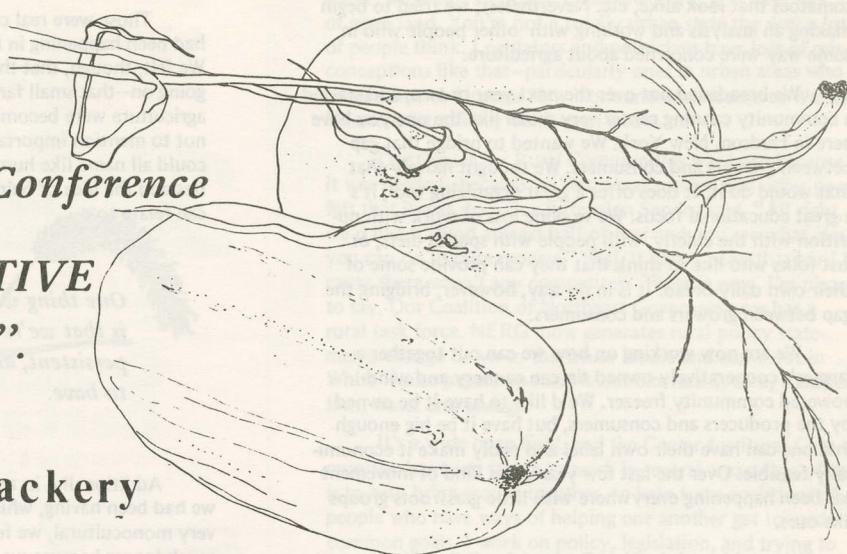


Opening
remarks at the
New York State Conference

“TOWARD A NATIVE
AGRICULTURE”.

by Pat Lewis Sackery



A rainy road and a late start caused the five of us who were riding down to Syracuse to arrive just as Pat Lewis Sackery was finishing her presentation. As driver of the vehicle, I noticed one or two disconcerted glances aimed in my direction by my fellow passengers. We were all looking forward to hearing what Pat had to say to us New Yorkers from the context of her experiences in New England.

Perhaps because she has worked most extensively in Massachusetts, Pat Sackery really has a feel for the urban/rural nature of the northeast region's many social and economic problems. "A strong regional agricultural system requires both an informed and involved consumer population and a small farmer constituency well able to act on its own behalf," to quote from the Statement of Purpose of the New England Small Farm Institute. This requirement of consumer and producer cooperation and of urban and rural people sharing responsibility for each other's survival and enhancement holds true, I believe, in even the most rural of rural states, as well as the most urban. In New York, a statewide meeting such as the one held this past April and the one planned for next year can encourage an exchange starting in news and information and leading to friendships and support between groups and people very much in need of each other.

I wish there was some way to report on all the weekend's events and to mention all the activities in process and starting up from New York City to Buffalo, from Truxton to Canton. That's impossible, of course. Instead, there is a transcript of Pat Lewis Sackery's remarks, slightly edited for publication, that can speak well for what the weekend was about. After her presentation, Pat had to leave and catch a plane back to Massachusetts, so I didn't get a chance to thank her for spending her time and energy on us. This is as good a place as any for that. Her address at the Center for Rural Communities is 114 Draper Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts (413-545-0060).

— Alan Casline

I was looking through various things. I got over the last few months that led to this conference. It was pointed out in one early edition that there is a feeling among people in New York, who are working hard in grassroots organizing relating to food, land, energy, appropriate technology, that maybe the time is not quite right to bring in people from outside—particularly people from institutions or agencies like the Legislature or the U.S.D.A. It made me very interested in being here, because I certainly sympathize with that way of thinking about things.

“Regional Food Self-Reliance” is supposed to be the theme of this conference, so I thought I would tell you what the Center for Rural Communities is. It is an exciting thing that has grown up in Massachusetts from very much the same concerns in evidence here. Five years ago, we started a group out of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women called “Women in Agriculture: Food Policy and Land Use Reform.” Our group got a lot of attention—more than it deserved, actually. I mean, it was just a little grassroots group of seven women and men who were scared that we imported 85% of our food. We didn't like that, and felt a responsibility to look into why that was and what we could do about it.

