape, and jobbers controlled this business in Grand Rapids during the late nineteenth century. By the late 1880s, it was claimed that jobbers accounted for over eleven million dollars of re-sales annually, with grocery jobbing topping the list, eclipsing all of the annual wholesale grocery trade in Detroit (Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce 1888; 1890). With so many jobbers in the wholesale food business, Grand Rapids became an important shipping center for fruits and vegetables, a place where buyers came to or called to from all over the region to purchase directly from farmers and dealers working on commission. Additionally, Grand Rapids was one of the busiest general shipping points for fruits in the United States, along with being a leader in year-round vegetable production from its many greenhouses (Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce 1910). It was suggested that as early as the 1870s, most fruit grown in the area was shipped out to “western markets” (Goss 1909: 459), supplied by farmers from the local “fruit ridge” who brought in over a million bushels of peaches by 1900 (Famous For Peaches 1901). Efforts to better facilitate produce marketing in Grand Rapids tended to be focused on accommodating this business.

Farmers had been going to a designated area named Porter Block in the center of downtown at least since the mid 1870s (Appeal of City Mart 1921). As the city grew, so did this

market place, extending for blocks from Porter Block. When the downtown became more cosmopolitan, local business owners began to complain that the market was unsightly and should be moved elsewhere. A heading in the local paper claimed that the market “smells to heaven and breeds disease” (That Market Site 1895). A conflict ensued between farmers, the City Council, and downtown business leaders. This forced the Council to act in finding a marketplace that was outside downtown, but convenient to growers, wholesale grocers, commission buyers, and retail grocers.

The local fruit industry had the ear of the Council. The Grand Rapids Fruit Growers Association was a powerful special interest group that brought much commerce into the city and was invited to confer with a committee put in place to find a suitable site (Grand Rapids City Council Proceedings GRCCP 1894b). Small vegetable growers known as market or truck gardeners ended up being sent to the margins. Their organization, the Grand River Horticultural Society, asked for a retail market to be included with the new market plans. They were referred to the Market Committee where their plea died immediately (Grand Rapids City Council 1894a). Market gardeners made better returns through direct sales with final customers. However, fruit farmers were better served by direct contact with wholesalers and jobbers who could buy whole loads of their specialized products (Ulrey 1936).

The Council ended up moving the market first to a space just south of downtown next to the commission houses on the rail lines. At the same time they split the market area into sections, giving fruit growers prime spots next to the warehouses, and pushing the vegetable farmers up and down the side streets. This arrangement was enforced by local police. The market gardeners did not always obey,

Mr. Strong arrived on the market yesterday morning at 2 o'clock and took his stand with his vegetables in the “peach belt” on South Ionia Street, whereas the rules prescribe that

vegetable dealers must stand on Spring Street. Mr. Strong declined to move out when requested to do so later by the police. He was moved out by minions of the law to a cross street. There he unhitched his team and vowed he would leave his vegetables there to rot, sue for damages and determine clearly the rights of vegetable men on the market. [War Declared 1895: 4]

Market gardeners were not the only people being shunned from the market. The papers also discouraged householders to purchase at the market. A sardonic theme of the “thrifty housewife” and her “big boys and men stumbling through the crowd, struggling under their heavy loads” showed up in the papers as the City council deliberated on what they were to do with this market problem (Grand Rapids Fruit 1896: 6). One article even did some calculations for the housewife to let her know that she was not getting a deal at the market.

One morning when the peaches were listed at the groceries at \$1.50 a bushel, an east end citizen and his estimable wife went down to the market early to get a bargain on peaches. They found just what they wanted at \$1.35, but before they could take them from the wagon they had to buy a basket which cost 10 cents. Then the gentleman sent the fruit home by a delivery wagon which cost 10 cents more. He and his wife walked down because they came before cars began running, but they rode back, which added another 10 cents, bringing the actual cost of the bushel of peaches up to \$1.65. Their grocery man would have delivered them free of charge the same fruit for \$1.50; still they thought they had made a good bargain.” [The Early Market 1893: 1]

This reporter did not calculate in the variable that maybe the “estimable housewife” actually enjoyed going to the market and buying directly from the farmer. When the market officially moved to a space on one of the three islands in the Grand River purchased by the city in 1897 (figure 3), householders did in fact patronize the market, looking to purchase fruits and vegetables in bulk for canning. As one reporter remarked during the busiest day to date in 1898,

Many residents of the city buy their fruit for canning this way. They like to select it from so great a variety, and then they like the excitement of the early morning trip, the bewildering confusion of teams and the unusual freshness of the air and the scene. The growers do not care to whom they sell. The money of one is as good as that of another. [Grand Rapids’ Great Fruit Market 1898: 4]

According to this article, saving money was not even a reason for going to the market. Freshness

and the unique experience were what brought the buyers down to the market. This motivation of customers becomes more apparent when the retail farmers markets eventually open.

Grocers did not have a similar sentiment as the farmers concerning retail sales at the market, however. They positioned themselves as spokesmen for the farmers, claiming that the farmer does not have the time to “fool away the morning” dealing with small transactions (Cash and Carry 1912). Their reactionary stance to retailing at the market became even more pronounced when the city of Grand Rapids seriously considered making retailing an official part of the City Wholesale Market.



Figure 3. The City Wholesale Market was established on Island No. 3 in 1897 (Canaan Co. Grand Rapids MI. Year Unknown. Author’s Personal Collection).

Prominent businessman Charles Leonard began agitating for a retail market at the urging of a local labor union (Cabinet Makers 1911) and some residents who were making their feelings known in editorials. As one resident wrote, “Mr. Farmer, shake hands; let us meet on mutual ground; cut out the middleman; bring your provisions Thursdays, not to the island market, but to our homes” (Urges the Farmer 1910: 4).

Leonard's rationale for a market was supported by the rising prices of food in the early 1910s. "Pennies are so all fired scarce among the laboring men that I am convinced they will be glad to make the market trip even if they save but a single dime," he stated (*Retail Market Is Not* 1912: 21). Leonard saw the current wholesale market as a public space for the people which had been taken over by special interests. He wrote to the city Council in 1911,

When the ground was originally purchased it was supposed that when it was improved the people would have access to it, and be able to trade directly with the farmers, but through some influence or other no steps have been taken to carry out the original plan. On the contrary the business has fallen into the hands of a lot of Jobbers [sic] who buy up the farmers' produce and then sell to the hucksters who divide up the city to rob the people. [Leonard 1911: 1]

Grocers responded that Leonard was misinformed. The City Wholesale Market was not ever meant for retailing, they and some aldermen countered (*Movement on Way* 1911). Furthermore, they argued that customers did not want to shop at the market anyway. The *Michigan Tradesman*, a local business paper which supported grocers asked, "How many women—and it is women that do the marketing—would tote home a peck of potatoes to save a possible five cents" (*Cash and Carry*: 3)? When a reporter went down to the markets to ask how grocers felt about a retail annex on the wholesale market, "Said one. Some of my customers will telephone to have 5 cents worth of yeast sent up immediately and if the delivery isn't made at once they find fault. I would enjoy seeing them come down here and buy a half bushel of potatoes and then toting the stuff home themselves" (*May Boycott* 1912: 1). In this way, it appears that they added to their local hegemony by speaking for the housewife as well as for the farmer.

