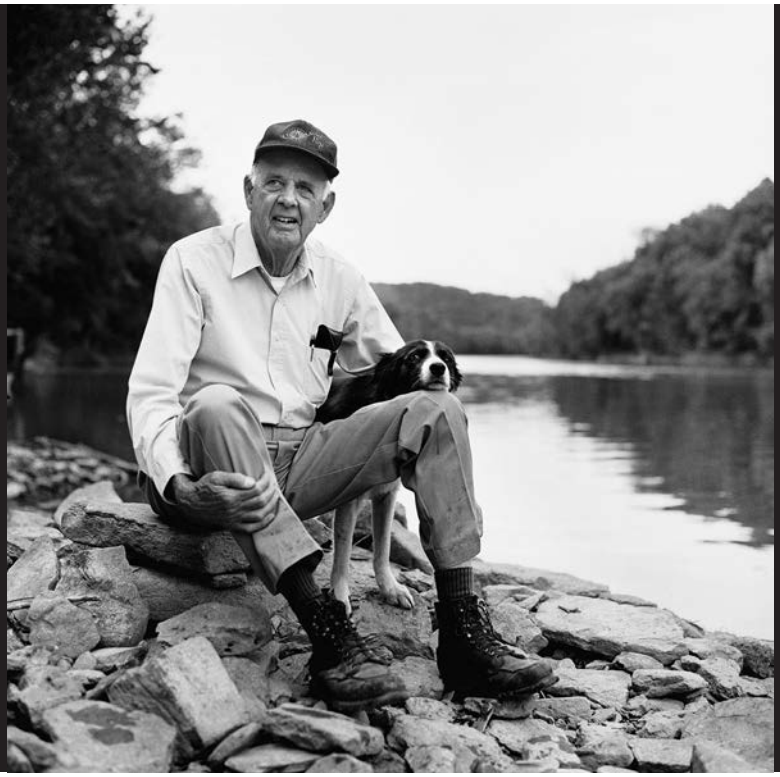
THE BERRY CENTER



WENDELL BERRY AT HOME IN KENTUCKY. PHOTO BY GUY MENDES, 2003

The Berry Center Journal

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"If there is no longer a household or community economy, then family members and neighbors are no longer useful to one another. When people are no longer useful to one another, then the centripetal force of family and community fails, and people fall into dependence on exterior economies and organizations."

—WENDELL BERRY, The Work of Local Culture, *What Are People For?* 1990

A Letter from the Executive Director of The Berry Center MARY BERRY

I suppose one can't be blamed for thinking that the world one grows up in is "normal." My father said to me recently that he can't believe how long it took him to realize that the Henry County of his youth was an anomaly in the history of agriculture. I've not stopped thinking about that since he said it to me. A most worrisome thing about human nature is how quickly we become used to almost anything. I have lived in the farm country of north-central Kentucky all of my life, looking at it all of my life. But until my husband and I went to Holmes County, Ohio, some years back to visit our friends David and Elsie Kline in Amish country I had stopped noticing what was missing *here*. Driving through miles and miles of well-farmed countryside with people outside working reminded me.

The question then is how do we restore such health and well-being to rural places? How do we become a culture that instead of celebrating the self supports the whole? For help I turn in my mind to the good examples I've known—to the women who have raised, inspired, and loved me.

Today, April 30, is my mother Tanya Berry's eighty-third birthday. My husband's mother, Mabel Smith, turned eighty-four on April 8 of this year. Their stories, in some ways, couldn't be more different. My mother came to Henry County as a bride in 1957 after a childhood spent moving from California and Kentucky many times. Mabel Smith was born to a farm family in Trimble County, Kentucky, and has lived all of her life there. Mabel was one of eleven children brought up in a self-sufficient farm family who knew how to take care of themselves from the fields and woods of their place. My mother was an only child raised by artists and academics. She says that she was brought up in museums. Mabel knew how to make a life on a farm because she was raised doing it. My mother had to learn, wanted to learn. She moved into an intact culture that taught her how.

Tanya learned to grow and preserve food, take care of livestock, feed lots and lots of company, and make a beautiful home out of a farmhouse that had been long neglected. Her house and her cooking marry her California roots with Kentucky culture. She has been a tireless advocate for the people of the community she came to live in as a young woman by driving people to doctors, taking food to the sick, and taking part in countless efforts over the last fifty plus years to fight for the land and the people of Henry County, Kentucky. She says to young people now who look to her for guidance in finding a home, "You can make a home. Just stop somewhere." All of this while being my father's first and best editor for, I believe, nearly everything he has written over the course of their sixty-two-year marriage.

My mother-in-law, Mabel Smith, is a competent and content country woman. She has been my mother-in-law for only five years so I depend on stories from my husband to learn about her years working on the farm and in the vegetable garden with her husband. I have experienced her cooking and her skill at preserving food. Gus, my father-

in-law, is a highly skilled wood worker and Mabel an accomplished seamstress. Flowers and plants flourish in the house and surround the backdoor. Every year, her son tells me, after the crops were in and there was time she and Gus would work on some kind of project for the house. The house is full of quilts, paintings, drawings, carved birds and animals, and much more. And so they live now in an order they have made and it is beautiful.

