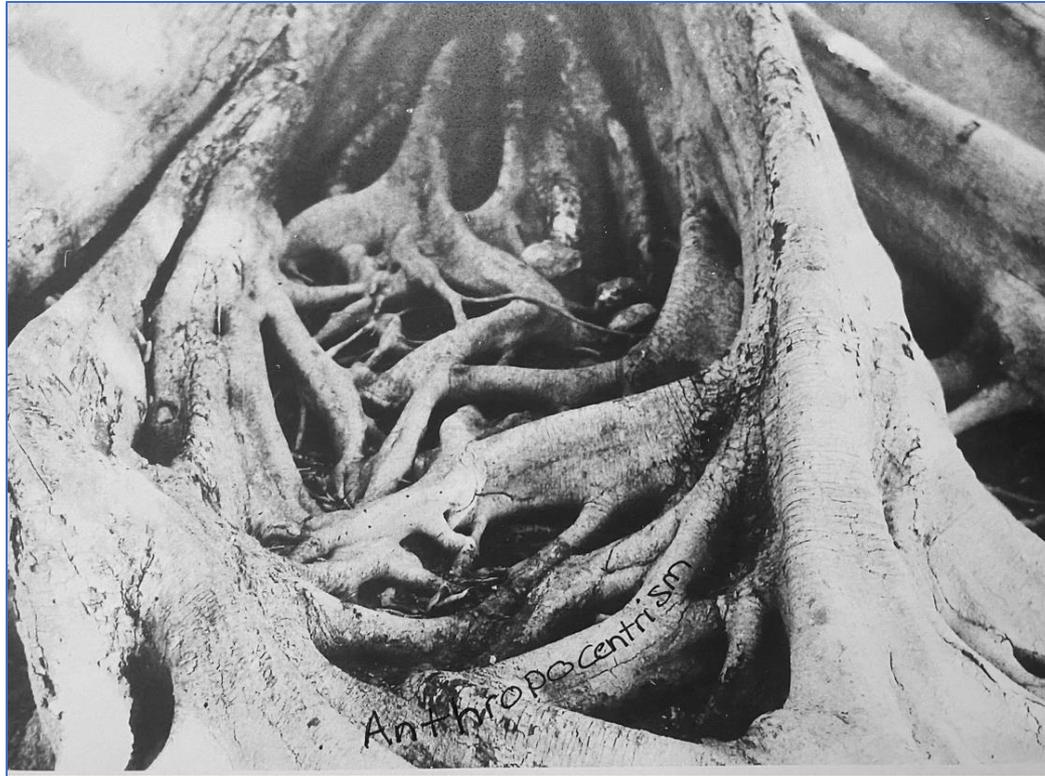


Commodity or Medicine?

Food and Farming in Transition



*...each spear of grass, each blossom,
each shrub and tree, hill,
valley and plain, seem to say,
"I have something to do," and
each seemed intent upon doing it -
upon fulfilling its destiny.¹*

- Betsey writing for a children's magazine

March, 2025

Dear Betsey –

*The ground is thawing, the maple trees are breathing,
the sap flowing, with the sweet sweet water of the trees...*

Did you tap those maple trees in front of your house, Betsey?

*I can see you dipping your finger into the bucket,
slurping the sweet tree water with delight.*

*Sugar maple trees were not only a source of sustenance
They were medicine and a sacred gift
for Indigenous peoples for centuries
before you planted those trees in Ohio*



*What other sources of food did you find in the wilderness
as your family settled?*

What foods came with you from Connecticut?

Which ones came with the ships from Europe?

*Just as subsistence and colonial farming fed you in the 1800s,
more industrialized versions of those colonial farms
fed my family in the 1950s.*

*Growing up in rural America,
I loved visiting the farms of my friends.*

*I recently made a journey back to the Clizbe farm,
where we gathered annually for Thanksgiving dinner,
and to the former dairy farm of my best friend Sarah's family.*



The cows were our friends.

*The highlight of the summer
was to accompany them
to the county fair in August,
and hang out in their stalls.*

*I remember camping out
in sleeping bags
in the cow pastures,
then waking up
to the sound of their bells
as they nudged our bodies
with their slimy snouts....*

*...while also making sure
we didn't roll over
into their fresh droppings..!*



*Another friend offered me my first pony ride,
the saddle slipped and left me hanging
upside down under the pony's belly...!*

*Our great love was Rojo (my first word in Spanish!),
the red horse of our tribal playmates.*

*The barn where Rojo lived harboured magic hiding places
among the dusty and musty bales of hay on the upper floors.*

*It was in the third floor loft that I resisted
a punishment in a Truth or Consequences game.
To avoid the consequence (probably kissing a boy!),
I walked backwards, only to fall
through a large chute for the hay bales,
heading straight for the ground-level concrete floor.*

*Saved by the basketball net on the ground floor,
catching my 8-year-old bum in its ring...!*

What farm animals were in your life, Betsey?