We were pretty uppity people who'd had a lot of experience in politics and advocacy and believed that we could make a difference—little bitty Davids with a great big Goliath. We did, in fact, work with a whole bunch of people through the next few years—different folks from Extension and the Governor's Office and the Legislature. We wanted to do some grassroots organizing that might make a difference. With some discomfort, we found we were way back at the level of analysis. We had no idea where food really was coming from for our region. We took it on faith that it was coming from somewhere else. We didn't understand why our farmers were digging stuff under their fields at the end of the growing season while we couldn't buy any cabbage in the stores that was grown closer than Pennsylvania. We didn't know that we

didn't have storehouses, processing plants, or ways of distributing food that was grown locally. We didn't know about supermarkets needing a steady supply of everything—of tomatoes that look alike, etc. Nevertheless, we tried to begin making an analysis and working with other people who in some way were concerned about agriculture.

We broadened out over the next year or two, and started a community canning center very much like the one you have here in Hudson, New York. We wanted to bridge that gap between growers and consumers. We thought naively that that would do it. It does offer a great organizing tool; it's a great educational focus. We've done lots of work with nutrition with the elderly, with people with special diets, or just folks who like to think that they can provide some of their own daily bread. It is in no way, however, bridging the gap between growers and consumers.

We are now working on how we can put together a farmer's cooperatively-owned tin can cannery and wind-powered community freezer. We'd like to have it be owned by the producers and consumers, but have it be big enough that one can have their own label and really make it economically feasible. Over the last few years, this kind of movement has been happening everywhere with little grassroots groups like ours.

We envisioned the New England Small Farm Institute about 2½ years ago because our land grant university—the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which is like Cornell for the State of New York—wasn't teaching farmers how to farm. They were teaching Agronomy. The famous line that we always quote was, "We don't teach people how to grow corn; we teach them how corn grows." Well, we thought that was interesting, and that people should know that. But we also thought it might be nice to grow some of our own—not just field corn, but sweet corn for people to eat and other kinds of crops. So we began thinking that maybe a little grassroots group could form a non-profit cooperative to create a school that would provide a hands-on experience, including a couple of years in residence for people who didn't grow up on a farm, but who wanted to farm.

You know, that's the real trouble: the people who grow up on farms don't stay in farming anymore. A lot of the rest of us want to go back to farming, but we didn't grow up on a farm, so we don't know what it was like. We didn't get those skills that you need, and there are many of them all the way from how to use an arc welder to how to deliver a calf all by yourself.

So we started this New England Small Farm Institute, which has taken all this time to get even this close to coming to fruition. One thing we learned about ourselves is that we're dad-gummed patient and persistent, and that that's a good trait to have. In the Southwest where I'm from, there are Gila monsters. They don't let go when you kill them; they just stay on. That's the way we think of ourselves—as Gila monsters. You know, you just hang in there. You've got to do that.

We were really made fun of by our land grant, by people in our college of food and natural resources, for even wanting to work with small and part-time farmers. They felt that was leading the road to welfare—that you start a person

to being a small farmer and they end up on food stamps every time. Either that, or they broke their back from the labor of it.

Those were real concerns because that was just what had been happening in New England and New York State. We felt, though, that there were some changes that had been going on—that small farming and part-time farming and local agriculture were becoming viable again—economically viable—not to mention important for lots of other reasons that we could all name like human values, reintegration of communities and the idea of being interdependent at a level that you can relate to.

