

“Y’all Bon Appetit, You Hear?”: Lessons from the Oklahoma Food Cooperative

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Not even a decade old, The Oklahoma Food Cooperative (OFC) grosses an average \$80,000 (US) a month for Oklahoma farmers and ranchers. A review of the OFC’s planning stages reveals its similarity to the recommendations of the Toolkit at <http://www.foodcoops.org>, a basic outline of the steps needed to form a food co-operative. In particular, the story of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative expresses how crucial it is for a wide variety of people to become involved as early as possible in the creation of a co-operative. Despite its location in the conservative heartland of America, the OFC creates a space for progressives from all political backgrounds to unite in order to support agriculture and promote ‘eating local’.

The Oklahoma Food Cooperative provides monthly delivery service of Oklahoma-grown products to customers through the 68,000 square mile state. Established in November 2003 by Robert Waldrop and a group of like-minded activists, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative (OFC) has developed from humble beginnings into a highly organized volunteer-led organisation that grosses an average \$80,000 (US) a month for Oklahoma farmers and ranchers. Not even a decade old, the OFC freely provides other North American cooperators with the information and software they need to emulate their success. The OFC operates against the grain of contemporary Oklahoma politics, where a frustratingly conservative base ensured that no electors supported Barack Obama in the 2008 election. But make no mistake: the Oklahoma Food Cooperative is pure “Okie”; when he concludes a moment of gratitude at the beginning of the yearly shareholders meeting and potluck, Waldrop hoots his characteristic “Y’all bon appetit, you hear?”

The purpose of this article is to tell the story of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative in light of the Toolkit at <http://www.foodcoops.org>, a basic outline of the steps needed to form a food co-operative. The Toolkit recommends that planners should be sure to think about and clearly define their policies from an early stage in the design of a co-operative. This includes evaluating the need for premises, defining procedures and pricing, and researching the rules for and obtaining the necessary permits and licenses. The Toolkit also urges co-operatives to actively promote their co-operative and track its progress once it is created. Though the Oklahoma Food Cooperative was planned and founded before the publication of the Toolkit, its example serves to reinforce the logic of its steps. The success of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative

demonstrates how crucial it is that a wide variety of people become involved as early as possible in the creation of a co-operative. The story of the OFC also provides an example of a co-operative serving a pressing social need in an American midwestern state: the unification of diverse people in the service of common goals.

Description

The Oklahoma Food Cooperative was established in 2003. An online operation from the beginning, the OFC makes no money for itself, but acts as a virtual location which links the producers of goods and the customers who want to buy them. Producers and customers are equal members, paying the same fee (\$50) to join, earning one vote apiece in the annual Stockholders Meeting. The operating costs of the OFC come from the 10% charged to both producers and customers.

Throughout the year managerial decisions are made by a board of directors, the core of which is made up of the following officers: President, Vice President for Producers, Vice President for Customers, Secretary, Treasurer, and Chief Information Officer, a person appointed by the Board of Directors to manage the OFC’s computer system. The Board of Directors also includes an employee representative (if at the time the co-operative has employees), and five or six at-large members elected by the Cooperative membership (Oklahoma Food Cooperative). At the current time, the OFC has four part-time employees, one Logistics Manager who works 40 hours a month and three logistics workers who work 10 hours a month apiece. Other than these, the OFC runs on the labor of volunteers. It takes 350 volunteers to maintain the 43 pick-up locations now served by the system (Waldrop).

Several cities warrant multiple pick-up sites, and six provide home delivery services for an additional fee.

Membership

Members have to apply to become producers, and their qualifications are vetted by the Standards Committee. Producers must hold the necessary licenses and certifications to sell food in the state of Oklahoma, and they must create their own products. In other words, they may not act as distributors for commercial items or repackaged raw materials. Products do not have to be organic or 'all natural', as long as producers communicate transparently the methods they employ. However the OFC requires that animal products come from free-ranging flocks and herds, and that these are antibiotic and growth-hormone free. The OFC also forbids the sale of genetically modified crops. Finally, the OFC also requires that sellers of prepared or processed foods like frozen casseroles, soups, or bakery products utilise meat and eggs from Oklahoma farmers. Before being granted membership, farmers and other producers must attend and participate in a Delivery Day. This is also the case for producers of non-comestible products, for whom there is a separate application.

The OFC acts as an agent for producers in what is called a cross-docking operation. This means that the co-operative serves only to transport products; the "products are always owned by either the producer or the customer" (Waldrop). The OFC neither sets prices nor limits the number of producers who can sell a particular product. In other words, the OFC strictly maintains its role as a clearinghouse for products; for this reason, the OFC system is largely a model of ordering, transportation and delivery, a structure that could be used for a variety of products.