A joint committee of the Council members and the Board of Trade conducted a survey of other cities around the country. They found that a retail market would be beneficial to the city (Committee on Markets 1912). In fact, they argued, at least six neighborhood markets would be ideal. Not everyone agreed at City Hall. One alderman responded sarcastically to the idea of neighborhood markets,

If a central market is good, half a dozen are better, of course. And if six are good, why not sixteen or sixty? Why not still go further and have a market stall on every block, with a superintendent for each, paid by the city, to see that the dealer does business on the square? I'm thinking it will be a long time before you'll see public retail markets in Grand Rapids [New Market Scheme 1911: 9].

Nevertheless, a section of the market was set aside for retailing during two hours on market days in 1912.

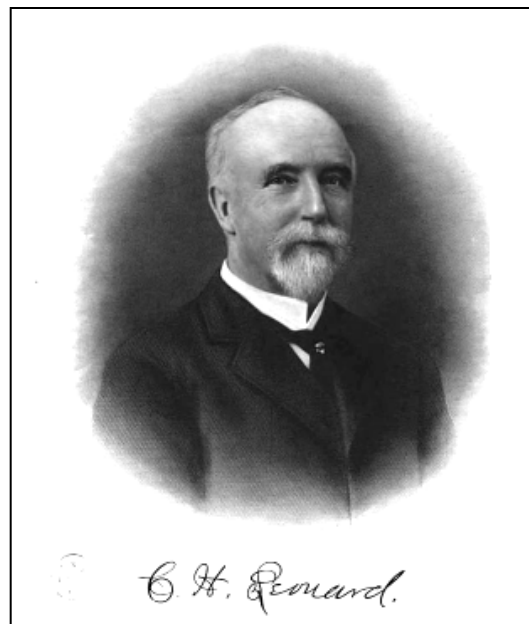


Figure 4. Charles H. Leonard used his influence to urge City official to open an experimental retail market. The market failed mainly on account of grocer boycotts of farmers selling retail to housewives (Photo: Fisher 1918: 227).

Only “the local Syrians” and Charles Leonard showed up at the new retail market (Ultimate Consumer 1912, Cars Empty Again 1912). This was not because customers did not

want to buy from farmers, though. Farmers could not sell to customers without being boycotted by the grocers. Housewives knew this because the grocers had made their plan clear in the local paper. As one grocer said, ““I do not know how the other grocers feel about it, but the farmer and gardener who goes in to cultivate the retail trade will not sell any of his stuff to me if I know it” (May Boycott 1912: 1). Leonard convinced the city to keep up the market for a few weeks by paying the stall rents for farmers out of his own pockets (Retail Market is Not 1912), but the market eventually died.

The *Michigan Tradesman* remarked on the market experiment, “The experiment of a retail market has been useful, perhaps, in showing what the people do not want, now that this has been satisfactorily demonstrated, the idea should be given up” (The Leonard Fiasco 1912: 8). The grocers and those in support of the new distribution system successfully dismantled direct marketing through their engagement in local politics and the media. This new arrangement created economic markets which were less civic in the sense that the voices of small farmers and consumers were no longer important. As Leonard argued, the space which had been established for the people was not accessible by the people. Additionally, the sensual and social aspects of purchasing food directly from farmers in a community environment were eroding as the residents who enjoyed purchasing their bulk fruits and vegetables at the market were no longer welcome. The grocers’ domination of local discourse and food distribution was about to be challenged, however, as the War intensified in Europe and food prices rose sharply. At the same time, women’s clubs were finding a foothold in local politics and public welfare. Their voice was no longer going to be usurped by the grocer concerning the local fresh food market. The next section traces their successful attempt to construct a marketplace alongside the existing food system, which benefitted the community both economically and socially.



## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RETAIL FARMERS MARKETS IN GRAND RAPIDS

This section shows how the retail farmers markets were established in Grand Rapids through the civic engagement of women's clubs. The markets were eventually supported by the local government because of the work by women who convinced local leaders that the markets would be a valuable tool in cutting household costs for laborers, while not threatening grocers. Once the markets started, it became apparent that the markets were more than places for cheap food. Residents were enjoying the opportunity to meet with farmers and neighbors in the early morning, while also getting the freshest food. The establishment of retail farmers markets was not necessarily a reaction against the grocers, but an economic arrangement which built a new civic market with and for producers and final consumers. Indeed, the markets became successful as the number of grocers increased.

By the mid 1920s, there were over 300 grocers in Grand Rapids. 50 of these grocers were chains, with the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company operating 43 stores (Grand Rapids Listing Company 1927). At the same time, three retail farmers markets were successfully operating. These markets were the direct result of "untiring efforts of the Civic Committee of the Grand Rapids Federation of Women's Clubs." (Chamberlain 1919: 16). These efforts were conducted not in opposition to the grocers, but through cooperative meetings and negotiations. Credit and delivery, which forged relations between independent grocers and customers in the past, were losing appeal as food prices climbed at alarming rates. The way in which these markets were started is an example of public work by local women to solve the problem of local food security by promoting more civic marketplaces. Their strategy for promoting and defending the markets was based in consensus building among many citizens of Grand Rapids concerning the need for better food security.

Focusing on the common good was a unique step for groups which had been criticized by one local woman as “too busy with poetry and Greek to interest themselves in something that means the very homes and existence of the multitude” (Fish 1916: 6). Like other women’s clubs around the country, which were first established for white, middle-class, educated women to share literary and other niceties, the Grand Rapids women’s clubs were turning their attention toward “practical work” (Belanger 2009). Influenced by the home economics movement, clubwomen attempted to reach out to the multitude by inviting housewives to talks and meetings as early as 1915. These meetings were aimed at showing how Grand Rapids households could economize in light of the high cost of food which was being caused by massive inflation caused by a glut of gold on the international markets<sup>5</sup>. They did not initially receive a warm welcome. One letter to the editor, signed A Working Man’s Wife, wrote about a speech Eva Hamilton, who became the “mother of the retail market idea,” had given on conserving meat,

If Mrs. Hamilton knew anything about the working class she would know that the parts cut off of the nice, rich, juicy meat and the soup bone are about all we ever buy. It is all we can afford to buy...I wonder if she ever stopped to think how almost impossible it is for the poor to economize...She should know they cannot afford to buy ice to keep things fresh, nor do they have nice, big cool cellars...As a rule they have to live in hot, close rooms or in the larger cities in the tenements where it would be impossible to keep anything overnight...It is almost laughable to hear one who knows nothing about poverty tell the poor how they should save. [Economy is Fine 1915: 6]

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<sup>5</sup> The High Cost of Living and Food Prices have been well-explored from national, political, and social perspectives. See Macleod, D. 2009. Food Prices, Politics, and Policy in the Progressive Era. *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. 8(3): <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jga/8.3/macleod.html>> (19 Jul. 2010). And Rauchway, A. 2001. The High Cost of Living in the Progressives’ Economy. *The Journal of American History*. 88(3): 898-924.

The club women were adamant, however, that they were dedicated to the betterment of all people, even if they seemed ignorant of the real needs of their fellow housewives. As one organizer claimed, “This is a movement for all women, not just club women” (Fight on Food Prices 1916: 1) The club women were becoming more powerful in Grand Rapids as suffrage gained momentum and the War brought the position of householder into a role of conservationist. Working class housewives could not ignore the opportunity for a say in how food was making its way to their tables, even if it was through those they saw as out-of-touch socialites. The club women made their first move claiming a stake in local food distribution by conducting a formal inquiry into the role local retailers had in high food prices.