These women exemplify what my father calls, "the art of the commonplace." The abundant rich lives these women have lived have relevance today to our attempt to change our land and people destroying economy. They are the holders of the culture we need to make efforts such as the Green New Deal amount to something lasting.

It would be wrong not to feel allied with and encouraged by the interest in a Green New Deal. After all, the work of The Berry Center began with my worry that The Burley Tobacco Program, a New Deal program, and one that should be used as a model of how to support small farmers and their communities, had been forgotten. The prosperous and diversified farms that I remember from my childhood would not have existed without it. The Amish community of Holmes County continues to thrive because of Organic Valley, a dairy co-op modeled after the Burley Program. But we must not miss the fact that the Henry County of my youth and Holmes County of today were and are populated by people who could and do live within the limits of a particular place. And from the acceptance of limits comes the possibility of contentment, joy, and community. Any success coming from a Green New Deal or any other government program or political solution will depend on a population of people willing and able to do their own work, who know as much as possible about the place they live, and who honor the golden rule as an economic principal.

I recently heard a well known philanthropist say in an interview on NPR, "… In the U.S. women

Loyce Flood and Julia Ford mixing sausage. From *For The Hog Killing*, 1979: Photographs by Tanya Amyx Berry.
(Publication available Fall 2019 from the University Press of Kentucky.)

do 90 minutes more of unpaid labor at home than their husbands do. That's things like doing the dishes, carpooling, doing the laundry. Unless we look at that and redistribute it, we're not going to let women do some of the more productive things they want to do." I understand that this woman is talking about husbands taking up their fair share of household work. But she manages to demean the work of home economics while she is at it. And, the redistribution of household work has not meant, necessarily, husbands and wives working together equally, it has meant the work of households has been passed on to others. As long as upward mobility is the point of education in this country and everything that can't be quantified by a direct payment is considered "not productive" no top-down approach from the centers of officialdom will work.

Since 2011 it has been my privilege to work every day for small farmers and land conserving economies. I have been congratulated on starting something at The Berry Center. But I didn't start this work. I have continued it. I stepped into a long line of agrarian people who have been at work in the world since the beginning of time holding on to the cultural knowledge needed to care for the land—and the people who belong to the land. This is the essential work of human beings. This is what people are for. I am the imperfect inheritor of a perfect vision. Possibly the most ruinous separation in our polarized culture now is the urban-rural divide. The vision of a healthy, prosperous countryside feeding itself and a city, in our case Louisville, ensuring the health and security of that city, which in turn ensures the continued health of the countryside, is so hopeful that I don't despair and I don't give up.

Photo by Ethan Payne from *Bitter Southerner*.

Our Home Place Meat—Building A Local Farm and Food Economy

DEBBIE BARKER

"There aren't many bright spots in farming," says John Logan Brent, livestock farmer and judge executive in Henry County, Kentucky. "But Our Home Place Meat is one ray of hope and optimism."

Our Home Place Meat (OHPM), a program which began in 2017 at The Berry Center, is establishing a cooperative for small and midsize local livestock farmers to sell to regional markets. Over the last several decades there have been many attempts across the country to develop local food systems. "Buy local," has been a rallying cry for decades now and yet our food system is less and less local. In fact, the food on your dinner plate has likely traveled thousands of miles.

Why is it so challenging to build local food economies? What elements are needed to better assure success? OHPM is addressing these questions with responses based on ecology and care—respectful animal husbandry, healthy landscapes, quality food, and thriving farm communities.

Beginning in our own Home Place, counties in north-central Kentucky, we are building a local food model that can be replicated in communities throughout the nation.

OHPM is guided by three fundamental principles: pay farmers a fair, predictable price, manage supply, and provide stable purchasing agreements with farmers. Along with adhering to these principles, we work closely with local businesses to restore community-based infrastructure that is needed for a local food system. OHPM is also tackling other areas including branding and marketing, supply management, farm and product standards, sales and distribution, and more.

FARMERS FIRST

"For us, it begins with the farmers," says Sandy Noble Canon, program director of OHPM. "We pay farmers a fair, parity price so they can make a living and farm well." While this sounds like an obvious approach, it is rather revolutionary in these times. Under today's highly industrial farming system, the farmer is the last in the food chain economy. Consolidated agribusinesses and food companies pocket the vast majority of profits while farmers are doled out pennies on the dollar.

To be precise, the farmers' share of the food dollar is a mere 14.8 cents, the lowest level since such studies have been conducted. (USDA's Economic Research Service's Food Dollar Series, 2016)

OHPM, working with farmers to determine pricing that is fair and marketable, purchased 44 cattle in 2018 and plans to more than double production this year. "Other farmers would like to join the program," says Sandy. "And many of our existing farmers would like to sell us all of their cattle instead of shipping them off to feedlots." Finding more buyers—restaurants, grocery stores, distributors and other outlets—will allow us to work with more farmers and expand our purchasing.

Why the growing interest among farmers to participate in OHPM? A central reason is because OHPM farmers receive a higher price per pound for their cattle than they would receive from feedlot facilities. And, as OHPM participating farmer Joseph Monroe says, "Working and collaborating within a community is a great feeling."

Paying farmers a decent, living wage means that livestock can be raised more ecologically and humanely. OHPM provides an alternative to transporting cattle to distant feedlots where they are fattened up with grain and given antibiotics, steroids, and hormones (ASH). OHPM livestock are pasture-raised and are ASH free.

