

**Show Transcript  
Deconstructing Dinner  
Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY  
Nelson, B.C. Canada**

**April 19, 2007**

**Title: CO-OPERATIVES – ALTERNATIVES TO INDUSTRIAL FOOD II**

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Transcript: Pat Yama**

“We need to deconstruct dinner because if we don’t, we’re going to not have too much dinner in the future.”

“One of the primary results and one of the primary needs of industrialism is the separation of people, places, and products from their histories to the extent that we participate in the industrial economy do not know the histories of our families or habitats, or our meals.”

**JON STEINMAN:** And you’re tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. This show is currently heard weekly on 18 Canadian radio stations and available each week as a downloadable podcast. I’m Jon Steinman and I’ll be your host for the next hour.

On March 29<sup>th</sup> 2007, Deconstructing Dinner featured the first of an ongoing series here on the program titled “Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food.” The idea behind the series is simple. Over the past few months we have aired broadcasts featuring packaged foods companies such as Kraft Foods, agricultural corporations such as Cargill, we’ve learned about the declining nutrient content of food in our modern industrial food system, and so the big question is of course, do any alternatives exist. Canadians now live in an age where we have little choice but to begin exploring food systems that reduce our impacts on climate change. But more importantly, Canadians need to prepare for rising costs of fuel of which the global supply is said to be dangerously low. The luxuries we enjoy today are alarmingly reliant on fossil fuels, and as the food system continues its globalized agenda, this direction seems to be the very opposite one in which we should be heading.

On Part I of the series we took a look at two exciting alternatives to the industrial food system, one in which was a co-operative grocery store in Nelson, British Columbia that has operated for 32 years, the other, a newly-formed distributors co-operative in Victoria, British Columbia.

Co-operatives are owned and democratically controlled by their members, with all co-operatives maintaining a set of principles that consist of, among others, concern for the community, autonomy and independence, and provide education, training and information.

On today’s broadcast we will learn about two more co-operatives, one, being a land-cooperative whereby those within a community are presented with the opportunity to take on the ownership of agricultural land, and when one of the most significant barriers facing farmers today is land costs that exceed the ability of many to earn a living, this is a very exciting model that challenges the more conventional approach to land ownership. We’ll hear from Rob Diether and Lorraine LeBourdais of the Horse Lake Community Farm Co-operative just outside of Hundred Mile House, British Columbia.

Another co-operative featured on the program today will be one that was launched in the 1980s by Cathleen and Brewster Kneen, both of whom are frequent voices here on Deconstructing Dinner. Their Northumberland Lamb Marketing co-operative that they helped form in Truro, Nova Scotia, is an example of farmers coming together to ensure a market for their product and retain control over the price they receive.

Ending off the broadcast will be a cautionary tale of the risks and threats facing the co-operative model. And thanks to an excellent program produced by our friends at WORT in Madison, Wisconsin, we will learn of one of the first co-operative grocery stores in North America that, after 39 years, was forced to close its doors in December, 2006.

*increase music and fade out*

April 17<sup>th</sup> marked the International Day of Farmers Struggle, coordinated worldwide by La Via Campesina – an international peasants coalition. Canada's National Farmers' Union is a member of the coalition. The day is observed to remember the 19 landless peasants who were among a group of people in Carajas, Brazil who were demanding land in order to feed themselves and make a living. The 19 were part of Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, the MST, the largest social movement in Latin American with an estimated 1.5 million landless members. The 19 individuals were murdered by military police.

In Brazil, 1.6% of the landowners control roughly half of the land on which crops could be grown. Since 1985, the MST has peacefully occupied unused land where they have established co-operative farms, constructed houses, schools for children, promoted indigenous cultures and a healthy and sustainable environment.

Similar struggles exist right here in Canada, where our society has valued food to the point that the products derived from agricultural land are worth less than the services and luxuries to be found from recreational land. This has led to land prices here in Canada being far too high for most farmers to earn a living on, and for any new farmers to even consider farming. But, there is an exciting project being launched just outside the community of 100 Mile House, British Columbia, and it looks to achieve exactly what Brazil's MST is struggling yet, succeeding to create.

In November 2006, the Horse Lake Community Farm Co-operative was formed, created to allow members of the community to buy a share in the farm and secure themselves with a stable supply of food.

Rob Diether and Lorraine LeBourdais spoke to me over the phone from their home near Horse Lake. The community of farmers that Rob and Lorraine are a part of is known as the Community Enhancement and Economic Development Society, otherwise known as CEEDS. In this first clip, Rob Diether speaks of their philosophy of land ownership and how they arrived on the land they now live and farm on.

**ROB DIETHER:** So, CEEDS has never owned any property. We've always been really against the idea of land ownership. You know the same way that we don't own air and we don't own water which are basics of life. The land is really a basic of constituent of living as well. So we certainly didn't want to own any property ourselves, put it that way. So after leaving the Borland Meadow where we'd been squatting we found that we could carry on farming on rented property and we were drawn down to the 100 Mile House area. What we call the Betty Place property is in the

South Cariboo and we're just east of 100 Mile House. This whole area east of 100 Mile House at least along the Horse Lake Road, you know, homesteaded in the very early 1900s. And of course before that this whole area was used by the Shuswap Nation who we see lots of evidence of that. On the property we found artifacts. And eventually the property was owned by a fellow by the name of Vic Furrer and the Furrer family still is in the area. When Vic Furrer died he passed that particular piece of property on to his daughter, Betty Johnson. And it was from Betty that we started leasing the property, just about 20 years ago. And so we've been leasing and farming and residing on that property for the last 20 years. A couple of years ago Betty announced that she wanted to sell the property and we could certainly understand her reasons. We really felt very attached to the land and wanted to see it remain as a piece of organic farmland. And so we began to explore ways in which we might be able to secure that property so that we could keep on farming.