Figure 5. Eva McCall Hamilton was considered to be the "mother" of retail markets in Grand Rapids. However, Emily Chamberlain was also instrumental in establishing markets. Here Hamilton is pictured in 1920 promoting her run for State Senate (Photo: *The Independent*, October 23, 1920: 131). Chamberlain is pictured in 1940. Chamberlain was civically active throughout her life, promoting the establishment of the Grand Rapids Art Museum and the drinking water pipeline from Lake Michigan (Photo: GR Woman Recalls 1940).

Food prices went up by almost twenty percent as the War escalated in Europe, prompting a local judge to call a grand jury investigation into the effects of middlemen on food prices (Grand Jury is Given 1916; Fight on Food Prices 1916). The investigation never did materialize. However, the Grand Rapids Federation of Women's Clubs (GRFWC) organized its own inquiry (Club Women Quiz 1916). The Home Economics Department of the Federation claimed that they were going to find out what caused high prices for food at local retailers. The head of the committee, Emily Chamberlain, was "chairman" of the Civics Committee. She spent two weeks arranging open and private meetings with milk dealers, wholesale and retail grocers, and meat dealers. The dealers were cooperative and let the women look at their official ledger books. Their investigation culminated with a mass meeting at the East Side Ladies Literary Club for all of the housewives in the City. Whether working class women showed up is not included in the minutes (Grand Rapids Federation of Women's Clubs 1916). However, many representatives from milk producers and grocers pleaded their case. Mayor George P. Tilma (Women Absolve G.R. Food Men 1916) was also in attendance.

Grocers could no longer control the voice of the housewife in the local media, as the meeting was well-publicized and supported by local political officers. After each representative was allowed to present his case, the women came to the conclusion that high prices were caused by the price of packaging, exportation to the War effort, and the cost of labor (Grand Rapids Federation of Women's Clubs 1916). They were not blaming the grocers for gouging. They continued to argue, however, in front of the Mayor, that a retail market would be a wise decision for lowering food prices. This was the first time that the "voice of the housewife" was publically heard concerning the need for direct marketing in Grand Rapids. Following the meeting, the women met with Mayor Tilma, and he organized a High Cost of Living Commission. The first

two tasks charged to the commission were to inquire deeper into milk dealings and explore the feasibility of a retail farmers market (H.C.L. Commission Named 1916).

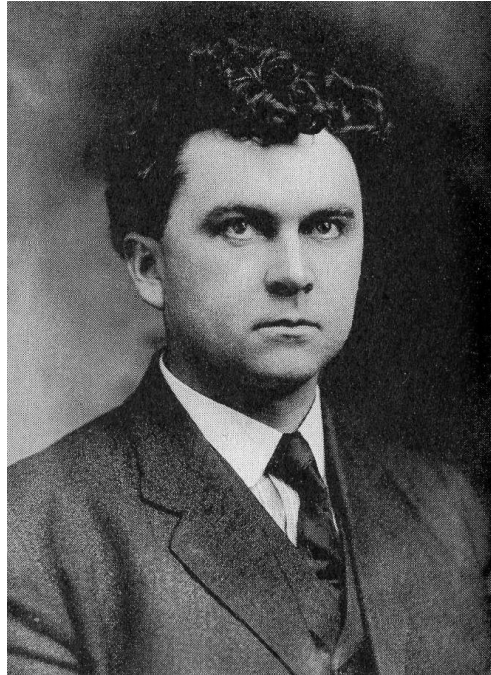


Figure 6. Mayor George P. Tilma, although in office for less than two years, supported community gardens and retail markets. The High Cost of Living Commission came out of his office (Photo: Grand Rapids Public Library Collection 54, Box 36, Folder 12 from Kleiman 2006: 60).

Four women were appointed to Tilma's High Cost of Living Commission, including both Hamilton and Chamberlain. This may have been the first time women were appointed to an official committee in Grand Rapids, and was a political springboard for Hamilton, who successfully won a seat in the State Senate in 1921. Hamilton immediately went to work and formed a market site committee which looked into possible sites where the city could establish a new market. This committee also researched markets from other cities and produced a report for

the Mayor and Council, which found that a market would benefit the city<sup>6</sup> (Hamilton 1917).

According to a dramatically written article in the paper, Hamilton “whipped five aldermen” who were the “villains,” and not only convinced the Council to open the retail market on Leonard Street, but also influenced the Council to pass the resolution to begin apportioning vacant lots for gardening (Woman as Heroine 1917: 5). The Council agreed to start an experimental market on a site in the northwest section of the city at the corner of Leonard and Front Streets, with a \$2,500 appropriation (Key 1964, Stewart 1918). Farmers were given stalls free of charge initially, and the site was opened for business on the seventh of July, 1917 with a speech by the newly elected Mayor Philo C. Fuller (City Retail Market 1917). It was immediately successful. A week later there were almost 1200 buyers at the market (City Retail Market Popular 1917). The Leonard Street Farmers Market became a social phenomenon by the end of the season. An article from early August described the atmosphere,

They come in autos, on horseback, in one-horse shays, on bicycles and velocipedes and on foot to the city retail market to hunt old Hi Cost of Living and in lots of instances they find him and give him a wallop or two. Here the lady from the limousine and the lady with the market basket on her arm mingle and vie with one another in seeking out the bargains. They carry away their purchases in everything from big eight cylinders to baby carriages and, above all, everybody has a good time doing it [Hunting Old Hi 1917: 13]

A reporter went down to the market in August to talk with housewives and assess prices because “the average housewife is a good judge of fruit and vegetable values” (Some Attack 1917: 8). This is a marked change in the media over the sarcastic rhetoric shown earlier in the papers concerning the “thrifty housewife,” reflecting the nationwide importance of women in a new consumer-driven economy (Strasser 1999). Some of the women claimed that the farmers

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, no copies can be found of this report. I found the original cover page, which offered recommendations. However, the valuable data which was collected through junkets to other cities and nation-wide surveys has been lost. This is an example of the vanishing data Allison Brown (2002) used to emphasize the urgency of researching the history of farmers markets in the United States.

were “holding them up” and charging too much for their product. However, this was because, as one woman argued, “you have to come here several times before you can buy to the best advantage. In this way you learn the faces of those who sell at moderate prices” (Some Attack 1917: 8). The market superintendent backed the women, claiming that some of the farmers will “soak the women at the highest prices they can get” if they are not willing to forge long-term economic relations with the farmers (Some Attack 1917: 8). There was a necessity for social relations at the market because prices were not governed by any other outside sources. The only rule of the market, at least during the preliminary stages, was that the sellers were growers.



Figure 7. The Leonard Street Market drew crowds from all walks of life, and was a social phenomenon (Print: Hunting old Hi 1917: 13).

Bringing governance to the producer/consumer level led to interdependence between farmers and customers of which both had to negotiate in the market to make it fair. The market may have been an example of public service, but farmers were there to forge new economic

relationships, not as benefactors of the city's charity. As one reporter commented, "The farmers do not think that the women who trade at the retail market should consider them as public beneficiaries. They are at the market to get the best prices they can get, regardless of the high cost of this and that and the acute financial stringency existing in the homes of their customers" (Some Attack 1917: 8). The arrangement must have been working out, because the market progressively became busier throughout the summer of 1917, prompting letters to City Hall for more around the city.