Selling pasture-raised livestock locally at a fair price also means that farmers can better care for soil, water systems, landscapes, and animal welfare. As Joseph notes: "Cows and animals are vital ecological tools that keep soils healthy." Cattle provide natural fertilizer for free. And by raising livestock on perennial pastures, farmers don't need to purchase expensive seeds or chemical inputs such as synthetic fertilizers or grain for feed. Also, perennial pastures maintain healthier soils and better preserve water resources than, for example, growing monocultures of grain.

Seeing the promising results of OHPM, farmers are asking for more information about how to maintain healthier pastures, improve grazing methods, improve genetics, and incorporating other practices that advance stewardship and ecology. In response to farmers' requests, OHPM organizes farmer field days, workshops, and assists farmers in finding needed expertise. "As OHPM expands we'll need to respond even more to our farmers' needs," says Sandy. Upcoming field day topics include improving hay fields and pastures based on protein content, learning weed control methods for pastures, and conducting soil testing.

Along with providing practical information, OHPM also provides equipment that is shared among participating farmers. We purchased a high-powered drill with a hay bale probe that is shared among farmers to sample and analyze changes in food quality for the animals. We also bought a portable scale to weigh livestock on the farm before transporting livestock to the processor. As we expand, other equipment, as well as information and training, will be needed.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND PARTNERSHIPS — KEY TO SUCCESS

Central to OHPM's ongoing success is Trackside Butcher Shoppe, a local meat processing facility that opened in 2015. "We wouldn't be able to do this without Trackside," Sandy plainly states. "A local food and farm economy is not possible without this kind of local infrastructure."

The relationship between Trackside and OHPM exemplifies a food and farm economy that depends upon values of cooperation versus competition. The interconnection between local businesses, when the success of one can be the success of another, leads to economic values, sometimes referred to as a "care" economy, that foster prosperity within a community. (*See more on Trackside, page 7.*)

LOCAL CULTURE INFORMS FOOD AND FARM CHOICES

Another central tenant of OHPM is our belief that local economies should reflect local culture. We began with a product that is historically and culturally relevant to the region —Rose Veal. The rolling landscapes and lush perennial pastures of the region are ideally suited for cow-calf production. In fact, Kentucky produces more beef cattle than any state east of the Mississippi River. Rose Veal provides the greatest value and promise for our farmers who own cow-calf operations.

"Rose Veal, processed at weaning weight, is the beef I was raised on and eat today," says Mary Berry, founder and executive director of The Berry Center. "It's delicious and fits very well with the idea that we should be eating less but better meat while directly supporting our local farmers. There's no reason that beef needs to be fed grain and get to 1200 to 1500 pounds to be enjoyed. This is an industrial agriculture idea."

Rose Veal, which gets its name from the rose color of the meat, is produced very differently from the veal known by most people. White veal is produced by taking a calf away from its mother at birth, putting it on formula, and keeping it in a crate that is too small for the animal to even turn around. In contrast, OHPM Rose Veal, a tender, flavorful meat, comes from calves raised their entire lives on mother's milk and fresh pasture. Rose Veal is raised under strict animal welfare and food quality standards—no antibiotics, no steroids, and no hormones are administered to the animals.

A MODEL FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

While we are encouraged by positive responses from livestock farmers, chefs, and markets, OHPM is also clear-eyed about the challenges of creating a local food economy. The work requires long-term commitment, agricultural knowledge, and deep knowledge of regional culture and history.

So we are moving forward—building community, fostering fairness and equity, learning from the deep know-how of farmers, re-learning forgotten skills and knowledge, adopting some new ways as well, and much more. OHPM looks to examples of farm systems that work for small and midsize farms, also known as "farms in the middle," too small to compete with giant, industrial farms and too large to profit by growing specialty crops.

The central principles of parity pricing, supply management, and steady purchasing agreements are taken from the Tobacco Program administered by The Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. Its legacy was largely shaped by John Berry, Sr., and his son John Berry, Jr. (father and brother respectively to Wendell Berry). The Tobacco Program, while not flawless, is credited with keeping small and midsize farms viable for over six decades. When the Tobacco Program ended, Kentucky and other participating states witnessed the decline and disappearance of many farms in the middle. *(See From the Archive, page 14.)*

Guided by fundamental principals and working with local farmers and businesses, OHPM is taking on the challenge of building a local food economy. If our nation wants "buy local" to be more than a slogan then we need more successful examples of how to build healthy, local food and farm futures.

As Wendell Berry writes in the essay, *Solving for Pattern*, a good solution for farming will "involve solutions to problems of fertility, soil husbandry, economics, sanitation—the whole complex of problems whose proper solutions add up to health; the health of the soil, of plants and animals, of farm and farmer, of farm family and farm community, all involved in the same interested, interlocking pattern—or pattern of patterns." OHPM strives to be such a solution.

To learn more about Our Home Place Meat, please call Sandy Noble Canon at 502-845-9200 or email sandycanon@berrycenter.org.

TRACKSIDE BUTCHER SHOPPE— KEY PARTNER FOR OUR HOME PLACE MEAT

The relationship between Our Home Place Meat (OHPM) and Trackside Butcher Shoppe illustrates how infrastructure and community cooperation are critical to building local farm and food economies.