**JON STEINMAN:** Upon being presented with the news that the land was going to be put up for sale, CEEDS discovered an innovative way in which they could afford to purchase the land, and do so in such a way that would have a positive social and economic benefit. And here entered The Land Conservancy, also known as TLC, a British Columbia charitable land trust that works to protect important habitat.

**ROB DIETHER:** We did explore different ways of how we could perhaps buy the property ourselves but it didn't really seem as though that we had the financial where-with-all to purchase the property ourselves. But we really thought it important that CEEDS, you know still has access to the land. But more importantly that this is a very beautiful important piece of farmland on Horse Lake. Probably one of if not the biggest piece of farm property that still remains on Horse Lake.

We were aware of The Land Conservancy down in Victoria and we contacted the Conservancy. Sometime later we had a visit with somebody from The Land Conservancy – they stopped in to see us. And it was Ramona Scott who is still very active with the TLC in Victoria. Ramona described a project they were undertaking on Vancouver Island where there's a similar situation. There was a piece of farmland that they wanted to preserve and they'd come up with this model of forming a co-operative to actually pay for the land and to have the farming rights on the property. Anyway, this sounded pretty exciting to us and we gave Ramona a good tour of all our farming operations and she was most impressed by what she saw happened at the Betty Place. So we just put it out to the community to see if there would be interest in people becoming part of a co-operative that would buy and secure this piece of farmland.

The main thing here is that the title to the property will end up in the hands of The Land Conservancy. This gives a piece of farmland absolute protection. It means that the Betty Place will stay as a piece of farmland in perpetuity by belonging to the TLC and then the TLC will lease the farming rights to the co-operative for a period of 99 years. So, the co-op won't own the property, the co-op will simply be leasing it. And then in turn, the co-operative will give a long-term lease to people that are actually farming the land. And in this case that would be CEEDS.

**JON STEINMAN:** To better understand how people in the community can become a part of the co-operative, Rob further describes how many shareholders they need to purchase the land.

**ROB DIETHER:** So the co-operative has been formed. So we were incorporated, I believe just recently in November 2006. The membership share costs \$5,000. The co-operative can actually have up to 200 members but we need to have 80 paid shareholders to actually purchase the property. We're paying about \$400,000 for the property. We found that at this stage we have 30

shareholders. Our goal is to get another 50 shareholders over the next couple of years at which time we'll be able to pay the mortgage on the property and Mrs. Johnson is holding the mortgage. She's been very generous about the whole thing. And then at that time, once we've got the 80 memberships, we've paid for the property then the TLC has the right to purchase the property from the co-op for \$1. And as I said the title would be turned over to the TLC. So yeah we're all up and running. Of course we hope to sell more than the 80 shares in order to give the co-op the capital, but in the meantime, we're doing fundraising activities. But essentially, any membership now goes directly towards the purchase of the property.

**JON STEINMAN:** And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, and Part II of an ongoing series here on the program titled "Co-operatives, Alternatives To Industrial Food." We're presently learning of an innovative model of agricultural land ownership taking place outside the community of 100 Mile House, British Columbia. The Horse Lake Community Farm Co-operative is an important model of maintaining local food security within a community. Local food production is essential to the food security of any village, town or city, and Lorraine LeBourdais describes the presence of agriculture in their area.

**LORRAINE LEBOURDAIS:** Well I'd say Jon that we are the food security in the 100 Mile area. We are probably the biggest food supplier. We do a bin delivery. Up until this year we've actually farmed another garden, another couple of acres. So, we figure between the farmers markets and our bin delivery, we sustain at least 85 families in this 100 mile area. And that's not taking into account our meat sales and stuff like that. This is just all the produce but there aren't many farms of people producing food in the 100 Mile area. There's lots of potential and in the past, of course everyone produced their own food here and the region was fairly self-sufficient. But it's now mostly, as Rob was saying, the prime farm land is usually on the lakes and the rivers and they are also the prime recreational property. So, it's all been sort of gobbled up and there's one other large organic beef producing farm in our area and a few small greenhouse operations but CEEDS is for sure the biggest producer of food for our area.

**JON STEINMAN:** Becoming a member of a land-co-operative is certainly a new model through which Canadians can source our food. And Rob and Lorraine describe the benefits of becoming a shareholder in the farm.

**ROB DIETHER:** Members would all have the opportunity to be directly involved in the whole direction of the farm right from the beginning so it gives people a real connection to the land, gives them a say in how the co-operatives will operate and will how the farm will run. So people right off the bat have direct involvement and can contribute to the whole direction of the farm.

**LORRAINE LEBOURDAIS:** And also it provides the members the first option to purchase goods from the farm. They will be first in line for share in any of the produce.

**ROB DIETHER:** We're developing an business plan right now where members can actually be involved right from the core of this co-operative and in forming this business plan.