Putting public marketplaces in neighborhoods and not in central, downtown locations was a new idea which was strongly supported by the women's clubs, most notably the GRFWC and the Women's Committee of the National Defense Council (WCNDC). Chamberlain wrote letters to the Commission as a representative of the WCNDC and the GRFWC urging the city to open another farmers market in 1918, "Since we thoroughly believe in the slogan that, 'Food Will Win the War,' we also believe that the establishment of retail markets will tend not only to bring producer and consumer into closer relationship but that they will encourage greater food production by providing an outlet for the home gardener as well" (Chamberlain 1918: 1). Chamberlain wrote another letter with Clara C. Russell, one of her fellow High Cost of Living Commission partners, which claimed that the GRFWC had "between five and six thousand women" as members of whom all were behind more markets (Russell and Chamberlain 1918). Chamberlain's letters were accompanied by multiple petitions from housewives requesting that the city place markets near their homes (Beck 1918, Quigley 1918).

These petitions were answered by the city. They not only opened a second market in the southern part of the city in 1918, but put through legislation which allowed the city to officially purchase the Leonard site and make improvements such as sheds, walkways, and permanent



tables (Grand Rapids City Commission 1919). By 1922, there was a third market on the east side of the city which is currently operating as the Fulton Street Farmers Market. These markets were extremely well patronized. Combined daily attendance averages totaled over 10,000 buyers, or almost 750,000 per year by the late 1920s (Grand Rapids City Commission 1928), and the loads brought by farmers were more numerous than those on the markets in Detroit (Ulrey 1936). The markets were here to stay.



Figure 8. Almost 8,000 people showed up on Saturdays at the Leonard Street Market by the 1920s (Photo: Grand Rapids City Archives, Parks and Recreation Department, Photographs, City Markets, Series No. 22-10, Box No. 3/d/1, 810.004187, C045.004187, C045.004187, circa 1927).

Although low prices were the impetus for new retail farmers markets, the motivation for large attendance was not solely low prices. It was suggested more than once in the local papers that prices were actually not much better at the markets than at the local grocer. Additionally,

the new chain grocers, with their cash and carry operation and vertically integrated distribution were providing reasonably priced food. Unfortunately, time and space did not allow for an exhaustive look into price differentials, as no official statistics were kept on prices outside the wholesale market other than random postings in newspapers. Therefore, a comparison cannot be made between the grocers' prices and those at the retail market.

There is qualitative evidence that some housewives were not going to the farmers market for cheap food, however. They were going for good food. A reporter on the Leonard market in 1921 noticed that many of the prices were not lower at the farmers market, most notably eggs. When he inquired housewives about this, they said they were fine with spending the same amount as in stores to get their eggs from "honest-to-goodness farmers who were marketing their product from their own flocks" (City Retail Marts 1921: 13). For some, the market itself was an experience which was just as important as the good deals and fresh food. A collage of pictures in 1919 with a headline describing a "civilian army" "rallying" at the local market, showed multiple people strolling through the marketplace with their families on a Saturday, filling prams with food, enjoying freshly pressed cider, inspecting rabbits, and generally taking pleasure in the market with their families and other community members.

All sorts of things are offered for sale at direct-to-consumer prices, ranging from rabbits to cider to beef to cabbages. It is common to see Mr. Papa pushing a gocart out on the market day laden not with baby but a bushel of potatoes, apples, or several dozen ears of corn. If Johnny has a cart mother makes him help out on market day and the boy gets experience which may inspire him later to become a husky voiced huckster or a truck gardener...Some war on old H.C.L, eh? [Grand Rapids' Civilian Army 1919: 2]

DeLind (2006: 142) has argued that an important aspect of civic agriculture is embracing the sensual aspects of food production. We need to "reintegrate agriculture, its rhythms, sensibilities, and trappings back into our daily lives," she stated, "Buying milk or grain directly

from the farmer is good; absorbing the sounds and sense of a water-powered grist mill or a horse-drawn milk wagon is even better". The stone from Grand Rapids' water-powered grist mill was already a monument down by the roller mills on the river, and although the milk wagon was horse-drawn, the rider was not a dairy farmer. Connections with agricultural sensuality were eroding quickly as the relationship between farmer and urban dweller widened in the wake of food consolidation described in the first section, and the markets brought some of the agricultural trappings into the lives of these people who were, in some cases, multiple generations removed from the farm.

There was something special about the markets. An article written by "Mrs. Housewife" described the Leonard Street Market a couple of weeks after it opened (Figure 9). She rode to the market in her neighbor's "Tin Lizzy" to see for herself why the market had become so popular,

If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget the busy and picturesque sight which greeted us.

I should say there were at least 30 loads of produce on sale, lined up in a row just below the west Leonard bridge. The wagons backed against the stone pavement were filled with the most attractive fruits and vegetables, the morning dew on the greenery, fairly glistening in the bright sunshine. [Mrs. Housewife 1917: 6].

Mrs. Housewife observed that all types of people were at the market that morning, from the socialites to the workingman's wife. She and her companion concluded that the market was not only economic, but also pleasurable. Additionally, she noted that prices were negotiable and she chuckled when she saw some "newlyweds" asking a farmer why particular vegetables were sold a certain way.



Figure 9. This was one example of the handful of collages that appeared following the opening of the Leonard Street Farmers Market showing the different types of people who showed up early in the morning on market days. (Photo: Mrs. Housewife 1917: 6)

The farmers markets, by bringing together farmers and customers, made not only governance more collective and fair to all actors in the marketplace, but also added to the agricultural literacy of urban dwellers. The clubwomen, a self-organized group of citizens, attempted to act collectively, inviting every housewife to mass meetings to assess the food security situation, reflecting at least an attempt at problem solving through public work. These women then made efforts to solve problems cooperatively by working with grocers and politicians to investigate how to increase food security. The result was a space in which self-governance, the defining element of civic markets, was possible. At the same time, social and cultural ties were being strengthened through new public spaces.

## PROGRESSIVE ERA GRAND RAPIDS: A GARDEN CITY

Passing down knowledge about food had become important and the farmers markets were a space where residents could teach their offspring food system literacy. This benefit was even more pronounced and promoted through the gardening movement which began around the same time Grand Rapids opened the City Wholesale Market. While business and political leaders were consolidating agricultural distribution, other residents were supporting a gardening initiative which focused on teaching the younger generation an appreciation for gardening and food processing, most notably in school gardens. School gardens eventually led to the formation of garden clubs that cultivated vacant city lots. Adults were also getting into collective and personal gardening by the middle of the 1910s, with local banks and the City Council allotting vacant lots. By the First World War, Grand Rapids had a fifteen year tradition of community gardening. The federal promotion of War gardens was not the impetus for collective gardening, but merely increased gardening participation. This section gives an overview of how community gardening became an important social and cultural institution in the first quarter of the twentieth century in Grand Rapids

The first school gardens, which were in effect community gardens, were started around 1903 at the Second Street School, located in a working class neighborhood. These gardens were part of the innovative methods being employed in the public schools to teach children practical skills including cooking and sewing for girls and wood carving for boys. The school superintendent claimed that the gardens, which were for both genders, were “not being done for the sport connected with the gardening, but for the sake of securing practical results not so much in vegetables raised, but because of the experience the children will have gained” (School Gardens Have Been Laid Out 1903: 8). The papers echoed this sentiment.