OHPM's first step was to work with farmers to supply the livestock, but the effort to develop a local food and farm model would have quickly come to a halt without a local processor. Sandy Noble Canon, OHPM program director, states plainly, "We wouldn't be able to do this without Trackside."

Trackside Butcher Shoppe co-owners, John Edwards (left) and Chris Wright (right). Photo by Ethan Payne from *Bitter Southerner*.

Co-Owners John Edwards and Chris Wright simply smile modestly when they hear this and generously return the compliment. "We're honored to work with OHPM and a unique product [Rose Veal]," says Edwards. "It's really making a difference for some of our small family farms in this region."

Edwards and Wright opened Trackside in 2013 with a wing and a prayer and support from the community. John Logan Brent, elected Henry County judge county executive, played an important role by helping Trackside obtain loans and grants from Kentucky agriculture programs. And they are grateful for support from local farmers. Both agree that it's a privilege to work with the farmers. As Edwards says, "They work harder than anybody and get paid less than anybody."

Besides its obvious role as a meat processor and butcher shop, Trackside is becoming a regional hub. "People bring in animals and share stories and news of the area," says Edwards. For Edwards and Wright, Trackside embodies the sense of community that they wanted their families to experience. "When farmers come here it reminds us of the fond times we had growing up on our grandfathers' farms and we wanted our kids to experience some of that," Edwards adds.

Trackside is truly a family affair. Both families made the commitment to take it on. Before Edwards and Wright were able to leave their full-time jobs at the phone company, their wives, with young kids in tow, spent many hours running all aspects of Trackside. Edwards and Wright spent their evenings, days off, and all of their vacation days at the Shoppe until they were able to leave their steady, well-paying phone company jobs for Trackside. "We may not make as much money," says Wright, "but it's so satisfying and we're learning something every day."

Contact Trackside Butcher Shoppe:
www.tracksidebutchershoppe.com

Valley Spirit Farm is a two-family farm located in Henry County, Kentucky—
The Fiechter family (left) and the Monroe family (right).

A NEW GENERATION OF FARMERS— THE FUTURE OF OUR HOME PLACE MEAT

The two young families running Valley Spirit Farm, a founding supplier for Our Home Place Meat (OHPM), represent an enthusiastic new generation of farmers. The Fiechter family, Caleb and Kelly and their children, Judah and Rebekah, and the Monroe family, Joseph and Abbie, with young ones Ruth and Angus, started the farm in 2015. Raising produce, mushrooms, and pastured meats, Valley Spirit Farm works with nature to grow nutritionally dense, chemical free, and ecologically responsible food.

Just about the time the two families were hitting a wall in their beef sales, OHPM provided a new market. "The genius of OHPM is that farmers didn't have to completely change the way they farm," Joseph says. "Maybe some had to eliminate feeding grain to calves, but otherwise not much else had to be done."

Caleb adds that, too often, ideas for creating local food and farm systems come from outside of the community and require farmers to "blaze a whole new trail." Joseph notes that sometimes this approach can ostracize conventional farmers and not consider their deep knowledge of landscapes and farming. "We're non-GMO and focus on building organic matter in soils and other such 'ecological' practices and we've learned a lot from conventional farmers," says Joseph.

What about the promise of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture systems (CSAs)? Both families agree that these efforts can take a lot of time away from farming, estimating that they can spend at least 50 percent of their time on marketing. "The reality is that there are few farmers markets and CSAs that are profitable for many farmers," Joseph adds.

"OHPM is a model to watch," Joseph says. "We're interested in farming models that build community, collaboration, and bring neighbors together. OHPM has been invigorating."

Contact Valley Spirit Farm,
www.valleyspiritfarm.com

A Vision

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility.

WENDELL BERRY—*The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry,* 1998.

Photo by Ben Aguilar.

We have never understood that the only appropriate human response to a diversified forests ecosystem is a diversified local forest economy. We have failed so far to imagine and put in place some sort of small-scale, locally owned logging and wood-products industries that would be the best guarantors of the long-term good use and good care of our forests.—WENDELL BERRY, Conserving Forest Communities

A Lesson in Local Forest Economy STEVE SMITH

The Wendell Berry Farming Program's horse-powered forestry class, conducted in January 2019, aimed to re-ignite the imagination and skill needed to guarantee the long-term use and care of our forests. Ten students took part in this immersive course at Tom and Janet Grissom's Drennon Woods Farm in Henry County, Kentucky. Rick Thomas, Sterling College draft animal educator; Jason Rutledge, Healing Harvest Forest Foundation; and Ben Burgess, Kentucky draft horse logger and biological woodsman, led the draft-horse course.

This article by Steve Smith, a farmer who started the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) market model in Kentucky, is based on a presentation he gave to students during the forestry course. Steve makes the important point of how little has been done to create a local forest economy and also beautifully shows how an agrarian mind works. He makes his judgments based on his knowledge of what has happened in the past on his farm, how his years on his farm have improved the place, and what his own work has cost the place.

To make intelligent decisions about land use in a particular place takes a very high order of intelligence—intelligence that has been lost as our local economies and local cultures have been lost. How are we going to get people back to rural places who think like Steve? An agrarian culture once supplied the people. To create the local economies that supply local needs, people must be taught. That's what the Wendell Berry Farming Program is all about.