**JON STEINMAN:** During both the January 12<sup>th</sup> and January 19<sup>th</sup> broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner, we heard dialogue on the topic of local food. Of interest was learning how integral the infrastructure for local food processing is if a community wants to ensure that a local food system can be economically sustainable. I spoke with Rob and Lorraine on how their co-operative model of land ownership can incorporate such processing.

**LORRAINE LEBOURDAIS:** We don't have the infrastructure there. There's no buildings but on the property of the emissaries in 100 Mile they've got the commercial kitchen, they've got the dry racks, they've got everything. So it somehow we see it as maybe trying to juggle the both of them. And the town now owns the kitchen and stuff that we could be processing them and doing a lot of value-added stuff there. Some of the memberships they already take part in leasing the kitchen there so there's lots of potential. It's just incredible.

**ROB DIETHER:** Yeah, on and off the farm. (Lorraine agrees).

**JON STEINMAN:** Some of the processing options suggested by Rob and Lorraine consist of canning or drying produce, producing prepared foods, and even an option for setting up an apiary to produce honey. Of course beyond the benefit of ensuring a local supply of food, the co-operative model of land ownership is one that can foster social relationships that our current food system does not rely on in order to operate. In the case of the Horse Lake co-operative, it will be essential for the community to become involved and I asked Rob Diether if he believes such community involvement could ever exist within the dominant food system.

**ROB DIETHER:** I think less and less so, as time goes by. In this area right now we're faced certainly as beef producers anyway. We've got new provincial slaughterhouse regulations coming in. They're going to be introduced or to take effect this Fall and we are going to lose one of our abattoirs right here in 100 Mile House. They'll be continuing cutting meat but they'll no longer be slaughtering animals. So we're facing some real challenges in terms of making local meat products available here to direct market and that's quite a challenge. And also with the introduction of biofuels and a lot of farmland certainly in the Prairies and so on, will be devoted to producing biofuels. It's already put a lot of pressure on the price of grain, particularly corn. And I think there's certainly a lot of our ranching neighbours who are selling their calves in the Fall and the calves eventually go into feedlots they'll be getting less and less for their calves as the price of feeding these animals in the feedlots rises as a result of the increased price of grain, specifically corn. So, I think the model that we're promoting is really, really important and I think that over the years we will be a real alternative to the present food system, for sure.

**JON STEINMAN:** Rob's answer introduced what is one of the most important issues facing British Columbia's food security right now, and that is the new slaughterhouse regulations that favour big business and effectively push most small-scale meat production in the province *out* of business. Deconstructing Dinner ran a feature on this issue back in May 2006, and regardless of whether or not you eat meat, this is a story that illustrates the misguided direction in which our food system is heading. When local food production is seen to be absolutely essential to the future survival and well-being of Canadian communities, regulations that effectively destroy such capacity should be of great concern. And that broadcast has been archived on our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner), and it's listed under the show titled, "Slaughterhouses on the Butcher Block."

In closing out my conversation with Rob Diether and Lorraine LeBourdais, they comment on what they consider to be the number one contradiction facing humanity today, and that is our alienation from nature.

**LORRAINE LEBOURDAIS:** It really struck us when we were young and moving out of the city and you know all of a sudden you're on the land just how little we know about nature's cycles. So we just dove head into raising animals and learning all this but ... and now we meet people that ... they know nothing about where their food comes from and we just see people that are getting further and further away from the natural living. You know if we were in tune with how things

should go naturally we wouldn't be polluting and ripping down all the trees and destroying our planet the way we are. The best way to get that relationship back with nature is to start growing your own food and providing for your own shelter and looking after your own needs and getting back. It wasn't that long ago we were all homesteaders and growing our own gardens and our own chickens and stuff. And really that's the future, we have to go back to that, to where we're all kind of providing our own means of life. And once we get that relationship going again where we know how to put a seed in the ground, you look after you're going to get a carrot, once we get that relationship back then maybe we'll start looking after the planet better.

**ROB DIETHER:** And I add maybe start looking after ourselves a little bit better too.

**LORRAINE LEBOURDAIS:** Our fellow human beings, yeah.

**ROB DIETHER:** That means being alienated from nature or really means that we're alienated from ourselves and our fellow humanity because after all we're a part of nature as well.

**JON STEINMAN:** And that was Rob Diether and Lorraine LeBourdais of the newly formed Horse Lake Community Farm Co-operative. The farm is located outside of the community of 100 Mile House, British Columbia. And you can learn more about the co-operative on their website at [horselakefarmcoop.ca](http://horselakefarmcoop.ca) and you can also reach them at phone number 250-791-6255.

*soundbite*

You're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, and Part II of an ongoing series here on the program titled "Co-operatives, Alternatives to Industrial Food." Long an example in Canada of how people can assume control over our needs and resources, co-operatives as an alternative to the industrial food system will be the focus of this series with each broadcast taking a look at both successful and unsuccessful examples of this model.

How does a co-operative differ from a traditional business? Most importantly, a co-operative is owned and democratically controlled by the people who use the services or by those working within the co-op.

Back on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2007 we aired Part I of this series where we looked at an example of a grocery store co-operative owned by the customers themselves. And we looked at a distributors co-operative whereby food is consolidated from small-scale regional farmers and processors and then sold to the public. That broadcast is archived on our website.