The school garden tends to inculcate in him [the student] a love for the soil that may lead him to establish gardens of his own, even though it be but a two by four patch hemmed in by buildings. There are many wasted opportunities for kitchen gardens in Grand Rapids. They are not taken advantage of, probably because they are not appreciated. [The School Garden 1901: 2]

The school gardening program included a take-home segment where children were expected to take seeds to plant in their own backyards. The first round of seeds were flower seeds given to children from the health and civic beauty committee of the Ladies Literary Club, which distributed 3,000 packages of nasturtium, morning glory, and flowering cucumber seeds to six schools in 1901 (Pupils Like Work 1905). The children were then instructed to write letters to the school superintendent telling of their horticultural experiences (Tell of Gardening 1904). Prizes were also offered by the committee for the best display of flowers (Prizes for Children 1904).



Figure 10. This is one of the few photos available of a school garden in Grand Rapids. This particular garden was ornamental. (Photo: Grand Rapids Board of Education. 1902. *Thirtieth Annual Report*. White Printing Company. Grand Rapids MI. 112)

The Ladies Literary Club continued their seed distribution and contests up to World War One, gaining momentum in 1915 with influence from the City Beautiful movement which was

sweeping the nation (Many Rewarded 1915)<sup>7</sup>. Two years earlier, the City's Clean Up Committee which was led by Agnes M. Chalmers, suggested that vacant lots should be turned into "temporary small lots and farms" by students from the Truant School (Vacant Lot Gardens 1913: 25). Embedding agriculture into the Grand Rapids community was important to local educators and was being lauded in the local papers,

Whatever tends to develop on children the love of the soil and the understanding of nature in children is commendable. No activity known to man pays as large dividends as gardening in health, wealth and happiness. Fresh air, thrift, exercise and innocent delight fall to the lot of city children when they weed and hoe. [Community Gardens 1914: 6]<sup>8</sup>

By 1915, official curriculum was created for school gardens which included summer vacation work, and was financially supported by the school board (Will Ask for Funds 1915). Central High School put an agricultural club in place where students conducted experiments in growing crops and studied the "sociological condition of rural communities" (Agricultural Club Formed 1915: 2)<sup>9</sup>. Local banker Charles W. Garfield, who was an accomplished gentleman farmer and president of the Grand River Horticultural Society, was president of the school gardening program. He also was instrumental in starting Grand Rapids' first official "community gardens." With help from the Ladies Literary Club, Garfield put an appeal in to the City Council for a community garden initiative under the auspices of the Grand Rapids Parks

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<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the City Beautiful Movement also was the demise of many farmers markets in larger cities. See Donofrio 2007.

<sup>8</sup> This is one of two references found for the term "community garden" in Grand Rapids. See Community Garden Project 1914.

<sup>9</sup> Teaching rural sociology along with agriculture in high schools was not unique to Grand Rapids. Hollywood High School in Los Angeles had a class named "Civic Agriculture" which was similar to this group. See Tracey, H.C. 1920. The School Boy, His Home. *Los Angeles School Journal*. 4: 8.



Department (Community Garden Project 1914: 16). The plan never did materialize under the Parks Department. However, the local Association of Commerce's Civic Beauty Committee took the reigns and made a call for residents to donate space on vacant land which could be used by those wishing to grow vegetables (First Vacant Lot 1915: 5; Plan Vacant Lot 1915: 17).



Figure 11. These full-page spreads were popular in the late summer of 1915, showing the work done by residents to make a "cleaner-greener" Grand Rapids through improvements of which community gardens were important ways to improve vacant and neglected lots. (Photo: Happier City 1915: 5)

Their movement became the Cleaner-Greener Grand Rapids initiative, and throughout August there were articles in the *Grand Rapids Herald* showing groups of children and adults working



large, vacant lots around the city, along with the portraits of community improvement association leaders who were providing financial and political support for the gardens.

One woman in particular, August Raddatz (pictured in figure 11), was active in not only lobbying local leaders for neighborhood improvements, but also in creating a space for her neighbors to grow flowers and food. Her resolve is reflected in the following, “When the city authorities were tardy in sending down men to cut the weeds which grow in profusion and riot about her home and in the street, she herself would march sturdily out to the offending spots and with her scythe hack and hew until the entire patch lay conquered before her” (Happier City 1915: 5). Raddatz, along with her husband and neighbors, created a space between two railroad tracks which became known as Happy Hollow, which included lawns and flower gardens, a grape arbor, and a vegetable garden.



Figure 12. Children working ‘just like real farmers’ in one of the multiple community gardens established during the summer of 1915 (Photo: Municipal Beautification Gains Enthusiasts. *The Grand Rapids Herald*. August 29: 2).

Gardens, in the same manner as retail farmers markets, became an important alternative to the grocers as prices on food increased. The community gardens being established on vacant lots were no longer only worked by children once the United States entered the War, but were also being used by adults to supply the household larder. Still, children were the gardening majority. This makes sense, as working parents may not have had the time to tend large gardens away from their homes. Backyard gardens, however, were plentiful and promoted heavily by the local papers as a way to “supply father, mother, and the children with interesting, wholesome outdoor work of a pleasurable sort that will relax mind and body and take the thoughts off of the everyday grind” (The Backyard Garden 1915: 17). Another article stated, “[O]ne seldom sees a tired businessman who does not cherish the alluring fancy of keeping chickens in the backyard” (Window Boxes 1916)<sup>10</sup>. Gardening was not only an economic remedy for the poor workers.

Entry into the War resulted in an explosion of gardening in the city. The City Council decided to appoint the City Comptroller to keep track of vacant lands and apportion them out to those that want to garden. (Council Turns Down Tilma 1917; Tilma 1917, Doornink 1917; 1918). The comptroller’s office phone rang the whole first day following Hamilton’s performance in the Chambers supporting the aforementioned markets and the gardens (City Retail Market 1917). Most of the available land was gone within the first couple of weeks.

The local banks produced lists of vacant properties where the owners were willing to offer their lands to residents for gardening. Garfield began to be known as one of the local “garden men,” along with another banker named William Murphy who, in addition to

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<sup>10</sup> Coincidentally, the legality of chickens in the city was a hotly debated topic during this period, with the Back-to-the Landers in conflict with the City Beautiful people. The latter won. See Chickens in the City 1913. *The Grand Rapids Press*. May 22: 6. For a current attempt to overturn this rule in Grand Rapids see Grand Rapids Leaders Worried. 2010. *The Grand Rapids Press* June 23. [http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2010/06/grand\\_rapids\\_leaders\\_worried\\_a.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2010/06/grand_rapids_leaders_worried_a.html)

apportioning lots, held neighborhood garden meetings (Backyard Patriotism 1917: 1). As well, local factories were tilling up land on their properties for laborers to work during their breaks and after hours (Grand Rapids Company 1917)

Still, youth were the community gardening giants in Grand Rapids. Over 1300 children were part of garden clubs in the summer of 1917 (Thirteen hundred children 1917). These clubs were not mandatory, but solely existed because the students wanted them. They canned over 7,500 quarts of vegetables and earned a total of about \$7,000 through local sales the summer of 1917 under the guidance of an instructor named Grace Watson (Seven Acres 1918). A local reporter commented about their work,

It was not only in the actual raising of flowers and vegetables and the reducing the high cost of living through the cultivation of war gardens, but the interest and spirit which was created which gave the work its greatest value. One boy said that he liked belonging to the club because he learned the care of a garden and the cultivation of vegetables. Another boy said that he found as much pleasure on the garden work as in play. [Seven Acres 1918: 15]

Garfield invited a man from the United States Department of Agriculture to inspect Grand Rapids' garden clubs. The official was taken down to a plot where "department store girls" were working a plot of land, and the man said that the girls were "cheerful farmers tilling the soil" (Washington Man Inspects 1918: 170).