Our farm is on the Little Kentucky River, Bedford, Kentucky. The hills on either side are steep and heavily wooded, and most of the farming is done in the bottoms. About two-thirds of our farm is woodland, and for a long time I have thought about the possibilities for our woods. What are the alternatives to industrial logging that could provide our farm with a steady income while at the same time improving the health and integrity of the woods? The answers call for at least five things:

(1) A better understanding of forest ecology.

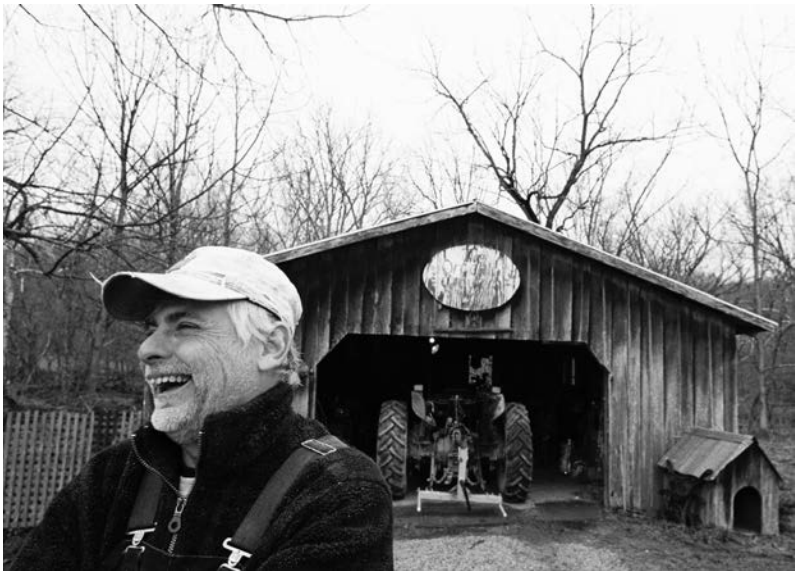
(2) A forest management plan that is not market driven, that is designed to improve the health of the woods and is tailored toward addressing specific problems and achieving specific goals.

(3) A local forest economy that begins by supplying local needs, adding value to our timber, getting a premium for ecologically harvested wood, and networking with wood workers, carpenters, builders, horse loggers, sawmills, and retailers to develop new markets and new market models.

(4) A market plan designed to inform and educate buyers about the benefits of ecologically harvested wood and the importance of a local forest economy to rural Kentucky.

(5) Worst first, uneven age, single-tree selection, and low-impact timber, harvesting using draft animals.

When lumber treated with chemicals was discovered to be unsafe to use as garden beds it created a demand for red cedar lumber. I had a portable band mill and had been doing some custom sawing when I started getting a lot of calls for red cedar. One was from a farm and garden store in Louisville that was using the lumber to make high-end chicken coops, outdoor furniture, and garden beds. They were also supplying garden beds to local schools. Glad for the business, I began cutting cedar.



Steve Smith at his farm in Kentucky.
Photo by Ethan Payne from *Bitter Southerner*.

After spending several months in the woods, I was surprised to see that I had made a serious dent in the grove I was working in. There was something troubling about the way the trees were leaving so fast, too fast, I thought. At the rate I was going, how much longer could the cedar last? After seeing how the value of my lumber nearly tripled by just hitting it with a palm sander, adding brackets, and being packaged as garden bed kits, it occurred to me that I might be missing out on an opportunity, and that my lack of planning would probably cost me more than I knew. By not having an adequate forest plan I was following someone else's plan. I was filling orders for timber, and the orders were coming faster than I could fill them. The most valuable forestry technique I had learned so far was to stop sawing trees.

Eastern red cedar is rot resistant and so are the tops and branches. Left where they fall, they make good habitat for invasives like bush honeysuckle, tree of heaven, and multiflora rose, and become harder to move the longer they lay. I saw how opening the forest canopy was an invitation to invasives and how thinning the trees was therefore a better practice.

Wendell Berry Farming Program guest instructor Ben Burgess shows students Prathana Shrestha and Grayson Weltyk some of the finer points of draft horse logging. Photo by Ben Aguilar.

I had started by thinking that I would prefer to see these stands of cedar in pasture. However, having thought about it a good deal, I have since come to see that the problem I was ultimately wrestling with is a mistake that was made here two hundred years ago when the original forest was cut down, the hillsides were plowed, and the top soil washed away. The cedar trees have done a good job of holding the hillside in place. My expectations of these groves needed to consider that I have inherited a problem that will take thousands of years to repair, and the only elegant solution that I am likely to see in my lifetime are the groves themselves.

As an economic landscape, however, the stands of cedar are problematic for several reasons. The trees stand close together shading the ground so that not much is growing in the understory. Thinning the trees is difficult because the tops become lodged in the trees around them. In some places a few hardwoods have managed to reach the sunlight, and a few shade loving trees and shrubs like red bud and dogwood, but the stands are nearly all cedar and growing on hillsides. The steepness of these slopes make them difficult and dangerous to work on. Any disturbed soil is at risk of washing away. The work is slow. It is hard to get footing, hard to employ directional felling. Once the tree is on the ground then the real work begins. There are a multitude of branches to trim, some of them spring loaded. You are soon up to your elbows in branches with nowhere to step, trying not to pinch the saw, not to dull the chain on a rock. Your hands become coated with sticky cedar resin that is thick as molasses but not as sweet.