At the end of today's Part II of this series we'll listen in on segments of a program that features *one* co-operative grocery store in the United States that just recently closed its doors after 39 years in operation. Understanding the risks posed to the co-operative model is just as important as understanding the benefits.

I'll also quickly note that there will also be links from the Deconstructing Dinner website to more information on co-operatives in Canada where you can find a more detailed description of what co-operatives are.

*soundbite*

In this next segment of today's broadcast, frequent listeners of Deconstructing Dinner may recognize the next two voices, given they have been recurring guests on the program, and that is

Cathleen and Brewster Kneen. Cathleen is the Chair of Food Secure Canada, a newly-formed organization working to unite people and organizations working for food security nationally and globally. Brewster was a featured guest on our recent exposé on agricultural giant Cargill, as he is the author of the book “Invisible Giant: Cargill and its Transnational Strategies.”

Now based in Ottawa, both Cathleen and Brewster publish the Ram’s Horn – a monthly journal of food systems analysis. The Ram’s Horn was first created following the formation of the Northumberland Lamb Marketing Co-operative in Truro, Nova Scotia, more cleverly referred to as Northumberland. The co-operative continues to exist today, and represents a successful model that provides small-scale farmers with a level of security that ensures a fair price for the product, and uses the collective size of members operations to ensure their products can end up in the stomachs of consumers. Lamb is simply one example of how such a co-operative can challenge the industrial food system, and in the case of Lamb, challenge the cheaper imports coming in from places like New Zealand.

The documented history of Northumberland had never before been prepared in any meaningful way until Cathleen and Brewster hosted a workshop in October 2006 at a conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. They spoke to an audience comprised mostly of farmers hoping to learn from this successful co-operative model. Deconstructing Dinner recorded this presentation and with only enough time to listen to some segments on today’s broadcast, I’ll note that the entire unedited recording is also available on our website.

And here’s Cathleen and Brewster Kneen introducing what they call “an interesting experiment.”

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** I’m Cathleen Kneen. This is Brewster Kneen. We’re long time partners in a number of enterprises.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Along which was a sheep farm in Nova Scotia from 1971 to 1986. It came to an end when our two children left for university and we lost our indentured labour, as you like to say and discovered we had either downsize to a part-time operation - find employment or expand and hire somebody and run even faster on the treadmill or get out and move to another level of activity. We’ve been in the food systems business ever since.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** Out on the display tables on this level at the other tower are some copies of the Ram’s Horn which is a newsletter that we started when we were sheep farming and have been doing ever since by way of trying to analyze what’s going on in the food system. And there’s copies there for anyone who’s interested.

We’re here today to talk about an interesting experiment which we started. I’d like to talk about how it started because I’ve wanted to write the history of this for a long time. And it starts with “It was a dark and stormy night” (audience laughs). Because it was a dark and stormy night. We were having the first meeting of our co-op board and sitting in Andrew Richardson’s kitchen eating Eva’s scones and drinking her tea and Drake and Donna and Pierre weren’t showing up and they weren’t showing up and they weren’t showing up. So finally we all got in our cars and went over there. And it turned out that it was lambing time and they’d had a ewe with a problem and so they were butchering the ewe and fostering the lamb onto another ewe. And meanwhile, they were kind of among the “back-to-the-landers” in that community. With the sheep farming community was quite diverse but they were among the “back-to-the-landers” and there was no power in the barn. So by the light of the kerosene lantern, in the middle of a raging storm outside, sitting on hay bales in their barn, we started the Northumberland Marketing Co-operative, right?

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Yeah, that's one beginning of the story (audience laughter). Because actually if we're really going to tell a story we have to go back about nearly 10 years when we first started farming and moved to Nova Scotia from Toronto not knowing what we were doing and learning from the sheep and from our dogs and from everybody we could. There was a bunch of Scottish Blackface which wasn't necessarily a very good idea, we released from quarantine and the fellow who was responsible for that wanted to have a breeding stock sale. And we said, we were new to it but as typical it seems to be of this clan we had moved very quickly into positions of political activism and I think by that I was already Secretary of the Sheep Producers Association. And we decided that we should have a sheep circus to inaugurate...

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** No, sheep fair please. Don't overdo it.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Well, that was what I wanted to call it but we had to settle for a fair. And so we organized this event to foot a display for the public and raise the prices for the breeding stock but also, we had some other things in mind because we realized that sheep as you know are sort of the scum of the barn of the farm. They're the things that live in the bottom of the barn and the leftovers and the dirty hay and the spoiled hay and were really marginal. At least that was the tradition. And cattle is something else again. They're the wild west, they're the hero, the cow.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** Men raise cattle.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Men raise cattle and cheaper for well I won't say (audience laughs). Anyway, we thought we really needed to do something that would increase the esteem of and self-respect for the sheep farmers for one thing and get them working together and face their reputation. Certainly in Nova Scotia at that point and probably elsewhere is sheep farmers being among the most individualistic and ornery bunch of people you could possibly get together or try to get together and usually without success. That was the story.