The gardens of Grand Rapids, especially those cultivated collectively by youth, were established through collaborative efforts, while also further promoting cooperation in their operations. The supervisors required the children to form their own clubs, elect their own leaders, and deal with income from produce sales, an example of both self-organization and self-governance (Thirteen hundred Children 1917). Additionally, gardeners were expected to share what they learned with the rest of the community. For example, in 1919, 750 students participated in 58 canning demonstrations, where local residents learned how to cold-pack

vegetables grown in backyard and community gardens, strengthening a civic culture through learning and sharing (Garden Clubs to Can 1919).

War gardening fervor culminated in a City Garden Day at a park. Hundreds of children paraded around the park holding banners that read “Soldiers of the Soil” and “We’re Not Slackers.” Guest speakers from around the state came to congratulate the children on their work. (Garden Day Draws Thousands 1917: 7), and a representative from the Michigan State College Extension judged the children’s harvests, offering prizes (School Children Unite 1917; figure 13). The event was even filmed to be shown later at a local theater with “close-ups” of local “celebrities”, including Mayor Fuller who had spoken at the opening of the Leonard Street Market a couple of weeks earlier (Soldiers and Garden Day 1917: 19). So many people showed up that there was not enough room for everyone to sit down for lunch. Garden Day brought out a whimsical flair from the mayor as evidenced in his invitation,

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?

Mary and all others are invited to Garfield Park Saturday, July 21. Experts will show how to eliminate insects by spraying, how to catch moles and other four legged animals that take what belongs to you and how to make your garden productive. Other experts will show you how to “eat what you can, and can what you can’t.” Prizes will be given for the best samples.

The Furniture City Band will play and everyone will sing patriotic songs. Celebrated national speakers, including ex-Gov. W. N. Ferris, will be present.

Clay H. Hollister, president of the Old National Bank, and another gentleman too modest to have his name mentioned, will tell you in five minutes how little they know about gardening.

Bring your luncheon, spend the day. Come in the afternoon anyway.

Good time for all.

Philo C. Fuller Mayor [Garden Day 1917: 6]

The community continued supporting gardening for children at least until 1921, even after the local schools lost funding at the end of the War. Donations by the Kent Garden Club,

the Grand Rapids Recreation Association, and the Old National Bank kept the curriculum in place (War Army Garden 1920). Community gardens were also supported at least until 1920 by local “garden men” such as W. C. Kellogg, and businesses such as the Baxter Street Laundry, which offered fourteen lots on its property for neighborhood cultivation (Plans to Unify 1920: 20). Gardening became a part of Grand Rapids’ identity as a city, which was used to entice workers to move in and work for the local factories in popular magazines and trade publications. The following quote is an example,

In summertime Grand Rapids is one vast park. Everywhere is a wealth of shade trees—the likes of which are not found in many cities so large. Every other home has its front or back yard flowers, and nearly everybody has a little truck garden from which to supply the family table. [Grand Rapids, Mich. 1921: 873]

Gardening was more than a simple measure to improve food security. It answered a longing for the soil which residents wanted to develop for their children. It was a cooperative activity which formed the identity of Grand Rapids as a place that was not disconnected from nature, even though it was “hemmed in” by tenement buildings. The work of citizens to construct these places of cooperative growing gave residents an opportunity not only to have access to healthy food, but also to build solidarity as a community. Patriotism may have been the official ideology once the War started, but having a good time, while also creating beauty, was the result.

While there are clear indications that those who started the community gardens and the farmers markets acted collectively, this does not mean they were completely selfless either. Clubwomen and bankers may indeed have been expressing their own *noblesse oblige*, accumulating symbolic capital by improving the welfare of working people (Bourdieu 1984), and there is evidence that Eva Hamilton used her popularity as the woman who “whipped the

council into line” to further her own political agendas (Mrs. C.B. Hamilton to Speak 1917: 2; Why Mrs. Hamilton Should Be Elected 1920). Still, their work was more than gratuitous volunteerism. Food citizens such as Eva Hamilton, Emily Chamberlain, Charles Leonard, Charles Garfield, George P. Tilma and others were dedicated to seeing changes in the way people in Grand Rapids could obtain healthy food without stressing household economies. This they accomplished not only through personal social position and in their own self-interest, but also through collective, collaborative work, with an interest in promoting common wealth.



Figure 13. Garden day drew hundreds to a local park for parades, music, produce contests, and speeches. (Photo: Schoolchildren Unite 1917: 10)

Mixed motivations aside, both markets and public gardens resulted from self-organized, collaborative, and cooperative efforts, and it can be argued that these efforts defined place, much like modern farmers markets and community gardens. Like their modern counterparts, farmers markets and community gardens in Progressive Era Grand Rapids brought people together to enjoy themselves. While there were clear pragmatic reasons for creating these spaces, there is

also a sense of longing throughout these case studies, a longing for a connection to food, the soil, and community, which could be fulfilled at both the markets and the gardens.

Of course there are major differences between what has been considered civic agriculture and the farmers markets and gardening movements in Progressive Era Grand Rapids, most notably a concern for the environment, rural communities, and small farmers (Lyson 2005). Still, a concern for beauty and preservation of the natural attributes in the city were apparent. Additionally, the agricultural club started at a local high school did include rural studies which focused on the well-being of rural communities, most likely influenced by Liberty Hyde Bailey's Country Life Movement. Additionally, the retail farmers markets did improve economic returns for small farmers, but the markets themselves were not specifically established for this reason. The only information found which specifically argued that the markets should be started in Grand Rapids for the benefit of small farmers was an editorial written by a vegetable grower (Says the Unwritten Law 1916) and a support letter from the Michigan Farm Bureau (Carr 1920: 1).

Differences aside, there was public work being done in Grand Rapids to construct more civic food systems. Public work is self-organized, cooperative, collective, and for the common good (Boyte 2011). When successful, public work within the civic food system model produces civic markets. The above events, when viewed through this lens of civic foods systems, look a lot like civic agriculture. Granted, there are empirical limitations to historical research in that primary data associated with the motivations and intentions of humans are scarce. However, it cannot be denied that the citizens of Grand Rapids in the Progressive Era used civic engagement to create alternatives to the existing food system, while also creating new connections to the place in which they lived.

## CHAPTER 5: CIVIC FOOD SYSTEMS AND HISTORY: LOOKING BACK AS WE MOVE FORWARD

The three studies offered here beg for deeper exploration into historical assumptions of food and agriculture in the United States. Overcoming common assumptions can offer local communities a better sense of their place in movements toward civic food systems. First, the assumption “most cities had at least one farmers market” may not be supported by historical evidence (Lyson 2004: 91). Second, the history of community gardens should not be viewed through the simple lens of economics. Third, the consolidation of food distribution may not be uni-lineal and uni-dimensional, meaning that there was not a progression from market, grocer, chain grocer, to supermarket, in which the general public did not play an active role in affecting the system. The role of the individual grocer, housewives, workers, politicians and the power relations which surrounded how food made its way into the city is ignored when history is viewed as a simple evolution from direct marketing to consolidated commercialism.