Given all of this, getting the trees off the hillside is work best suited for horses and mules. Having seen how horse loggers can go where tractors cannot, and with far less impact on the land, it is obvious that draft animals provide a great advantage. Assuming the stands of cedar could be managed in a way that improves the land and makes better use of it, and the problem of invasives can be solved without using herbicides, then the question is: How? What are the options? Could all the cedar be cut, and the land converted to pasture? If so, it would require periodic mowing and the land may be too steep to mow, which would limit where pasture might be established. There is also the problem of the slash (tree tops and limbs) that is slow to rot.

The question of how to manage these stands of cedar was not one I could answer while trying to fill orders. The orders for lumber had exceeded my ability to supply them long term and I was going to have to refer my buyer to another mill anyway. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that I should have had a better focused management plan and I should have shared that plan with my buyer, explaining to him why I could not supply all of his lumber, but that I could provide lumber from woods that are managed according to an ecological standard, which should be worth a premium. To receive a premium, I would supply labels, signage, and marketing materials designed to educate customers and promote better forestry.

Kentucky farmers have often considered pasture to be a better use for their stands of cedar. As part of a diversified farm economy, pasture prevented

Jason Rutledge, guest instructor, guides Wendell Berry Farming Program students Gabe Francisco and Emma Stein while skidding cedar logs near Pleasureville, KY. Photo by Ben Aguilar.

many stands of cedar from becoming subdivisions by providing an economic return to the land. But that economy is gone, and the weight of its loss has come to rest on farm communities that would greatly benefit from a local forest economy.

My experience with organic farming has helped my thinking about a local forest economy. They are in many ways similar. They both involve natural systems that are best represented as a circle, a continuous loop, an energy flow that works as long as all the parts are in place, in proportion, and in harmony with each other. It doesn't matter where you start in the circle, it has no beginning and no end. In an organic farming system, if we start with healthy soil it leads to healthy plants, which people prefer, which pays for the better farming practices that produce healthy soil, and the loop continues. We see how each part is connected to every part. It is a natural system that is also describing a market model, which in my case was Community Supported Agriculture.

It works because the market model is appropriate to the system. What they both have in common is people, people choosing to support a model that protects and enhances the world they live in, a model based more on the Kingdom of Heaven than on Wall Street. It is a very specific kind of market model. Entrepreneurial business models are important, they provide a valuable service, they have their place in a local forest economy, but an entrepreneurial forest economy cannot compete with industrial logging.

We need a local forest economy that can compete with industrial logging by putting money into the local economy. It would be helpful if it were a part of a greater forest initiative that provided a standard of good forestry that farmers could subscribe to and receive help with forest plans and standardized marketing materials that tell the unique story of how rural Kentuckians got tired of waiting for help that was not coming and took it upon themselves to do something. It could start as a pilot project with a dozen or so farmers who understand the significance of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association model and work in that direction, all the while mindful of my friend who has the farm and garden store in Louisville, and many people like him, who would gladly support such an effort.

[The parity concept] accords with our way of life, and it gives real and tangible meaning to the philosophy of 'equal opportunity.' It is a consistent American way of striving for, and approaching, parity of income without the use of direct subsidy payments by the government. It must be preserved and effectuated to the end that farmers may continue to enjoy the high standard of living and opportunity which they have had only a taste of.

—John Berry, Sr., Speech to the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 1948.

From the Archive at The Berry Center Michele Guthrie

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, incorporated into New Deal legislation and implemented in the early forties to address low farm prices, at first didn't include the major crop of small farmers in Kentucky and the southeast region—tobacco. Southern Congressional delegations, led by Kentucky's Virgil Chapman pushed to include tobacco in a program that provided the financial support of the federal government through price supports based on parity and production controls to prevent surpluses. It was known as the Tobacco Program.

Various cooperatives administered this and other agriculture programs which, in the case of tobacco, provided that the federal government be paid back with interest for its support loans to farmers. John M. Berry Sr. was president of The Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association (BTGCA), and under its guidance came economic and social stability in rural areas of the region that lasted for sixty-plus years.

By the eighties, the expanding industrial agriculture system, which contributed to surpluses and falling commodity prices, hastened a nationwide crisis in farming. Across the country thousands of farmers faced bankruptcy and lost their farms, their livelihoods, and homes. In a letter to Senator Wendell Ford of Kentucky, dated July 29, 1982, Mr. Berry acknowledged struggles for tobacco farmers:

Tobacco is on trial and the program which secures to the small burley tobacco farmers a minimum wage will be under recurring attack . . . When one considers the fact that the 1979 national marketing quota for burley tobacco was 614,165,325 pounds on 303,093 farms and of that quota 486,098,259 pounds or 79% was produced on farms having quotas of 10,000 pounds down to 1,000 pounds or less and that Kentucky had 41,219 farms with a quota of 1,000 pounds or less and produced 21,553,547 pounds, it becomes apparent that burley tobacco is a small family farm crop, whose producers find indispensable to their economic well-being. Plainly, it is so important,

John Berry, Sr., (right) with his son, Wendell Berry (left), and grandson, Den Berry (center). Photo by James Baker Hall.