**JON STEINMAN:** And this is Deconstructing Dinner.

The idea to create a marketing co-operative whereby farmers would combine their efforts together to strengthen their collective potential, was one that also arose literally overnight when Brewster Kneen attended an animal auction. Most importantly, what Brewster realized was one of the fundamental problems in the food system, whereby everyone *but* the farmers seems to be making money, and herein presented the importance of a farmers marketing co-operative.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** And one of one week we had a shipment going out on Friday. The auction was Thursday afternoon. We always had enough lambs on our own place that we could fill up the load or hold back, we had some flexibility. Which is one of the things you need. You've got to have some if you are going to do this sort of thing. You've got to have somebody whose got the facilities and the abilities to either send, ship together or not so you can put together a full load.

Anyway I thought – well, let's see. We've got some lambs to go but you know maybe we could hold them, save them for the next week, the next shipment. I went to the auction. Price is good. I bought a bunch of lambs from our fellow producers, put them on the truck the next day and sent them to Montreal and I made \$.30 a pound. So, when we had the next meeting we had a sheep producer. I said – okay guys, this is serious. I want to tell you what I did last week or whenever it was, this last time. I made more money off of you and your land in one overnight than I can make as a farmer in a whole year. So, this is not acceptable. So that is when we started looking seriously.



**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** That is when you got thrown out of the sheep producers (laughs)

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** That's when exactly one of these Drover farmers organized a classic coup, went around signed up a bunch of people who never remembers the association, called a meeting, voted me out and took over the \$5,000 I'd been carefully accumulating while wish I was a sheep to finance these other enterprises.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** That's when the Ram's Horn started.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Yeah, the Ram's Horn started to explain to the sheep producer – you deserve to know who did it to you and why. So we put it right down black and white. Of course that made us even more friends (audience laughs).

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** And we still, that's what the Ram's Horn is still trying to discuss – who's doing it to you and why and how.

**JON STEINMAN:** Upon discovering the amount of money that these sheep farmers were missing out on, the first step was creating a marketing program for their product.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** So, the long and the short of that was that we realized that we needed to have some other kind of a marketing program for our lambs than what we had available. We did the market research and discovered to nobody's surprise that there was in fact a great deal more market than there was being satisfied, particularly in Halifax but also elsewhere. We went to Agriculture Canada for some help. They wanted us to create a cookbook. There already was a cookbook. Madame Benoit had done a cookbook for the Canadian Sheep Producers. I've still got a very dog-eared copy of it. It's a great cookbook. We didn't need a cookbook. What we needed in fact...

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** We didn't need the three guys in suits (audience laughs) coming to sell us a cookbook because they can carry it around and talk and say - look, this is what you should do and then they can take it back and sell it. We said – look, by that time we had gotten to the point of organizing and said okay, we were working with a small abattoir in Truro that custom-killed for us. This is where we'd gotten to and organized with. They were custom-killing and we said – okay, what we need now is we've got the lands assembly, we've got the farmers use to working together to assemble the lands, we've got an abattoir that we can work with that does a really good job. They're very, very skilled, but we haven't got a way of getting those to the storage. We need a truck. So Scotsburn Co-op, they happened to have a retired ice-cream truck, milk truck which we got for \$5,000.

**JON STEINMAN:** After recognizing that a truck was needed to get their marketing program off the ground, the next important step was of course raising the \$5,000. With no financial institutions or branches of government willing to support such a venture, you'll be surprised to hear where the money came from. And the source of the money is a pretty good example of how the relationships within the food system have lost their human component today. In today's industrial world of food, it is highly unlikely that a group of farmers would find a loan from the local grocery store chain capitalist.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** But we needed the \$5,000 for the truck. By that time we had gotten acquainted with the meat buyer for Sobeys. And Ron Young was a lovely guy. He started out as butcher in London.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** Yorkshire. please.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Yorkshire. Yeah Yorkshire and he wanted to have his own butcher shop but he couldn't get a telephone. So he got pissed off and moved to Canada and went to work for Canada Packers (audience laughs). He worked his way up to be meat buyer for Sobeys. And he was basically a butcher and a hell of a good one. And we just got, well I got acquainted with him because we needed to figure out Sobeys was THE chain in the Maritimes at that point.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** Okay, I've got to interrupt again with another digression because Sobeys was at that point, not only the chain but old Frank Sobey who started it was still alive so it was very much a family enterprise. And Ron was actually taken for a drive, well Frank Sobey came to him and said – Ron, would you take me for a drive. So okay fine they go for a drive around the countryside.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** With a chauffeur, I mean Frank's chauffeur's driving.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** And they're sitting in the back seat and Frank says (mimicking male voices)

Frank: So, Ron, what's that?

Ron: That's a sheep sir.

Okay they go on a little bit further.

Frank: What's that?

Ron: Well that's a sheep sir.

Frank: What's that?

Ron: Well that's a sheep sir.

Frank: I want them in my stores (audience chuckles).

So, Ron was under the gun to get local lamb into the stores at the same time as we were trying to find a partner to make sure that we had a commercial outlet. Because we all had been selling freezer lamb directly to the market. That was easy. But we needed some regular outlet, a commercial outlet where we could sell the number of lambs that we were trying to produce at that point.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Yeah, which was getting up to a 100 a week. But when we needed the \$5,000, I was saying – Ron, what are we going to do? Because we needed to get them into his store and butchered on Tuesday and loaded on the truck on Thursday and in the store for the weekend and fresh, fresh, fresh. Top, had to be top quality. And Ron said – why don't you go and ask Bill? Or maybe it was Frank?