*The oxen that pulled your family wagons from Connecticut
must have helped clear the forests
and break the land for the first planting.*

*Your horses likely pulled plows, harrows,
moving machines, and hay rakes in the fields.*

*Were you a rider?
Did you befriend any of the horses?*



When Judge Eliphalet Austin settled in Austinburg in 1797, he cleared enough land to plant wheat the first year.

Wheat was not a native plant, but was introduced by British colonists. It soon became both a staple food source and a cash crop, creating what were known as the "Bread Colonies."

What other crops did your family grow?

Selling agricultural goods was also a source of income for your family. Did you sell mainly grains? To whom?

Did your mother tend a big vegetable garden like my mother did? My mom canned green beans and tomatoes for the winter, stored potatoes and onions and squash in the cooler root cellar.

What foods graced your table, Betsey?

The diet of a settler family must have depended on foraging (berries, nuts, herbs) and planting fruit and vegetables, along with hunting and raising animals.

Our table was filled with typical dishes of 1950s America. Women who had mastered serious war-time jobs were encouraged to return to the kitchen, seduced with new labour-saving appliances often made from converted military tools.

Betty Crocker cookbooks touted the use of processed food like Campbell's soup, while frozen TV dinners offered our mother an occasional break from kitchen duty.

We benefited from living in a farming community, even if we didn't farm. We got eggs from local hens and fresh milk from dairy farmers.

Milk delivered in bottles, which when left on the porch in the winter, meant the milk would freeze and rise up out of the bottle, with a cap an inch or two above the rim.





Domesticated turkeys



Wild turkeys

What animals became part of your meals, Betsey?

The dense forests of northeastern Ohio were home to wolves, deer, elk, wild turkeys, foxes and wild cats.

Did your family hunt as the original Indigenous peoples did? When did farm animals arrive – the cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, chickens, goats and geese?

As new to this land as you were.

To protect the herds and flocks, church bells rang to scare off the wolves and other wild animals.

We got fresh meat, mainly chicken, pork and beef from our farming neighbours.

Aside from our pets, the only live animal we ever had in our yard was a turkey, which my dad would buy at Thanksgiving. The big rock in the back corner of our yard was the slaughtering stone.

Both fascinated and horrified, we watched him wield a hatchet to cut off the head as quickly as possible.

Then there was the time that a headless turkey danced a jig around the yard before succumbing to its ultimate fate.

Author Barbara Kingsolver once talked her family into [a year-long experiment](#) in growing all their own food, which included raising heritage turkeys.

The big challenge was retraining them to fornicate, because for a century they have been bred (and castrated) to provide meatier birds for Thanksgiving feasts.

I imagine that the poultry you raised, Betsey, didn't wobble like today's birds that have been selectively bred for enlarged breasts!



*Sometimes, the parishioners would pay my father in produce.
I understand your father was also paid partially with provisions,
including young cattle and whiskey!*

*I'll never forget the moment that I walked into the kitchen,
freaked out at the sight of half a frozen pig recently delivered to the table.*

*Sliced down the middle, horizontally,
a cross-section revealing half the bones, ribs, and organs.*

*How did you feel. Betsey, when newly slaughtered animals
appeared in your kitchen?*

You couldn't say that we rural kids didn't know where our food came from...!

*Our backyard had a plum tree which offered us its fruit in season.
We built a tree house about 9 feet up, climbed to the platform,
then slid down the tree's drooping branches to the ground.*

Other families had pear and apple trees.

*Every fall, after the apple harvest, a group of women gathered in the park
across from the church. A big iron pot hung on a pole over a wood fire,
the women chatting as they stirred apples for hours until the fruit carmelized.*

*Apple Butter Day was a major social event. I can still see the steam rising,
taste the rich flavour of that sweet brown sauce!*

This was mutual aid. Everyone took home a jar.



Were you and your sisters groomed in the kitchen, Betsey, supporting your mother in cooking for your large family?

My sister Kathy was drawn to baking, liked hanging out with my mom. Dad rarely entered that space; his specialty was Campbell's tomato soup from a can and grilled cheese sandwiches.

Though I didn't articulate it at the time, I think I saw the kitchen as a site of women's oppression (roots and routes video!). I had little interest in food and less in cooking; that came later, as I travelled and tasted diverse culinary wonders around the world.

Even my brother Mike experimented more with baking than I did. He approached the kitchen like a chemistry lab, mixing food colouring to produce a blue cake with orange icing.

"Gross!" we chastised him, but we never refused to taste his experiments...!

We girls were encouraged to learn to cook and sew, conforming to the model of the 1950's housewife.

Sewing was my home craft of choice. Store-bought clothes were a luxury, so we made most of our own.

