

Boone's Feed All Regardless of Means ("F.A.R.M.") Café: Building Community  
Capacity to Address Food Insecurity

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**ABSTRACT:** Boone, North Carolina is home to the Feed All Regardless of Means ("F.A.R.M.") Café, a pay-what-you-can restaurant located in historic Boone Drug Store on King Street. This central location supported the funding of an American Library Association "Building Common Ground" grant in 2011 that enabled a year-long campus/community exploration of the issue of food security in North Carolina's High Country between the Watauga County Public Library, the Appalachian State University Office of Sustainability, the Appalachian Humanities Council, and the Café. This paper shares three of that project's insights into the unique potential of the pay-what-you-can model to address food security issues in Appalachian communities. The pay-what-you-can model is contextualized as part of the "trend toward production and consumption of local food" that has "re-energized many mountain communities and made them acutely aware that Appalachia is perhaps as well-suited as anywhere in the world to take a leadership role in the local food movement" (Olson, 2011).

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Food insecurity is a critical issue in the High Country of Western North Carolina. As of last year, ours is one of only nine states with higher household food insecurity rates than the national average (Coleman-Jensen 2010). 21% of our county's residents live below the poverty line, 6% more than the national average. Last year, 1 in 8 Americans received help from a food bank; for us, that number was 1 in 6. Our neighbors who seek emergency food assistance often must choose between paying for food or other essentials such as fuel, housing, and healthcare (FeedingAmerica, 2010). And 36% of our households seeking food assistance have at least one employed adult, reminding us that having a job does not equal food security – and that hunger's face is rarely what many expect it to be.

In 2012, I helped the Watauga County Public Library receive a Building Common Ground grant from the American Library Association to support a year-long project called "Food Security in the High Country: Compassion Comes to the Table." The project was a collaboration between the Library, the Appalachian State University Office of Sustainability, the Appalachian Humanities Council, and pay-as-you-can restaurant F.A.R.M. ("Feed All Regardless of Means") Café. Its goals were to help participants understand the connections between food security, sustainability, and compassion, develop skills to address our area's food security challenges, and cultivate a deeper commitment to the common good of our community. The program provided a series of reading groups, film screenings, workshops, and volunteer opportunities at the library during the year.

One wonderful outcome of the grant was the opportunity to understand the pay-as-you-can restaurant movement more deeply, especially its local

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manifestation, F.A.R.M. Cafe. F.A.R.M. Café is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to build a healthy, inclusive community by providing high quality, delicious meals produced from local sources which can be paid for by a suggested donation of \$6-\$10, a donation of an hour's work, or with nothing at all. It is part of a national movement called One World Everybody Eats. This successful concept has led to 29 start-ups in other parts of the country where diners are served by volunteers in the "pay what you can" spirit, and has led national chains (most notably Panera) to emulate the model in some of their locations. In spring 2012, The Café moved from Boone's homeless shelter, The Hospitality House, into the lunch counter of the historic Boone Drug store, which made the Cafe accessible to foot traffic from both App State's campus and the bustling downtown commercial district of King Street. They are open for lunch today, a five-minute walk from here, if you would like to visit for yourself.

My project seeks to explicate the ways that FARM Cafe's pay-as-you-can model - pioneered in urban areas - is a uniquely apt solution to the food insecurity challenges of Appalachian communities. Are there ways that Appalachia's culture makes this model a right fit to meet our food insecurity needs? I am a newcomer to Appalachian Studies, and welcome the perspective of those better versed in the literature and traditions of the discipline on this question. But in my own reading thus far, three areas of interest are emerging.

First, FARM Cafe connects food acquisition, preparation and consumption processes to each other and to the land, thereby nurturing through the support of institutional structures what Wendell Berry (2009) calls "husbandry" relations

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between food and community - relationships that are uniquely ascendant in our region.

Jean Haskell (Olson et al, 2011) notes that "a trend toward production and consumption of local food" has "re-energized many mountain communities and made them acutely aware that Appalachia is perhaps as well-suited as anywhere in the world to take a leadership role in the local food movement" (204). In Boone, that new energy is apparent in the robust connections that exist between organizations like New River Organic Growers, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, and the University's Sustainability office, which is deeply involved in research and practical implications of local foodways. FARM Cafe is beneficiary of these connections: it accepts food donations from local farms and churches' organic gardens, and is frequently staffed by student volunteers who come through participation in the campus' Appalachian and the Community Together (ACT) office, which coordinates the infusion of service learning components into courses across the campus. Service and social organizations also contribute energy and human power, and most days I visit FARM Cafe I will meet a former student serving or washing dishes.

In these ways FARM Cafe enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the region's commitment to a deep understanding and application of sustainability principles.

It is striking that this energy originates in the same institutions (universities, businesses) that historically have had a hand in the harmful scientization and rationalization of organic agricultural processes. Berry dismisses the creation of a scientific discipline of agriculture as:

...worth lingering over because of what it tells us about our susceptibility to poppycock. When any discipline is made or is called a science, it is thought by some to be much increased in preciseness, complexity, and prestige. When "husbandry" becomes "science," the lowly has been exalted and the rustic become urbane. Purporting to increase the sophistication of the humble art of farming, this change in fact brutally oversimplifies it (94).