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** It was Frank.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** I think this was Frank. So I go out and Ron says – come on, I'll take you. So we go and see Frank Sobey. Ron gives us a little bit of an introduction and Frank says to me – what do you need? Well actually what we need is \$5,000. Oh, he says, pick it up on the way out. (audience laughs) Interest-free for a year.

**JON STEINMAN:** With their headquarters in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, Sobeys is now one of Canada's largest grocery retailers and food distributors. The Company owns or franchises more than 1,300 stores in all ten provinces under retail banners that include Sobeys, IGA, Foodland, Needs, Lawtons, BoniChoix, Food Town, Commisso's and Price Chopper.

As mentioned just earlier the ease at which Sobeys chose to support the creation of the co-operative is an ease that certainly would not exist in our current climate of national and multi-national retailers. Canada's largest retailers operate on economies of scale whereby distribution is centralized leaving many local farmers and producers out of the picture. And Brewster Kneen comments on the changing human relationships in Canadian food.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** It's really crucial because the kinds of relationships, of human relationships that we've had at that point, you know where do you find them today. So in one sense this becomes a romantic tale of bygone era. But on the other hand, if you're going to tackle this kind of thing and look at local marketing with local food which is what we're talking about then I think the story is relevant. Because it was a question of the trust between the buyer and the seller all the way around and that was why it worked.

**JON STEINMAN:** For any listeners just tuning in, this is Deconstructing Dinner, produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman. This is Part II of the ongoing series titled "Co-operatives, Alternatives to Industrial Food." In an age where our food system is controlled by just a handful of national and multi-national companies, this series will look at the co-operative model as an alternative to this industrial food system.

We've been listening to segments of a recording we compiled in October 2006 when Cathleen and Brewster Kneen presented the history of the Northumberland Lamb Marketing Co-operative to an audience of mostly farmers.

Co-operatives have a long history here in Canada, a history that includes both positive and negative stories. The co-operative model has been used for different purposes, and in the case of food, has sometimes been used to replicate just another capitalist system. The Northumberland Lamb Marketing Co-operative wanted to ensure that this didn't happen.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** The story of co-ops is a sad one in Canada and I think probably in the U.S. as well. Antigonish in Nova Scotia where they are sort of major pushers of co-ops, certainly in the Atlantic provinces and that came out of the Antigonish movement and so on. But one of the reasons for the push in co-ops was to counter the socialists because the Catholic church.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** It was the Communists.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** And wanted to count one, did not want the Communist organizers organizing fisherman and so on.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** And miners.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** And miners. That's right coal mining in Cape Breton and that this stuff. So they very cagily organized the Antigonish movement to establish basically a much more conservative co-op. And they did it by having extension workers which if you want to start something, they would supply the Secretary who would take the minutes. And of course the minute-taker is a crucial person on how the minutes get recorded and circulated. Now very clever. They would provide this service but that also pretty basically gave them control over the shaping of the co-op. That's a really crucial issue because I would say contended that the demise of co-ops in Canada including the major Prairie co-ops, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and so on, is due to the fact that they got suckered into having capitalist management and they had a different mentality.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** Now describe ours (chuckles).

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** Okay (audience laughs). So what we did, no but it's very important, we said – okay we've had the Fred Pierce which is a co-op guy for the province of Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture – Fred, what are our options in terms of business structure? We don't want to go like the co-op, Scotsburn Co-op which is getting very wealthy but off the back of its members basically. As a co-op, as a business. We want something where the co-op itself as the business doesn't make any money. It's the return to the farmers that we want. So it's just a pass-through. And he finally admitted after being pushed – well you can have a non-share capital co-op. Because if nobody is a shareholder, if we quit or anybody quits, they haven't got capital they can pull out of the co-op and destroy it. And there is no advantage in the co-op itself becoming wealthy. So the welfare of the co-op is not the point. Is it a good servant of the people?

**JON STEINMAN:** In wrapping up this segment of today's broadcast, Cathleen and Brewster comment on the importance of building better social relationships if Canadians are going to begin thinking about new local food economies.

**BREWSTER KNEEN:** I think in terms of organizing a new food economy that is going to be local, what we're talking about are the elements that have got to be thought about. So it isn't just food as a commodity and it isn't just nutrition and it's not just security. It's also having the fun – I mean it's the meals, it's the dinner, it's all these other aspects that we really and the reason I think we can change the whole culture of sheep farming in Nova Scotia in two years was because of the social, the context of that. It wasn't one person doing it. We were all learning from each other as we went along.

**CATHLEEN KNEEN:** I think the secret to the success of this one was that we had larger farms that could act as anchors. We had people who had skills that they were willing to share of how to do this and how to make it work. And we had that structure of open accounting and open information to everybody. And we had the social relationships. And I think those are the key pieces.

**JON STEINMAN:** And that was Brewster and Cathleen Kneen, publishers of the Ram's Horn – a monthly journal on food systems analysis. Deconstructing Dinner recorded them in October 2006 in Vancouver, when they spoke about the history of the Northumberland Lamb Marketing Co-operative in Truro, Nova Scotia. The co-op continues to operate today and is one of the primary suppliers of lamb in the province. Cathleen and Brewster both now live in Ottawa and their website for the Ram's Horn is [ramshorn.ca](http://ramshorn.ca). I'll also note that their entire unedited presentation in audio format will be available on the Deconstructing Dinner website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner).