hunches to the contrary notwithstanding, that you 'stay put': and stay in the fight for these small people.[1]

Demonstrating his point, an article some months later in the *Courier-Journal* announced that the Philip Morris Company had granted the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture some $600,000 for research into the mechanization of tobacco production. A speech by an executive of the company signaled trouble ahead for the Tobacco Program when he asserted that Burley tobacco cost more than it was worth and that major changes such as doing away with production controls were necessary or "the world of Burley tobacco as we have known it could soon be in jeopardy."[2]

While all farmers experienced difficulties throughout the expansion of industrial agriculture, small tobacco farmers were, in large part, protected by the hard work of Mr. Berry and others in the BTGCA. Mr. Berry believed in the Tobacco Program. As he wrote, "The parity concept is the happiest and most fortunate thought that has visited the minds of statesmen of this country in generations."[3]

However, he and others involved in its administration recognized imperfections in the Program. Through the years they implemented modifications to assure its future.

Mr. Berry's letter to Senator Ford presaging trouble for the BTGCA are the words of an agrarian who felt that all deserved equal opportunities to succeed. He believed in cooperation and cooperative marketing however messy it was to administer. Mr. Berry realized early in his life the necessity of doing everything he could for the small farmer. He felt the solution to the problem of farmers victimized by unbridled economic forces—greed and the resulting instability and volatility of the markets—was cooperative programs.

Our Home Place Meat, a program to establish a cooperative for local livestock farmers, is one example of how, as inheritors of Mr. Berry's work,

Owen Flood (right) and Mary Berry (left) working in the tobacco fields. Photo by James Baker Hall, 1973.

The Berry Center is applying tenets of the Tobacco Program that worked so well for sixty years. (*See Our Home Place Meat, pages 4-7.*) Programs like this, following a cooperative marketing model, serve as a way forward for revitalizing agrarian communities.

Finding aids for information about John Berry Sr. and his life and work will be available soon on The Berry Center website. My information for this essay came from his files. He had put his letter to Senator Ford and the article about the Philip Morris grant to the university in the same folder. He obviously felt that they were connected. In an archive, the ideal is to keep intact the original order of the materials. Thus, we have a vantage point on Mr. Berry's thinking that might not be available without an archive.

If you'd like arrange a research session at our Archive Center please call to reserve study space and time. Careful research and analysis, along with the imagination, affection, and hard work exemplified by visionary leaders like Mr. Berry Sr. and his fellow co-op leaders offer a path to a sustainable future for farmers and rural places.

Contact Michele Guthrie, The Berry Center archivist, at:
micheleguthrie@berrycenter.org

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1 Berry, John M., Sr., Letter to Hon. Wendell Ford, Senator from Kentucky, July 29, 1982.

2 Norman, Phil. "UK receives the first installment of $600,000 burley-research grant." The Courier-Journal, November 12, 1982. P. B17.

3 Berry, John M. Sr. "In Defense of the Tobacco Program" in *The Producer's Program: Fifty Golden Years & More*, by The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, Inc. The Association : Lexington, Kentucky, 1991. P. 53 – 56.

The Agrarian Literary League—Celebrating Rural Places and People

The Berry Center's Agrarian Literary League (ALL), a rural reading program, was featured as the 2019 February Grantee of the Month by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Arts Midwest. The recognition was given for a Big Read grant awarded to ALL in 2018. A program associate at Arts Midwest noted an "… obvious creativity, joy, and community…in each and every aspect of the [ALL] programming."

Each year, ALL chooses a book to inspire conversation among rural readers and organizes events relating to themes in the book. ALL's Big Read for 2018 was "A Lesson Before Dying" by Ernest Gaines. In keeping with one of Dr. Gaines's prevalent themes, ALL's program activities highlighted the history of African American agrarianism. The book brought neighbors together in conversation across generations, gender, and race.

Below is an interview with Virginia Berry Aguilar, ALL program director, partially adapted from the NEA/Arts Midwest interview with Virginia.

Agrarian Literary League's "Get On the Bus" tour of African-American historical sites in Henry County, Kentucky. Photo by Leslie McBride.

Tell us about your program and your community.

The Agrarian Literary League (ALL) serves Henry County, Kentucky, and the surrounding rural areas, with intent to grow into a national program. Like rural communities across the United States, our region of Kentucky has experienced steady economic decline over the past decades. This has led to shuttered businesses in our small towns, social isolation, and a rise in drug addiction and crime. The economic downturn also means that humanities and cultural programs are often the first things to be eliminated from public education. So ALL is bringing humanities to these communities. We believe that reading and learning about our agrarian history and culture instills a pride of place that is necessary in order to live well and knowledgably where we are.

Why did you select this particular book and what is it about?

Set in the rural South in the 1940s during Jim Crow laws and racial segregation, Gaines's novel

tells the story of a falsely accused young black man on death row and a Louisiana-born, college educated black teacher who visits him in prison and helps him realize his dignity. As the NEA summarizes in its description of the book, "Gaines poses one of the most universal questions that literature asks: Knowing we're going to die, how should we live?"

The ALL committee recognizes that rural places in the United States are experiencing a crisis of culture. We see the potential for reclaiming a dying culture through literature that gathers neighbors together in conversation. It was clear to us that "A Lesson Before Dying" had the potential to stimulate conversation about a part of our community's history that is not often told and is quickly being forgotten.

