# A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

## by Alan Casline

Three years ago when I heard Samuel Kaymen, one of the founders of New Hampshire's Natural Organic Farmers Association, speak on "Survival Agriculture in the Northeast" I agreed with him when he said, "We've reached a point where consciousness is such that organic agriculture is survival agriculture."

Samuel and I and maybe a few thousand other people in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and New York were aware that most agriculture is totally dependent on the petrochemical industry, and we agree that in the future in order to be self-sufficient the northeast will have to be almost totally independent of petrochemical agriculture. Ten to fifteen calories of petroleum to produce one calorie of food is not a wise way to proceed as a society.

Those of us that returned to St. Lawrence County after hearing Kaymen and others describe their experiences with farming in an ecological way realized that not many of the people involved in agriculture, or in the government policies that have to do with agriculture, would agree with us. We didn't go to them with our new insights and plans for revitalizing small-scale farming, creating jobs, and feeding large numbers of local people, because we didn't think they'd listen.

That winter, the Natural Farmers Association of the St. Lawrence Valley was formed in Canton. The association's first three meetings were attended by an average of people from as far away as Winthrop and Rossie, a range of 60 miles. Spurred by a common interest and a healthy spirit of cooperation, the association has grown to the point where this year's pilot marketing project involves some 20 organic farmers and food co-ops in Saranac Lake, Tupper Lake, Paul Smiths, Cranberry Lake, Ogdensburg, Gouverneur, Potsdam and Canton.

Perhaps next year's growing season will see the realization of one long-range goal: a number of families farming on a small scale with assured economic success.

During the last three years a number of other food system ideas have become increasingly popular. All over New York State the number of food co-ops and buying clubs has increased, and there are now over 300 of them. Farmer's markets and roadside stands do a brisk business, with consumers and producers both benefiting from sales of freshly picked produce. (Alas, some of these stands have nothing to do with growing food; their produce is shipped here from Mexico and Georgia by way of the regional market in Syracuse.)

In Potsdam, a community cannery project is getting off the ground, which increases the possibility of the backyard gardener supplying a year-'round diet of home-grown food as well as opening up possibilities for processing and marketing local foodstuffs.

A number of supermarkets and institutions in the area are willing to buy locally produced crops; the problem here, as elsewhere in the northeast, is one of supply, not of demand.

Historically, St. Lawrence County has always been one of New York State's major agricultural areas. As a fieldworker for Canton Agricultural and Technical College's Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, I talked with a number of retired farmers in the spring and summer of 1978. They told me of a time when the scale of agriculture in this county was much smaller, when the many abandoned farms we see today weren't abandoned, when there was a cheese factory at every four corners and farmers sold and traded wood, milk products, vegetables, fruit, eggs, and meat with villagers. A number of them had delivery routes and would go from house to house selling their farm products to regular customers.

At the same time, large trainloads of hay, cheese, meat products, and other farm commodities left almost daily for city markets in Boston and New York City. The two kinds of selling, both local and to distant points, went hand in hand.

Every healthy rural economy in history has exported large amounts of farm products and I, for one, look forward to the first boxcar load of carrots to leave our fields for the New York City markets.

Changing market conditions and state regulations are the two causes most responsible for the decline of the dairy and crop farms, not a need for bigger machinery and more mechanization, as you might think. As we enter the 1980's it is obvious that marketing conditions have improved.

For example, three different downstate food distribution groups, having heard of NFA-SLV's group growing and marketing effort, offered to buy any extra quantities of crops.

There won't be any extra.

Even New York State's lawmakers are encouraging local production and direct marketing. One plan, the Locally Integrated Food Economy (LIFE) project put forth by Change Unite Parker, who is senior research associate for the New York State Assembly Subcommittee on Food, Farm and Nutrition, is aimed at making our local food economy provide 70 percent of the total amount of food and fiber processed and consumed in our region by 1983.

That figure seems large, since it represents a great deal of commitment, local and state governmental involvement, and a growth in the spirit of cooperation to include a large part of society.

It is hoped that this issue of ROOTDRINKER will produce a new understanding of the state and the potential of the North Country's food economy. I have included a copy of Parker's LIFE project and hope that readers will take the time to consider it.

It may not yet be time to hitch our collective wagon to such a major restructuring effort, but, on the other hand, it may be the wisest course open to us as we enter the sure-to-be interesting 1980's.