The food system was considered by most scholars of the early twentieth century to be a chaotic mess, and this was certainly the case in early Grand Rapids. Food distribution consisted of multiple actors moving in and out of a web of producers, consumers, and middlemen. A visual representation is given in figure 14, showing how the food distribution system looked in most cities by the 1920s. This web was governed by not only industry and political leaders, but also by civically engaged citizens. There is some evidence that citizens in other locations were affecting their local food systems during the same time period.

In Michigan, twenty-four public retail farmers markets were started between 1910 and 1930, raising the official number from two to twenty-six. This rise can be attributed, at least in part, to the work of civically engaged citizen groups. The Michigan Women’s Committee of the National

Defense Council alone was influential in the opening of public retail farmers markets in



## Generic Representation of Fresh Produce Distribution in the 1920s

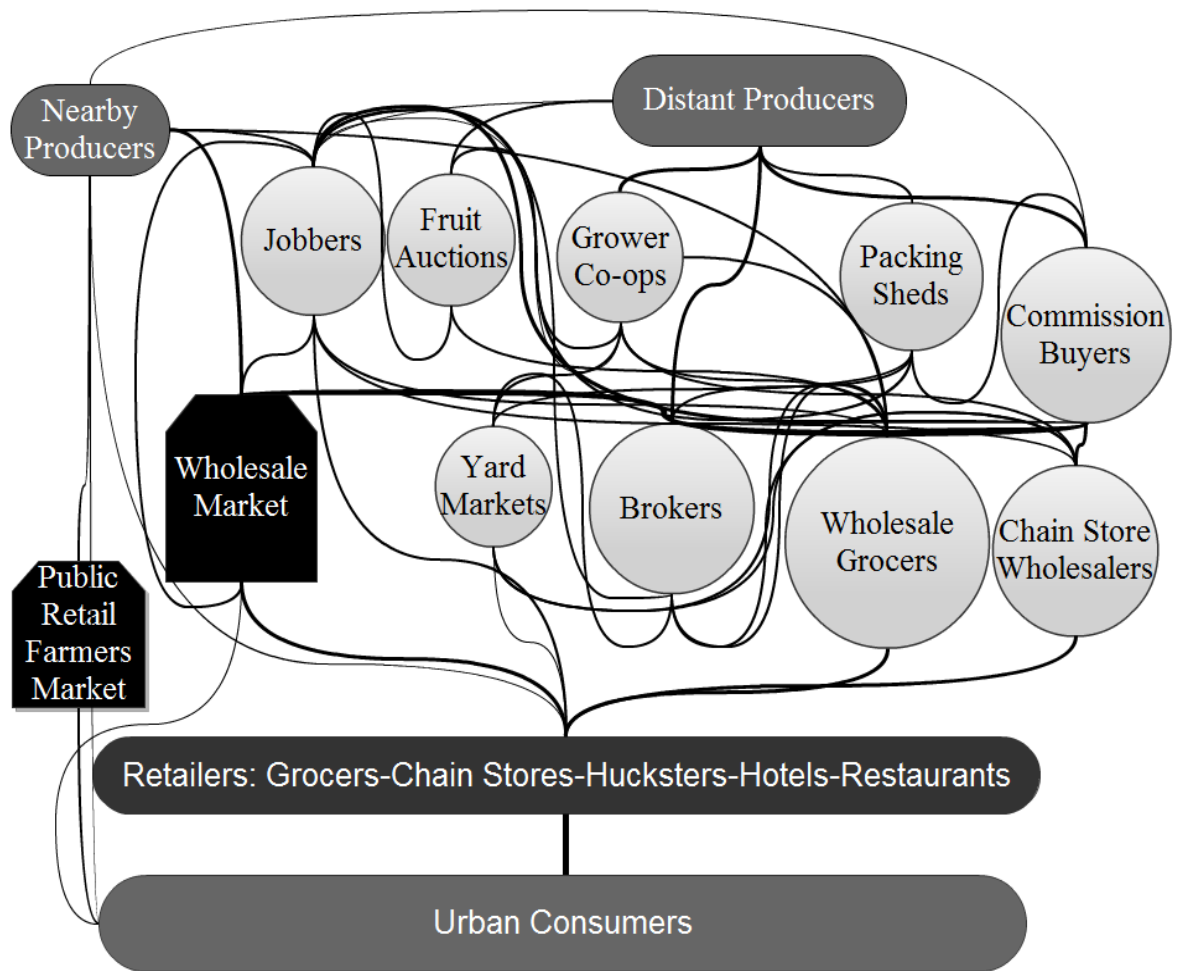


Figure 14. This is a visual representation of the fresh fruit and vegetable system in the 1920s. Thickness of lines indicates volume of trade. (Information for this chart came from Jardine 1926, Upson 1926, Erdman 1928, and Artman 1926)

Saginaw, Manistee, Marshall, Kalamazoo, and Lansing (Blair 1920), suggesting that there may have been demand for retail farmers markets from groups of residents in other Michigan locales. Additionally, the report published in 1919 (Rogers: 10) by the Census Bureau indicates that there were at least sixteen so-called “community markets” throughout the United States, which were started and operated completely through the work of unpaid residents. In the South, women’s markets were also popular, which were organized and operated by female farmers who sold directly to housewives (Wann *et al.* 1948). This rise in farmers markets may have been highest

in, but was not unique to, Michigan. Over 100 markets were opened during this period across the United States (Wann *et al.* 1947; Figure 2). Why there was an increase during this period has been loosely attributed to high food prices, but has never fully been explored (Pyle 1973). In fact, the work done on the history of farmers markets in general is lacking, while important local data is disappearing rapidly (Brown 2002).

Community gardens, on the other hand, have been studied extensively<sup>11</sup>. Victory Gardens during the World Wars and the potato patches of the late nineteenth century are well-known. However, the idea of early community gardens as places for just cheap food persists. A recent article in the *National Civic Review* stated, “[U]nlike earlier community gardening movements, which were born of public necessity for food, the community gardening movement of the 1970s arose out of social activism. Over the past few decades, cities have established community garden programs in response to citizen demand to strengthen community networks, beautify dangerous or blighted plots, combat obesity, and offer educational outlets for urban youth” (Hartsfield and Henderson 2009: 12). As the cases above demonstrated, the gardens in Grand Rapids during the Progressive Era were started for similar reasons, obesity aside. There may be hidden motivations, however, which were not explored in this research.

The work done by women in the Progressive Era to strengthen communities and beautify neighborhoods has been cited as not only an overlooked example of gender empowerment, but also an attempt for the middle class to provide social security to the working classes (Rimby 2005). Reformers which were defined as “Progressive” were most concerned with the social class conflicts which became apparent as the United States moved from the depression of the late

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<sup>11</sup> There is much currently published online concerning the popularity of school and community gardens prior to the First World War. An accessible history of school gardens which focuses on the time period covered here comes from California Extension agent Rose Hayden-Smith. <http://ceventura.ucdavis.edu/?blogpost=5081&blogasset=19305>

nineteenth century into the corporate economy of the early twentieth (Arnesen 2005). Indeed, Grand Rapids was in a state of class turmoil during the 1910s, punctuated by a city-wide strike of furniture workers which was followed by a charter change that redistricted voting populations, lessening democratic power in working class neighborhoods. Interestingly, the new farmers markets were started in the neighborhoods of those who voted against the charter change (Klieman 2006).