What were some of your most impactful programming activities?

Choosing "A Lesson Before Dying" provided the opportunity to reach out to communities of color that we had not closely worked with before. We were honored to partner with the local chapter of the National Association of Black Veterans (NABVet) and to work with the Grand United Order of the Odd Fellows (GUOOF). Many NABVet and GUOOF members have long family histories in this region and through their generous efforts we organized and led the first tour of African American historical sites ever conducted in Henry County. While sharing stories, new partnerships were formed to help with funding needs for preservation of many of these sites.

A close partnership with the Henry County Public Library made many of our most rewarding and creative programs possible. At one of our ALL events hosted by the library, we were lucky enough to hear testimony from Kentucky Innocence Project attorney Jimmer Dudley and one of his former clients, Jeffrey Clark. Mr. Clark's testimony of wrongful conviction and twenty-five

Agrarian Literary League book group leaders enjoy "Brunch with Wendell."

years of incarceration before exoneration was profoundly moving. ALL committee members heard from many people that they had a dramatic shift in their thoughts on criminal justice and prison reform after meeting and speaking with Mr. Clark.

Our 2018 ALL finale featured a conversation between Wendell Berry and Kentucky author Crystal Wilkinson. Ms. Wilkinson was the recipient of the 2016 Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence ("serving to inspire and recognize rising African American fiction writers of excellence at a national level"). Wendell and Crystal's conversation included the art of common language—the necessity of familiarity and affection for the people they write about, the culture and joy of shared work, and the craft of writing. In reflecting on the legacy and influence of Ernest Gaines's writing on her life, Crystal said, "Wendell, Gurney [Norman], Bobbie Ann [Mason], George Ella Lyon, and Gail Jones gave me permission to write about Kentucky. Ernest Gaines gave me permission to write about rural black people."

Author Crystal Wilkinson (left) in conversation with Wendell Berry (right) at The Berry Center's annual Kentucky Arts & Letters Day. (Moderator Debbie Barker, center.) Photo by Morris Grubbs.

Do you have any favorite anecdotes or stories from your community about the book and the ALL program?

Each year we are committed to offering our ALL programming and materials free of charge. We find that this opens the doors to groups of people who often feel excluded from these kinds of conversations. And we were moved to hear many times from our members that they were touched by the generosity of the program.

One of the ALL participants, who learned of the program through her NABVets membership, drove two hours round trip to attend each of our events. At the Brunch with Wendell event, she told the group that the kindness and warmth of our events was unlike anything she's experienced in years. "This program feels like the old community festivals we used to have. I couldn't believe it when I came to the ALL Fall Festival and you weren't trying to sell me anything—instead you were giving things away and inviting me to join. I decided then that I would come to each and every event that you are having."

Our community's response to the book and activities was overwhelming and there is a clear need and desire for such programming to continue, not just in our county but in all rural regions. We receive calls from communities across the country asking how they can become part of ALL. The Berry Center hopes to expand ALL not only geographically but to a broader range of ages. It would be wonderful if we could develop reading lists and educational and outreach materials for ALL that could be used in many communities, including curriculum for students in elementary and middle schools.

So, what is next for ALL?

In 2019 the ALL committee has chosen to read "Payne Hollow: Life on the Fringe of Society," by author and artist Harlan Hubbard (1900-1989). The book poetically chronicles the lives of Harlan and his wife Anna at their home, Payne Hollow, on the banks of the Ohio River in Trimble County, Kentucky. There, the Hubbards lived for thirty-four years—"another time of near ecstasy," as Harlan writes—living off the land, "off the grid," and outside of the money economy.

Among his many crafts, Harlan was a talented artist. His oil paintings, watercolors, sketches, and wood-cut prints often feature river boats, landscapes, and pastoral scenes of our region of Kentucky. As Wendell Berry wrote in his biography of Hubbard, "Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work": "Harlan's profoundest calling was to see in these transient shapes some enduring clarity of form and relationship, to trace out the lineaments of the timelessness in time and of the heavenly here on earth."

The ALL committee believes that by reading "Payne Hollow" together, we may foster conversation within our communities about threatened values such as thrift, creativity, subsistence, and neighborliness. To quote Wendell once more: "Hubbard has often been compared to Henry David Thoreau. But Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for only two years. For Harlan and Anna, simplicity and self-sufficiency became a lifelong experiment and experience."

Contact Virginia Aguilar, director of the Agrarian Culture Center and Bookstore at virginiaberryaguilar@berrycenter.org

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With sincere gratitude we thank those who have contributed to The Berry Center.

"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't who is a member and who is not, but in who knows and who don't."—BURLEY COULTER, from *"The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership,"* by Wendell Berry. (North Point Press, 1968.)

The Berry Center
111 S. Main Street
P.O. Box 582
New Castle, KY 40050

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The Berry Center
111 S. Main Street
P.O. Box 582, New Castle, KY 40050
Ph: 502-845-9200

Agrarian Culture Center & Bookstore
129 S. Main Street
P.O. Box 582, New Castle, KY 40050
Ph: 502-743-1820

The Berry Center Journal Editor: Debbie Barker

Graphic Design: Daniela Sklan