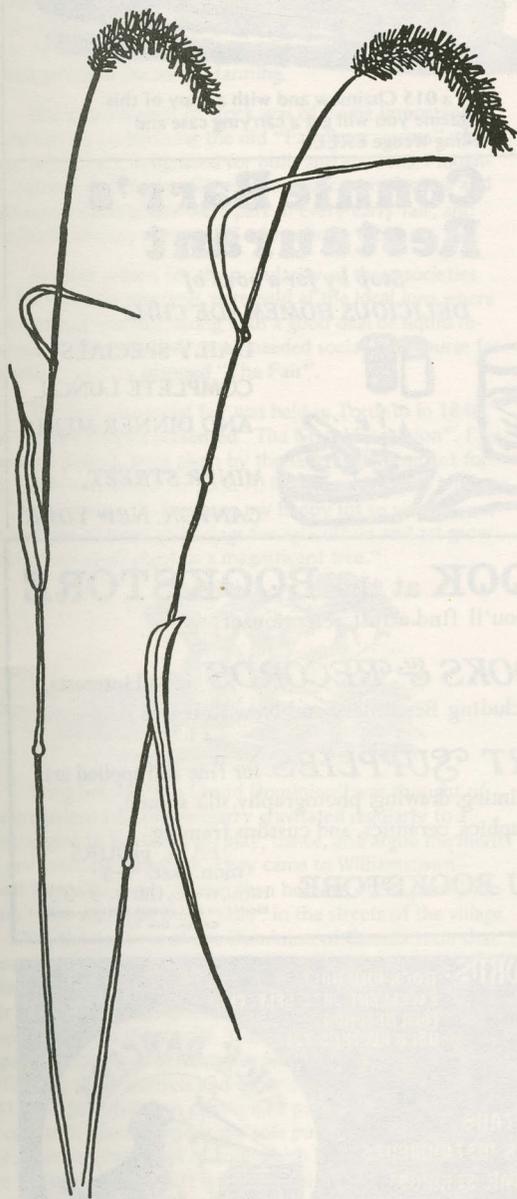
One thing we learned about ourselves is that we're dad-gummed patient and persistent, and that that's a good trait to have.

Additionally, in terms of the kind of agriculture that we had been having, which was very heavily chemical and very monocultural, we felt that that wasn't going to work much longer because we weren't going to be able to get the chemical input. We just really didn't believe that in 20 years we would have natural gas that could easily be used to create synthetic urea for chemical fertilizer, for example. We realize now it's probably more like 7 years than 20. But, at that point, not many people were admitting that things were changing so that it would make more sense to grow food in our region rather than to grow it out west and have it shipped in. These things have changed a lot. They've changed so much that we now have a memorandum of agreement for the New England Small Farm Institute from the land grant University at Amherst. By golly, we're in this together now.

The kind of research we want to go on with, like methods of undersowing legumes in corn, are the kinds of ideas that will allow people to increase nitrogen in the soil, be integrated with good cultivation practices, and be a little cheaper. Really, you *can* use machines to do this. It's not a "you get out there with your hoe" thing which is a little tough on people. If you've ever been down south and seen people working there, you don't especially want to wish that on anybody—particularly on a large scale.

Some research could be simply the rediscovery of methods that were used in the past. It's an easy idea and one that you could replicate in New York. It's being done in the Midwest now and California. There's almost a network of people planning these small farming institutes which will exist to train people in ecologically sound and economically viable agriculture, organic as much as possible. It's the kind of idea that has excited us as a grassroots group.

Well, these are just two examples of programs our little group has gotten involved in setting up. We went to a lot of conferences to meet people and to learn what we could learn. We read a lot of stuff. We talked among ourselves, argued a lot, and tried to set up coalitions with people. We started the Center for Rural Communities because Massachusetts has ignored its rural communities. We had a growth policy process that went through the entire state and came up with policy for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that didn't even



mention rural communities. And we're 65% forested! You know, we're not all urban. Like New York, you have lots of open land. You're not a totally urban state the way a lot of people think. Legislators and politicians have lots of misconceptions like that—particularly ones in urban areas who never come to Upstate New York and never come to Western Massachusetts. They don't even know.

Our Center for Rural Communities was born because it was needed—because we felt it was needed and other people felt that it was, too. Our Extension Service said, "All right, we'd like to fund at least half of that and you see what else you can do to raise money." Well, it hasn't been that hard because there wasn't any competition. There is now, I'm pleased to say. Our Coalition of Northeast Governors now has a rural task force. NERG now generates rural policy statements that go down to the White House and come out in White House papers on rural issues like health care, transportation, water and sewage.

It's a wide open field, and the Center for Rural Communities has been trying to work in several areas. One of them is to help bring groups together, to help form coalitions of people who have ways of helping one another get towards common goals. I work on policy, legislation, and trying to get people to talk to one another from the federal, state, and local areas. I get involved where there are federal and state guidelines, policies, or regulations that are keeping things from happening in rural communities, or that are pitting rural and urban people against one another. My lord, if we are not going to be interdependent in cities and countryside, we're really missing; we're not going to make it. My work is largely at the level where there are ways of supporting rural people and of providing more choices for them. Where there are barriers to doing that, I try to clear them away.