The failed retail market attempt by Charles Leonard was supported by labor unions whose letter came to City Hall just five months after the city-wide furniture strike. Allowing the markets to be successful could have been construed by some as a self-organized labor victory. The retail farmers markets which succeeded did so without the explicit support of workers. The women invited working class women to their meetings, but as mentioned earlier in this paper, there is no evidence as to whether any of these women were actually involved in the decision-making process. It could be suggested that the women were a vehicle for the government and business leaders to appease the workers, while not directly giving in to their demands.

The community gardens could also be reflection of this paternalistic welfare which lessened the agency of the worker while pacifying his or her desire for healthy living conditions. Bankers Charles Garfield and Clay Hollister, both active “garden men,” were instrumental in the first Grand Rapids Citizens League, which was assigned with the behind-closed-doors task of nominating the new commissioners which would then be voted in by the populace. This “organized citizenship” was defended in the papers as a way to get corruption out of City Hall, but was in fact of way to push their own conservative agenda in the face of popular dissent (Klieman 2006: 148). Additionally, gardens were started by factories to provide workers with places to not only grow their own food, but to also beautify grounds around production facilities.

An interesting hypothesis, then, could be that the work done to get farmers markets and gardening into the working class neighborhoods by women's clubs and other civic organizations was providing social welfare for workers without empowering them.

Closer scrutiny of the growth of retail farmers markets and community gardens in the Progressive Era could uncover some of the power relations which may not be readily apparent from official documents. Small, neighborhood retail farmers markets were being suggested by national labor leaders to feed working class populations (Sullivan 1913). The growth of public retail farmers markets, in particular, attributed to women's clubs across Michigan may have been a way to give workers what they desired (reasonably priced, healthy food), while not giving them what they actually demanded (fair wages through local decision-making power). Testing such a hypothesis would necessitate a broader scope than this study allowed. Much primary documentation has been lost over the last century. Still, there may be personal documents from marginalized populations hidden in the nooks and crannies of the mid-sized industrial cities of the Midwest, which could trouble the notion of public work by women which has been presented here.

Local inquiry is a fruitful way to build a comprehensive history of the food system in the United States and uncover not only pockets of civic engagement by citizens who were constructing new institutions in light of economic, social, and cultural needs, but also offer an original lens for looking at the power struggles resulting from a rapidly industrialized nation. Finding a full picture of any food system, or any economic system in general, necessitates many idiographic studies that can better explain the infinite particulars that have surrounded modern human sustenance. The goals of farmers markets and community gardens are varied and each

market is a reflection of the place in which it is located. Valuable information can be uncovered exploring the nature and benefits of both farmers markets and community gardens from the past.

Garry Stephenson *et al.* (2008) recognized the fact that many new farmers markets have been failing almost as steadily as they are growing. One of their recommendations is to plan carefully before starting new farmers markets, finding as many partners as possible in the community to make sure the market will be viable economically and socially. Each community is unique and applying a regularized model when developing local food arrangements may not only lead to failure, but also strip institutions of their valuable “local wisdom” (DeLind 2011). The process by which the original retail farmers markets were established in Grand Rapids is instructive from this perspective.

The retail farmers markets in Progressive Era Grand Rapids came out of experimentation from the bottom-up. Charles Leonard’s failed market came from his own personal observations that there was no place for the working class to purchase directly from farmers. However, he did not have much public support beyond a handful of union workers. The markets which eventually did succeed began as experimental markets also, but were requested in neighborhoods by local citizens who were working cooperatively to assess need. Not until there was proof of success did the city heavily invest in permanent infrastructure. Farmers markets do not become public spaces without the public work of many actors which fill the physical space even before it exists, and it may take experimentation to find what is successful in each community. Therefore, the physical space should not be invested in heavily until there is proof that it will indeed become a public place. This is where a civic food systems approach, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all model, is valuable in assessing the need and feasibility of a farmers market. All of the voices which are affected must negotiate and cooperate in building a successful farmers market.

If we want to construct civic food systems, we should know what has been done in the past so we can better inform ourselves in the future. The Fulton Street Farmers Market has stood the test of time as an institution which was started, and continually promoted, through civic engagement<sup>12</sup>. Next year it will be ninety years old and still operating. Currently, it enjoys popularity which has not been matched in Grand Rapids for at least fifty years. It can be used as a model for sustainable development in Grand Rapids, beginning with its creation.

As we work the soil in our own neighborhood gardens and interact with farmers and neighbors at the market we should be aware of those that came before us. Local history is important public work which can encourage civic engagement among current citizens by promoting a sense of place. The following excerpt is from an article printed last year in *The Grand Rapids Press*,

He was tired of seeing overgrown junipers on a traffic island in his northeast Grand Rapids neighborhood attract trash like a magnet, so Daniel Monsma rolled up his sleeves and did what he knows best: turn the earth and plant.

And some unexpected things happened after Monsma converted the tattered patch of public space into a tidy little paradise where Comstock Boulevard meets with Union Avenue and Aberdeen Street. Last fall someone spread new bark mulch anonymously, and a carpet of tulips came up this spring where none had been before...

Though the who is still unknown, the why isn't. Monsma and the mystery benefactor, other area landscapers and the Friends of Grand Rapids Parks, guerilla gardeners who cultivate without public money or accolades, all want the same thing -- to keep the city beautiful. [Many Hands 2010: online]

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<sup>12</sup> The City of Grand Rapids has threatened to close the retail farmers markets multiple times over their existence only to be answered with multiple petitions from residents. The Leonard Street Market could not weather the Urban Renewal of the 1960s as it had become cut off from its neighborhood by the new interstate. The South Side Market was probably a casualty of racial unrest and neighborhood redlining in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The current revitalization of the Fulton Street Farmers Market has been a community effort which came out of the work of local residents, and has been funded almost entirely through local, private donations.

One would imagine that August Raddatz, hewing and hacking away weeds with her scythe to create Happy Hollow, would be happy to know that the legacy of a cleaner and greener Grand Rapids through urban agriculture is still alive, and current public workers should be aware that they are part of a long tradition in their community (Happier City 1915). Although this is not a specific example of “food systems” per se, the growing of ornamental plants is only a step away from the development of edible gardens.

A handful of cities in Europe have applied the concepts of Slow Food to urban development (Mayer and Knox 2006). Slow Cities, as they are known, consider local history a necessary tool for constructing and reinforcing a sense of place, or as the French say, *terroir*. It is not just the authenticity of a local product which defines *terroir*. It is also the work that has been done in the past by citizens to build the community which gives each place its defining social and cultural elements. Doing public work, especially surrounding food, without knowledge of how your community came to be and the initiatives which have led to its current place in time is incomplete. Exploring the history of your own place, then, is itself important public work which can be useful to those interested in supporting a more civic local food system. Putnam argued that the Progressive Era offers instruction for those interested in strengthening civic engagement (2000). The case of Grand Rapids’ farmers markets and community gardens is illustrative of this point, and indicates a real need for a locale-by-locale search for similar historical pockets of civic food systems.

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