In our case, as "sustainability" initiatives have gained social and political momentum among campus and local business stakeholders, the opposite has happened. Institutions become powerful allies in the name of protecting the sanctity of husbandry of the land, rather than its exploitation. FARM Cafe represents one manifestation of the daily fruits that can be reaped when existing powers make manifest a commitment to sustainable principles rather than exploitative ones.

Second, FARM Cafe is the sort of locally-driven effort for social change that has historically succeeded in Appalachia. In "Backtalk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes," Stephen L. Fisher (2001) notes that "the Appalachian region has never lacked a politics of change and alternative development, but what stands out...is not the extent of the change efforts but rather the obstacles to change, the conditions leading to quiescence" (203). He notes how institutional and corporate efforts to remove resources from the region have shaped and damaged the landscape, and have led not only to limited organized resistance to exploitation in coal, textile, and steel industries, but also to "individual acts of behavior such as gossip, back talk,

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holding on to one's dialect, refusal to cooperate with authority figures...the sort of protest James Scott refers to as the "hidden transcript" of the oppressed" (203).

It follows, for Fisher, that "successful change efforts in the Appalachian mountains have centered more often around the concept of community than around the centralized workplace of the mine, mill, or factory. In addition...a reliance on and defense of traditional values - a strong commitment to land, kin, and religious beliefs, an emphasis on self-rule and social equality, and patriotism have fueled many of the popular struggles of the region" (207).

I am struck by how these two historical aspects of grassroots social change in Appalachia – one, its individualistic, subjectively-motivated nature, and two, its reliance upon a broadly-held ethos of justice, self-reliance, and faith - are both accessed by the logic of action that motivates participation in FARM Cafe.

There is great appeal in the common-sense math of the enterprise: if we accept donations, are economical about portion control and fastidious about waste reduction, and encourage those who can to pay a little more, we'll have the margin to accommodate those who can pay less, or pay nothing at all. In "A History of Appalachia," Richard B. Drake (2001) characterizes these attitudes as "neo-populist" and "informal economy" responses to the challenges facing Appalachia, and contrasts them with the failures of past top-down "capacity building" and contemporary neoliberal approaches. Tellingly, Renee Boughman, the manager of the Café, told me that the most important principle she has had to keep in mind was flexibility. "If you come in here with a preconceived idea of how things are going to go, it's not going to work. But if you can accommodate the needs of the community,

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what they are able to give you on any given day, then you'll have what you need to make it happen." In sum: generally-held principles of equity and economy, administered flexibly in ways that are deeply respectful of the needs and desires of the community, are how change has historically come to this region, and part of how this one is taking root.

Finally, the pay-as-you-can response to food insecurity builds upon the region's purported cultural attributes. Here I feel to be on particularly thin ice, ascribing social and even moral qualities to a people that may be less unitary demographically in this moment than ever before in its history (Cooper et al 2010). Perhaps "Appalachia" does not even really exist, except as an imaginary of the country's hopes and fears about itself generally: Appalachia as a place passed over by modernity and therefore the last holders of simple values lost to the rest of the country; Appalachia as a stew of ignorance and poverty, violence and irresponsibility; both identities sold back to itself and the nation at large as "authentic" reification of our best and worst (Becker 1998).

Still and all, Loyal Jones (1975) describes three "Appalachian Values" that seem cogent, as follows:

1. Appalachian people are uniquely religious, in that "life on the frontier did not allow for an optimistic social gospel. Hard work did not always bring a sure reward, and one was lucky if he endured...mountaineers readily see that the human tragedy is this, that man sees so clearly what he should be and what he should do and yet he fails consistently" (2-3);

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2. They are individualistic and self-reliant: "the pride of the mountaineer is mostly a feeling of not wanting to be beholden to other people. We are inclined to try to do everything ourselves, find our own way when we are lost on the road, or suffer through when we are in great need. We don't like to ask others for help" (4);
3. They are neighborly and hospitable: "it was necessary for survival for everyone to be hospitable on the frontier, to help each other build houses and barns and to take people in when night caught them on the road. No greater compliment could be paid a mountain family than that they were "clever," that is that they were hospitable, quick to invite you in and generous with the food" (4).

I perceive this confluence of values at play every day at FARM Cafe. There seems to be a deeply-held common devotion that understands humans as fallible, and is therefore committed to judgment-free acceptance of everyone who comes in as they are, which underpins the entire effort to meet food insecurity not with mere handout but with compassion and dignity. This is coupled with the tension between an impulse for hospitality and generosity and a tempering respect for the self-reliance and autonomy of all who come to eat, as evidenced by the discretion with which payment is arranged for all diners and no one really knows who at their table has paid and who has not.

In sum, I am working to explicate FARM Cafe's success in the region it serves through a broad appeal to the schemas and values of Appalachian Studies. The work so far acknowledges the Boone area's institutional commitments to sustainability



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and husbandry in the region; identifies the logic of action of FARM Cafe as consistent with historically successful efforts for Appalachian grassroots social change; and ascribes to FARM Cafe some of the values that may (or may not) be associated with the warp and woof of the culture in which it thrives. Much more work remains in building this understanding. I welcome your thoughts on next steps. Thank you.

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