*soundbite*

On Part I of this series titled “Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food,” we featured what is probably the most successful co-operative grocery store in Canada, and that was the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative in Nelson, British Columbia. In operation for 32 years, the store serves as a model whereby customers themselves maintain ownership of the store, they have democratic control over its governance. The store maintains some of the strictest buying guidelines of any grocery store where local and organic food take precedence over any other. The store returns any profits back to members and back to the community, and in the end, presents an alternative model where the community can determine what food is available to them.

Now this very same model, operating on the very same principles existed for over 39 years in Madison, Wisconsin, and that store was called the Mifflin Street Community Co-operative. And here presents a story of the risks that face co-operatives existing in the shadows of industrial organic food, of declining disposable incomes spent on food, and in the shadows of a society that is valuing food less and less. On December 8<sup>th</sup> 2006, the Mifflin Street Community Co-operative closed its doors, and long-time member, and supplier to the Co-op, Wajid Jenkins produced an excellent half-hour radio program on the closing of this historic grocery store. Wajid hosts a weekly segment at WORT radio in Madison called The Compost Pile. His production on the Mifflin Street Co-op was produced for the Pacifica Network's weekly radio magazine titled "Sprouts." Wajid has aired segments of Deconstructing Dinner on his program before, and today, it's us, who will air some of the segments of *his* production titled "Grassroots Groceries." And here's an introduction to Grassroots Groceries.

### Sprouts – Grassroots Groceries

**WAJID JENKINS:** Today on Sprouts we focus on Grassroots Groceries with a story of the recent closure of a small local food co-operative.

"It's all about grassroots groceries because if we're going to survive in this world we have to minimize the miles travelled by our food, we have to minimize the impacts on the land from growing our food and we have to know one another and food is what sustains us."

**WAJID JENKINS:** The Mifflin Street Co-operative opened in 1969 in the heart of Madison's radical student community neighbourhood. It was a tumultuous and spontaneous time with police, national guard and demonstrators battling in the city streets as the Vietnam war escalated and expanded into Cambodia. Mifflin Co-op was at the centre of these events as one of the few community organizing spaces for a neighbourhood literally under siege from State forces. Mifflin Community Co-op grew to be a beloved, community institution. Mifflin was pivotal in the formation of a co-operative movement both in Madison and around the country. The co-op members owned the building which is graced with a 20 year old mural created by dozens of people in brilliant collaboration. Mifflin will have a lasting legacy as one of the first food co-ops in the country and one that remained true to its ideals throughout its lifespan.

This story is both journalistic and personal for me. My parents were members of Mifflin as I am now. I shop there with my child and sold produce there grown in my backyard. Sadly on December 8<sup>th</sup> 2006, Mifflin closed its doors after 39 years. Today on Sprouts we speak with past and present members, staffers and board members about Mifflin's origins, it's politics, and it's closure.

Former staff collective member June Holty explains.

**JUNE HOLTY:** Mifflin Co-op is a hub of the community, a place where people could come together and be engaged in discussions about food politics. Mifflin is sacred and I just think of the thousands of people over the years who learned about whole foods for the first time. And we saw whole grains for the first time and were able to learn about where their food comes from and how they fit into the web of life. Mifflin Co-op is like one of the mothers, like one of the flagships of food for people not-for-profit.

**WAJID JENKINS:** Norman Stockwell, staff collective member during the 1980s and '90s explains the mission of Mifflin.

**NORMAN STOCKWELL:** What they wanted to do was to create a locally controlled grocery store at a time when things were beginning to move more and more towards chains and conglomerates and yet we're talking close to 40 years ago right now. In a sense, the folks that started Mifflin Co-op were very prescient. They were really seeing what has in fact happened to food in this country in the last couple of decades. But they decided let's create a locally controlled grocery store.

**JON STEINMAN:** In this next segment from Grassroots Groceries, we hear of the demise of the Mifflin Street Co-operative and possible reasons as to why its doors are now closed.

#### Sprouts – Grassroots Groceries

**WAJID JENKINS:** Mifflin was very successful throughout the 1980s and into the '90s building capital with strong sales and a popular neighbourhood block party. It was able to offer loans and grants to many organizations and played a role in the formation of North Farm Co-op Food Distributors as well as the now giant Organic Valley brand. But it has been almost 10 years since the store turned a profit and it has now closed. While it isn't easy to pinpoint a cause for its closure many agree that declining sales and community involvement coupled with changing demographics were too much to overcome. Long time member, Ingrid Rothe elaborates.

**INGRID ROTHE:** Well there are lots of other options now that weren't available when Mifflin first started. There's Willy Street Co-op. Even places like Woodman's now carry at least organic food. I'm not sure how locally it is but Whole Foods is now carrying more locally-grown organic food. So people who want to support that kind of thing, have a number of options that are not restricted to Mifflin. And I think maybe people, me even included, prefer to shop where they have more options in a store that has more floor space.

**WAJID JENKINS:** Former staff member, Norm Stockwell on some of the challenges Mifflin faces.

**NORM STOCKWELL:** Definitely peoples ways of shopping have changed and the fact that you couldn't find parking around Mifflin is more of an issue now than it was 20 or 30 years ago. The fact that Mifflin didn't have a full array of all the different choices that a larger stores has is certainly more of a factor than it was 20 or 30 years ago for people. Also the ideas about volunteering, peoples attitudes towards volunteering and towards compensation in the workplace have changed a lot over the last 20 or 30 years. And whereas in 1982 when Mifflin was about to go under, the staff worked for several weeks unpaid.