Ordering, Transportation and Delivery

Customers log in to the Cooperative's website the first week of every month to see items listed as available. The ordering period ends at the second Thursday of the month; on the third Thursday of the month, producers from all over the state meet in Oklahoma City, a conveniently central location in the state, to sort orders. By the end of the day, teams of volunteers have returned home, members' orders in tow. In each local pick-up venue, volunteers arrange orders

by customer member number, except for items (fresh eggs, cheese, meats, and frozen items) which are available for pick-up in coolers. Payment is expected at pick-up, unless the customer has pre-paid using PayPal, providing a printed receipt for inspection.

As experience would prove, Delivery Day runs smoothly only when items are clearly labeled with the name of the producer, the name and membership number for the customer, and the name of the product. After the ordering period closes, producers are able to download and print labels created by the OFC's specialised software. These are attached onto individual orders and contain all of the information necessary to get the item to the customer or to reroute the item if it becomes lost. Waldrop notes the evolution of packaging from grocery bags to zip-top bags because labels can be slipped inside the latter and are less likely to fall off, even if the items are wet from being in coolers (Waldrop).

In the early days, use of 'virtual spaces' precluded the need for a permanent physical home for the Cooperative; the group relied on a local church hall for Delivery Day organisation for the first three years of operation (Waldrop). From an early point the OFC invested in three 7x14 foot non-refrigerated trailers for transportation, and eventually refrigerated trailers were needed. These insulated trailers were outfitted with Cool-Bots, thermostat-like device which made it possible to cool the trailer with window-unit air conditioners. This solution not only saved the OFA money, but saves on electricity costs as well. The co-operative has been almost entirely self-sustaining since its origin, and volunteers and coordinators work to maintain cost-efficiency while upholding responsible ecological standards.

Origin

The Oklahoma Food Cooperative was first conceived of by Robert Waldrop, a fourth-generation "Okie." As an activist in the Catholic Worker Movement, Waldrop is founder of Oklahoma City's Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House, a charity which delivers food to the home-bound. Waldrop's activism developed within his commitment to permacultured kitchens, the basic unit of locally- and ethically-produced food system. This commitment comes in the form of systematic food storage and preservation as well as temperance and

economy in preparation. Waldrop emphasises the role of personal choice in the creation of markets for “sustainable and just food production systems,” but also emphasises citizens’ needs to plan for emergencies.

One of the hallmarks of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative is its extensive use of the internet from its earliest stages. In fact, the OFC was born in the virtual world. In late December 2002 Waldrop initiated an internet discussion group (okfoodret@yahoo.com) to find other persons interested in local food. Within one week of Waldrop’s inaugurating the discussion, two dozen people were involved in brainstorming a co-operative system. Soon someone was researching grant opportunities, another was investigating a building, and others were sharing their knowledge about the maintenance necessary for different products, from fresh produce to meats. As early as this first week, Waldrop and others discussed the need for producers to follow state health regulations and others debated the rules that would define proper labeling. In other words, just about all of the issues deemed pertinent by the foodcoops.org Toolkit were being dealt with within one week of community-level brainstorming.

Just over three weeks after the initial post on okfoodret@yahoo.com, Waldrop posted a motion to “constitute an unincorporated association to be called the Committee to Organize an Oklahoma Food Retail Cooperative, consisting of producers and consumers.” 23 positive votes later, the beginnings of the OFC took root. When the group began to sell memberships, they reincorporated under the Oklahoma’s rules for non-profit organisations and began planning meetings in various locations around the state. Waldrop advertised the meetings, which were held in churches, libraries, and other free venues, in free notices in area newspapers. Although the greatest attendance at any one meeting was a paltry 12, each meeting concluded with the election of one person to serve on the Organizing Committee. In his recollections of this time, Waldrop also notes that the potluck lunches at each meeting were “critical to the group’s success,” and repeats his mantra that “We start small or we don’t start at all” (Waldrop).

As the Toolkit advises, the first step in creating a food co-operative is the location of people who are willing to get involved; one person cannot create a functional co-operative. Waldrop reflects

that “The best organizers [of co-operatives] are people who ... are already actively buying, or looking for places to buy local foods”; Waldrop himself had been working on creating a permacultured kitchen for over twenty years when he began to think about establishing a retail outfit for local food (Waldrop). But the stimulating dialogue at okfoodret@yahoo.com would not have had occurred had Waldrop not elicited the expertise of others. If any lesson is to be learned from the early days of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, it was Waldrop’s willingness to start a conversation and to pull together the know-how of experts from around the state. While members are quick to give Waldrop the credit for establishing the OFC, perusal of the message board proves that early thinking and planning came from a variety of knowledgeable sources.