[4-H clubs](#) helped us develop these skills, one project and one badge at a time. We learned by doing, guided by the 4 H's: head, heart, hands and health.

As a seven-year old, I made a pot holder and baked peanut butter cookies. Each year the assigned tasks became more challenging, from tablecloths at age 8 to aprons at 9, from coleslaw to pineapple upside down cake.



Every August we displayed our final creations at the County Fair, which was founded when you were alive, Betsey.

4-H competition was organized by age, judged for quality, with ribbons for first, second and third place.

I hung those red, blue and yellow ribbons with pride on my bulletin board, proof of my success in what was called "home economics."

I was being trained along with other rural kids: the boys in farming; the girls in home-making practices.

Were there any similar activities at the fairgrounds, Betsey, when you were a teacher in Austinburg in the mid-1800s?



One of my favourite community events in Austinburg was the potluck supper in the church basement or the Grange Hall, a kind of community centre in rural America.

What kinds of community gatherings featured the sharing food in your time, Betsey?

At these potlucks, we would fill our plates to overflowing – trying each family’s offerings: tuna casserole, scalloped potatoes, Boston baked beans, dinner rolls, strawberry shortcake....yummy!

These feasts were not only about sharing the wealth of our land, they were about building community.

Once stuffed on home-made food, we were fueled for physical and social activity – square dances or group singalongs, usually led by my dad....preacher cum recreation leader..!

I’ve maintained the potluck dinner tradition – with students and activist friends, inviting a wide array of delectable dishes, often reflecting the cultural diversity within the group.

You might not recognize the food culture that is dominant now, Betsey, fast food often eaten alone or in the car...!

Our Earth to Tables Legacies book counters that in [Cooking and Eating Together](#) – community meals from a Toronto park to an engagement party in a P’urépecha community in Mexico.



In the summertime, there were also pie socials, a uniquely rural North American phenomenon.

A farm family would host a gathering during berry season, providing strawberry shortcake and home-made ice cream for 100 local residents.

Then there was the box social, a match-making version of these pie events, which invited the young women to make their favourite pie for an auction. Pies lined up on a long table – rhubarb, cherry, key lime, chocolate cream, lemon meringue, strawberry, raspberry, blueberry, Boston cream pie.

An auctioneer encouraged the young men in the room to bid on the pie of the girl they had their eye on. If successful, his pie maker was obliged to eat the first bites in his company.

Thirty years later, in a displaced Quaker community in a Costa Rica rainforest, I learned what happens if you break the gender protocol, and allow women to bid on one of the pies.

Here's the story of my transgression: [Feminist Pie Social](#)



Was there a General Store in Austinburg in your time, Betsey?

A place to buy dry goods and sundries?

Austinburg was a ghost town by the time I visited it two centuries after your arrival.

The corner grocery store, across from the church, a hollowed-out ruin.



Through my lifetime, I witnessed the development of the post-war global food system in our hometown, Betsey.

Stories of a farming community that fed us fresh food relegated to delicious memories.

The family farms are gone and local residents either stock up at corporate supermarkets in a nearby city,

Or drive a mile to a multinational fast food restaurant at the exit of a transcontinental highway that transports fresh tomatoes in refrigerated trucks from Mexico to my home in Canada.

This was the story I recounted in [Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail](#).

A story of disconnection from the land, from our bodies as nature.

*Food is our connection to all other beings and forces of nature.
Food as medicine, not a commodity.*

Food as a teacher about how to live together.

*Our Haudenosaunee partners taught me to grow corn, beans and squash –
the [three sisters](#) that model a way of living collectively.
Each offering something needed by the other.*

*Big cities lack garden space,
so I reclaimed a patch in the back alley.*

*In 2020, a global pandemic woke us all up
to our dependence on the unhealthy global food system,
and inspired many to start growing their own food.*

*In my tiny backyard in downtown Toronto,
a [pandemic garden](#) became my connection
with my young neighbours and our grandchildren.*



*When kids have only seen vegetables wrapped in plastic,
putting their hands in the soil is a radical act.*

*Betsey, if you were here today, I imagine
you would add “growing food” to your educational activities.*



*Maybe you would join me in rewilding
my backyard garden, Betsey,
bringing back to life the original plants
native to this territory.*

*Recovering biodiversity.
Inviting pollinators.*

*Growing sacred plants, like tobacco.
Learning which so-called weeds
are actually medicines.*

*I honoured the original stewards of this territory
with a [backyard land acknowledgment](#)
that offers greetings and gratitude,
for all the interconnected beings
found in my urban backyard.*



*Would you be honouring the medicinal use
of sumac in Austinburg, Betsey...?*



*Or tapping the new maples,
progeny of the 400 you planted 200 years ago,
for their sweet sap...?*

References:

1. Betsey Mix Cowles. "Letter to Frank," *Child's Friend* 7 (February 1847), 211.