When I was hired at Mifflin the starting wage was \$3.00 or \$3.50 an hour if we can afford it that week. Nowadays it's more difficult for people to live in that way, very frankly because everybody is closer to the edge financially than 20 or 30 years ago. Society has changed in that way. People talk about the change that's going on in the downtown area now. In fact there's more single family owner-occupied homes downtown than ever there was 20 years ago. So in some ways, it was a time when Mifflin could have been developing a larger membership, a larger clientele and people who were more likely to buy lots of stuff because they were in walking distance, they were homeowners. The changes that are happening in the neighbourhood now probably could have benefitted Mifflin a great deal had the co-op not already been saddled with the financial burden and really been in a position of not being able to ever kind of dig out of that hole.

I think some of the new stores and commercial natural food stores that have opened in town were going to be a great threat to Mifflin as well because the issues of parking and issues of available variety for a lot of the shopping public would mitigate against Mifflin's being able to survive that. So I think that the decision that the Board and the staff and the membership made is the only decision they could have made.

**WAJID JENKINS:** Staff member and Board member, Josh Stuewer.

**JOSH STUEWER:** The one event that sort of spurred on this decision of the Board to present a proposal to dissolve them as a co-op was a unresolved tax issue from years previous. Well we got word that we were going to be owing you know, roughly \$14,000 in principle and that there would be fines and penalties incurred beyond that as well. But what has brought Mifflin to the point of not being able to handle the \$14,000 bill from the IRS is a lack of community involvement in Mifflin. People tend to gravitate towards grocery stores that offer greater convenience. So they want things like parking. They want things like a broader selection of rice cakes (laughs). That has caused ourselves to diminish and our membership has declined. And volunteer hours in the store have remained relatively consistent but the workload on the people, on the paid staff is so significant that without more volunteer assistance, not much can be done in the way of developing the infrastructure for a successful business. Administrative things are not done because the shelves need to be stocked.

**WAJID JENKINS:** Board President, Matt Stoner.

**MATT STONER:** I think it all really comes down to economics. We have a capitalist system that is set up to reward economies of scale. The bigger you get the more incentives you get. The price that we get from our major grocery supplier is directly tied to the size of our store. So the bigger store you are, the cheaper your products are which gives you more business which allows you to grow, which cheapens your products which allows you to grow. And it's just like this cycle that Mifflin is a part of. There are a lot of economic forces that are moving against small businesses, community institutions. And we have a lot more hurdles to jump over. I feel like it's possible but it needs a lot of work and it needs a lot of community support and commitment.

**JON STEINMAN:** And this is Deconstructing Dinner and Part II of the ongoing series titled "Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food." You've been listening to segments of a production by WORT Madison, Wisconsin. Titled "Grassroots Groceries" and produced in December 2006, the half-hour program explored the demise of the Mifflin Street Community Co-operative, a customer-owned grocery store that embodied a set of social and environmental values not found within the modern system of food retailing here in North America. I'll mention that the entire half-hour recording of Grassroots Groceries can be heard through a link that will be placed on the Deconstructing Dinner website, and I do highly recommend taking a listen to this great production. And I thank Wajid Jenkins for providing us with the recording.

In closing out the broadcast, we'll leave you with this last segment from Madison, Wisconsin on the future of the co-operative model of grocery store ownership.

Sprouts – Grassroots Groceries

**WAJID JENKINS:** Board member Jennifer Feyerherm.

**JENNIFER FEYERHERM:** Oh I think it is a viable model. I don't think that the decision that we face tonight speaks about member-owned collectively run stores, the local model. Keeping money in the community, all those things are incredibly successful, but we learn as we go. There are lessons that we've learned that we could share with other folks and certainly hope that small, local community-run organizations continue.

**WAJID JENKINS:** The store is now closed and the shelves are empty again. On the window hangs a banner that reads "The revolution will not be convenient." An ironic comment on the store's

decades old slogan - Food for the Revolution. But co-op members and others agree that the spirit of Mifflin indeed lives on although many of us now wonder where to shop. June Holty offers inspiration.

**JUNE HOLTY:** I think it's time for a resurgence myself. I don't think it's time to let go. I think it's actually time for people to stand up and say – oh yeah, I forgot about my mother. I forgot about the place of education and community and how important that means to me and I've been absent. And I'm not going to be absent anymore. I'm going to actually step up to the plate and be a part of carrying out that legacy and carrying on that tradition.

“It's all about grassroots groceries because if we're going to survive in this world we have to minimize the miles travelled by our food, we have to minimize the impacts on the land from growing our food and we have to know one another and food is what sustains us.”

**WAJID JENKINS:** That's it for Sprouts. You have been listening to some of the past and present members, staff collective and Board members at Mifflin Street Community Co-operative in Madison, Wisconsin.

*ending theme*

“Co-op radio is such a great idea. You know we don't have that access to any co-op radio here. We've got just the CBC and Radio One and I'm afraid it gets sort of worse and worse all the time.”

**JON STEINMAN:** *And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan.*

*The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.*

*This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country, and relies on the financial support from you the listener.*

*Support for the program can be donated through our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner) or by dialing 250-352-9600.*

*Till next week.*