Another major interest for us is small farmers. We coordinated this Northeast Small Farmers Conference for USDA-CSA and ACTION, which funds VISTA and the Peace Corps. They all decided they didn't know anything about small farms (and, indeed, that was true). They decided they would have five conferences around the country and invite small farmer delegates to those conferences. We had one in the Northeast up in Maine in September. The farmers sat there for 2½ days. Some of them had never been out of their own county, and there they were up in Maine, working to say what their needs were, what was keeping them from making it as small farmers, and if they were making it, what were some of the good ideas they were using. One of the big culprits was Farmers Home Administration (FHA). The *biggest* culprit, though, was attitudes—peoples. attitudes towards small farmers, not wanting to have bad smells around them, littering, various things like that.

They did talk about solutions, though. They said that, while some are in the province of the Government, the Government is not the way to solve all these problems. It's going to have to be us farmers working for our communities. Well, that was the part that really interested me the most, because I believe that you can get sympathetic people in agencies—people like me, for instance—to advocate on your behalf as a small farmer. But, that's as long as I'm there and I don't get all messed up and lose my sense of values and perspective.

Small farmers need a way of speaking out on their own, and that's what we've been trying to work on since that conference. I talked to some people in New York about trying to get funding to do that—put resources into the hands of the farmers so that they can form their own organizations, get money for travel and telephone and a newsletter and money for honoraria to go to consult with committees and go to hearings to say what needs to go on for them. This is a real grassroots kind of organizing, but one that's well-linked to the people who make decisions about others. lives all the time at the state, county, and federal levels. My job is going to be helping make those introductions and make them stick so that they can use the channels.

There are a lot of other projects we're working on that have to do with local economic development based on the natural resources available to people in their own communities, and human skills that are in these small rural communities but are underutilized or used by the nearest factory in the nearest big city. We and you have both declining economic bases in these communities and growing populations. People are not bringing jobs with them. They commute or they're buying second homes, or they're retiring. It is not a healthy way to have a community.

It's important to stress self-reliance because nobody needs to be bought. It's important for your own self-respect. It's also important because it's a way of being non-violent. I don't know how many of you are students of Ghandi, but he used to talk about work and the ability to support yourself—the basic bread labor, as he used to call it—as being central to why it is important to be self-reliant, maybe not as just an individual, maybe as a small group, maybe as a whole community. You must be able to take care of your basic needs because, otherwise, the people who take care of them for you are dominant over you. That's an important idea to me. It's one reason why I try to work hard to support myself and my children as best I can and help them begin to see upon whom they can rely for what.

But, what does it mean to take responsibility for your own life in this world? It's important because we have been suffering a kind of disintegration in this whole culture that is exemplified in our rural areas. Certainly, you see it in our cities, as well.

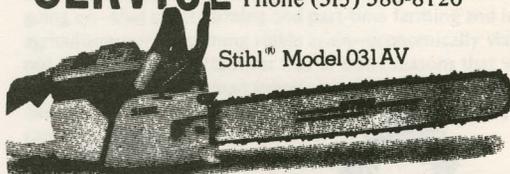
How can you begin to be more self-reliant? Doing what you're doing—linking up with others. Doing this conference is an important way of insuring some healthy kinds of connections between you, before it gets too late. I was in China a couple of years ago and saw what is possible for people to do to be self-reliant in basic grains and vegetables with regions the size of our Northeast. It's possible to grow food everywhere, to know upon whom you can depend, to know how you can be interdependent, and to organize for people and not just for money or for politics and power.

Everything we've worked on, I'm sure, from civil rights and that dad-gummed war to feeding ourselves and taking responsibility, all have to do with power—giving it to one another and sharing it. It's one of the hardest things we have to do. You all will know how. Just know that we're there in New England, working hard, too. It helps us to know you're here because, indeed, we do have a lot to offer one another; we have a lot of need for one another.

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