Progress

The first order for Cooperative members was processed in November 2003. Producers netted about \$3,200 in sales from the 36 orders placed that month (*Norman Transcript*, 2006). By October of the next year, the Cooperative consisted of over 800 members and monthly sales grossed an average \$23,000. After three years, the Cooperative boasted a 2,000 item inventory, with selected products offered according to season. That same year (2006), the OFC netted \$450,000 with 95% of proceeds going to local farmers (*Norman Transcript*, 2006). By 2007, increased operations (there were now 1,000 members) called for a larger and more permanent meeting site for Delivery Day, and that autumn the OFC purchased a warehouse. In the year that followed, annual sales increased 52%. Now with over 2,000 members (130 of which are producers as well), the OFC sells \$70,000 to \$90,000 worth of Oklahoma-produced goods a month, a feat which puts almost a million dollars into the pockets of Oklahoma farmers a year.

In addition to its pecuniary success, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative can count positive social change among its achievements. In the profoundly partisan atmosphere of current American politics, it is unique and refreshing to see an organisation with devoted members and volunteers from both sides of the political spectrum. As Waldrop notes, OFC members include “conservative evangelical Republicans, ... gays and lesbians,” to “Muslims, Buddhists,

pagans, Democrats, anarchists, socialists, atheists,” and every other imaginable political identity. But what unifies this group is the “right to eat and to access local foods”. This right belongs to everyone, Waldrop states:

not just the people who agree with you on politics, religion, or culture ... Many of our members would not normally even be in the same room as others, much less working with them across barriers of religion, politics, and culture, on a common endeavor. We find this to be very hopeful — there is no lack of barriers dividing us these days, so it is nice to find that a diverse group of people can come together and work with each other on a common cause (Waldrop).

The ‘common cause’ of Okie co-operators begins with much-needed revenue for struggling rural farmers, but also includes other worthy initiatives that bring the message of food to the wider population. For example, the OFC has provided the basis for a ‘Farm-to-School’ initiative (culminating in Oklahoma Senate Bill 1515 and Oklahoma House Bill 2655, 6 March 2006), which seeks to provide local produce to school cafeterias. In the midst of the nation’s recession, the creative methods of Oklahoma co-operators have provided enormously impactful presence in the state. What is more, it has influenced the Nebraska Food Cooperative, as well as co-operative food systems in Texas, Michigan, Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, and Ontario (Waldrop).

Limitations and Resources

The development of similar co-operatives in other states is not surprising, given the structure of

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Resources

- Bissett, Jim (1999) *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Norman Transcript (2006) *Oklahoma Grown Food Coop Celebrates Third Year* at <http://normantranscript.com/commerce/x518969918/Oklahoma-grown-food-co-op-celebrates-third-year>, accessed 4 August 2010.
- Oklahoma Food Cooperative Website (2010) <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/>
- Oklahoma Food Cooperative Discussion Board (2010) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/okfoodret/>
- Waldrop, Bob [2010] *How to organize a local food coop in YOUR state: Lessons from the organizing campaign of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative* at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/organizing.php>. See also Bobwaldrop.net

the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. Waldrop is generous with his time and talents, and visits communities who wish to emulate the OFC. The Cooperative’s online operating system, the Local Food Cooperative Management System, is not a simple program - users must be proficient in php and msql, programming languages used for database and web applications - but is available for free under the General Public License system, and can be found at <http://www.localfoodcoop.org>. The structure is only limited by geography; to be so streamlined, a co-operative operates in the space that produce can travel to a central location in one day. Yet since ‘eating local’ is its raison d’etre, this element of the OFC system poses no problem for the trend for food co-operatives in the United States.

Conclusion

The Oklahoma state motto is *Labor Omnia Vincit*, and socialism carried the day in the years before the First World War) (Bissett, 1999). Despite its progressive history, however, Oklahoma is a ‘Red State’, an area of the country caught up in the frighteningly narrow-minded goals of political conservatism. The Oklahoma Food Cooperative provides an outlet for the good works of progressives from ‘both sides of the aisle’ for whom political representation has been limited. As the case of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative has shown, even political diversity is no match for the bonds of a common cause. What is more, the success of the OFC illustrates the efficacy of the style of planning promoted by the Toolkit at <http://www.foodcoops.org>. Starting small is starting, after all.