

# Fifty Years of Scribbles and Screeds

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

**T**he excellent contributions in this issue can speak for themselves. After four decades as editor of U.S. food co-ops' trade magazine, in my final column from that chair I offer a look back.

## 1968: A turning point

Leaving my Minnesota small town for Minneapolis, I come of age during the 1960s. Moved by what I learn, I quit college and resolve to refuse the military draft. Joining many others, I experience powerful solidarity in our antiwar community—and later seek its echo in collectives and cooperatives.

Assassinations cut down leaders of change, and rebellions reverberate worldwide. The U.S. expands its toxic assault on Southeast Asia, eventually killing four million, just as it had only 15 years earlier in Korea. The damages left are unacknowledged but are also brought home.

With a federal prison sentence hanging over my head, I work hard with friends and comrades to organize our part of nationwide draft resistance, while supporting all versions of opposition to the war nightmare. I am part of the evolving radical movement and a joint editor for a front-lines newsletter.

I move into a communal house of 15 politically active young adults, and by 1970 we are buying bulk foods at the first food co-op. Like most everyone in Minnesota and Wisconsin, I have encountered co-ops of the prior generations. Inspired by critiques of resource overshoot, I become vegetarian temporarily, vasectomized permanently, and make walking and bicycling my daily mode and outlook.

But the war machine is not finished with me, and after a major court victory aided by the ACLU (*U.S. vs. Gutknecht*, January 1970), I am for a second time criminally indicted for refusing to cooperate with the military draft. My contributions at a new food co-op are rudely interrupted by a two-year limbo of hiding, jail time during trial and conviction, then federal prison in Minnesota (joining several good friends) and parole.

I return to the Twin Cities metro and share lovely solidarity in a restaurant collective—and begin my work as a journalist in the cause of cooperatives with *The Scoop* (1974-1978), sharing grassroots knowledge and helping to resist an anti-democratic leftist group. Usually an independent contractor, I continue my opposition to war by omitting to file annual federal income tax returns.

## 1978: National co-op associations

Working with two cohorts, I help plan an alliance of the “new wave” food co-ops that have sprung up across the country. Our trio garners support for a 1979 launch of the Alliance of Warehouses and Federations and a bimonthly trade magazine, *Moving Food*, and I leave my job as a board member and administrator for DANCe, the regional food co-op distributor. Over the next six years (while giving up fall apple picking), I help coordinate a national network and edit its trade magazine. Currently available to CGN members, the *Moving Food* archive (1979-1985) will be available on the grocer.coop site in 2019 for all researchers and obsessive readers.

By 1980, several of the new regional distributors also ally with

the prior generation of co-ops. The historic CO-OP label grocery line is fading; a rebranding oriented to the natural foods co-ops gives it a few more years of life. In 1983, I help produce a late and unrealized call for a unified food co-op sector from leaders of both generations: “Report of the National Planning Task Force for Food Cooperatives.”

In the headlines, Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan, aided by crimes against Iran and Nicaragua, is elected president, and the neoliberal era is under way.

## 1988: Have magazine, will travel

In 1985, beginning my year in Boston, *Cooperative Grocer* is launched as a bimonthly magazine focused on retail, thanks to support from Northeast Cooperatives and a dozen other co-ops. After the first year I take ownership of the publication and return to Minnesota. But at the end of the decade, I surprise my friends and relocate to Athens, Ohio. I am drawn there by love and personal opportunity, but I also need distance from the parochial Twin Cities network in order to maintain focus on a national co-op constituency.

During its first 18 years, I handle *Cooperative Grocer* editor and publisher responsibilities, including travel to many trade events in the Midwest and on the coasts, and at home countless hours on the telephone. A local musician and Mac user helps me launch the first online archives and co-op directory. Allies in many distant places bring their own dedication, and this never stops—their reports embody a record of our evolving food co-op movement, at grocer coop.

Outside the magazine, notable reports include a widely used collection produced with Karen Zimbelman, “Challenges to the Cooperative Board,” and with the same co-author and Carolee Colter a study of management structure at Mississippi Market Co-op, “Evolution and Revolution.”

In the market, co-ops increasingly are the victims of their foresight and success. Co-ops drive the growth of local foods and organics, including Organic Valley (as I later described in *O.V.'s Rootstock*), but competitors with deeper pockets and resources are growing strongly. Joint co-op training is strengthened through regional and national associations, including an annual gathering of the tribe at CCMA (Consumer Cooperative Management Association). But the co-op distributors are shrinking.

Production of a valuable report, the “Retail Co-op Operations Survey,” originally launched by teaming with co-op accountant Scott Beers, changes to a project with Walden Swanson and a national cohort. In time it is given over to a sophisticated data-sharing service, CoCoFiSt, and CoMetrics.

## 1998: Co-op allies

During my 18-year sojourn in scenic Appalachian Ohio, I enjoy a supportive partner and lively community, take road trips, design and help build a lovely homestead, and have a second job managing a thriving farmers market that is a year-round highlight of the town.

Most of the regional food co-op distributors, almost all of the buying clubs, and quite a few stores disappear by the late 1990s, declining overall to fewer than 300 retail co-ops. The distributors either merge with another co-op, sell to United Natural Foods Inc., or simply close.

Co-op grocers associations (CGAs) arise in the Twin Cities and the Midwest and other regions. The CGAs create their first national association (NCGA), aimed at greater strength—but effective greater unity is initially lacking.

The spread of organic and natural foods is dominated by privately owned chain stores, from Walmart to Whole Foods, but local food economies also are growing. Retail food co-op expansion continues but at a diminished pace; additional professional training and consulting services emerge in response to co-op business needs.

A new online service, Cooperative Grocers' Information Network, maintains a lively range of conversations. Several years on, given an offer to merge with *Cooperative Grocer*, its board declines. Instead, after NCGA is reorganized into a stronger national structure, during a packed meeting at a CCMA conference I announce my intent to sell *Cooperative Grocer* to NCGA—and in response get the loudest ovation I have ever received.

### 2008: Triangle Park Creative

It's my first year after returning to Minnesota, back to my roots and remaining family and living on a good friend's organic farm. Before this, publisher Dan Nordley at Triangle Park Creative negotiated the "joyful transfer" of *Cooperative Grocer* assets and my work to a reformed Cooperative Grocer Network. I no longer have the publisher work and worries, I enjoy a most supportive work environment, and the magazine's depth and design are greatly improved. But the interactive web functions are muddled and, like many other small print and website projects, it struggles to cover its costs.

Meanwhile, despite all the market challenges, a new generation of food co-op startups is growing, and this time the support resources are much better than they were thirty years ago. The nonprofit Food Co-op Initiative is launched, with support from local and national cooperatives. New food co-op stories and analysis soon appear in every issue of *Cooperative Grocer*.

### 2018: Winding down

Nearing the end of this road: I've been blessed to have had a shared platform and the friendship and solidarity of many fine folks. I have tried to help present their passions, values, and practical wisdom in good, clear sentences—apparently, some people still read.

Needing support to continue this work, I have been humbled by generous comments and contributions from many cooperatives and comrades. In 2019, I will no longer be the editor here but will still write a column—perhaps with more focus!

As I step back, my prospects and the future at large look precarious. Climate and the ecology of earth are now changing more rapidly than at any other time of human civilization. I believe cooperatives and public ownership remain necessary for earthly salvation, or at least salvaging a functioning and protective society.

To me, the enduring basis for carrying on despite difficult prospects is not hope, likely to be false—rather, it is love and conviction and having the courage of your convictions. •



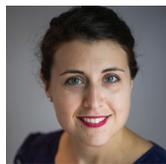
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