FOOD FOR LOCAL BENEFIT: CIVIC AGRICULTURE AT THE WEA CREEK ORCHARD

Student researcher Reese Curtis conducts an exploratory ethnographic study to investigate the community benefits of a locally owned, seventh-generation family farm in greater Lafayette.

Abstract

This project is a case study on Wea Creek Orchard, an intergenerational farm in the greater Lafayette area. Because this was an ethnographic project based on grounded theory, I did not have a set research question upon entering the field. After spending a few months volunteering on the Wea Creek Orchard, however, I noticed that this farm operates in a community-oriented way, prioritizing community engagement over the pursuit of profit. With these observations as a base, this project reviews the ways in which Wea Creek Orchard runs its business as a civic agriculture operation. Civic agriculture refers to locally embedded farms with direct-to-consumer sales that benefit their communities in some capacity. This project is significant in that it underscores the benefit that local farms bring to their communities, building upon a body of scholarly work that analyzes community benefit and local economies.

Keywords
sociocultural anthropology, small-scale farming, civic agriculture, ethnography, community benefit

INTRODUCTION

Wea Creek Orchard (WCO) is a seventh-generation homestead farm located in the greater Lafayette area. The farm is family owned and operated, with seven commodities crops being grown, primarily apples, pumpkins, and peaches. WCO sells its produce directly to consumers through a market on the farm’s property, as well as farmers markets in both Lafayette and West Lafayette. The WCO business has two major aspects. The first is the orchard and pumpkin patch, providing options for u-pick or simply purchasing these commodities from the market. The second is event hosting, with two seasonal festivals, weddings, field trips, and other social events for businesses and organizations throughout the community. The orchard provides a variety of activities for its visitors depending on the season, including u-pick (peaches, apples, pumpkins, and sunflowers), tractor rides, or simply a stroll on the property during the off-season. Significantly, WCO deviates from the dominant agricultural paradigm employed in the United States, which generally takes the form of industrial farming of one or two cash crops (Valliant et al., 2017). Instead, the farm is far more community oriented, placing a greater emphasis on social engagement and collaboration rather than maximizing profit. The tenets that make this farm unique—its direct sales, diversified crop output, and community oriented nature—position this farm as a civic agriculture operation.

First introduced by Thomas Lyson (2000), civic agriculture refers to farming operations that sell directly
to their immediate community, and are intertwined with said community’s development, both socially and economically. Where industrial agriculture allows for high crop output with little to no social engagement, civic agriculture encourages consumers to be involved with their food and those who produce it, promoting the development of social ties through local commerce and creating a sense of community around food (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). The reinforcement of social and economic ties between farmer and consumer is the cornerstone of civic agriculture, which theoretically improves community welfare and bolsters civic engagement. One example of civic agriculture can be found in community-supported agriculture (CSA), a farming strategy in which community members contribute on-farm labor in exchange for a share of the harvest (Watson, 2020). Operations like these instill a sense of pride and community in those who participate, deepening social bonds and forming community around food.

While civic agriculture represents a less globalized way of sourcing food, it is worth noting that most who participate in this civic agriculture (particularly CSA) are white, wealthy, and educated, raising questions of whose communities are benefiting from civic agriculture and why (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). Additionally, DeLind and Bingen (2008) warn that often operations dubbed as “civic agriculture” are small-scale farms with direct sales, with no common sense of place or social investment in community. While caution is to be had with overuse of civic agriculture, studies have shown that farmers who sell to and regularly interact with their immediate community are more civically engaged than those who do not, suggesting some legitimacy to the claims of civic agriculture (Clark & Record, 2017).

This ethnographic research project explores the ways in which Wea Creek Orchard operates as a civic agriculture operation. Small-scale farms with direct sales, an interconnectedness with the immediate community’s economic and social development, a shared sense of place, and the encouragement of community/political engagement constitute the main tenets of civic agriculture. This paper will outline my research methods, results, and will contextualize these results in the discussion.

METHODS

For this inductive ethnographic project, participant observation and interviews were my primary research methodologies. Participant observation, a common method for qualitative research in anthropology, involves spending an extended period with a group and participating in their daily activities to better understand their culture and values. Inspired by Andrew Flachs’ (2013) use of volunteerism to gain access to communal garden spaces, I decided to volunteer at Wea Creek Orchard as an unpaid farmhand to gain a better understanding of their operation and values. Over the course of five months, I spent a total of 116 hours on the farm, during which I planted pumpkins, pruned apple trees, watered crops, helped in the market, painted, observed festivals, and ate with the farm family. Throughout my fieldwork, I recorded and consulted field notes, then coded them toward the end of my project.

In addition to participant observation, three semi-structured interviews comprised the remainder of my data. Interviews allowed me to discuss recurring themes identified throughout my fieldwork with the farm family, and their semi-structured nature provided me the opportunity to guide the conversation while eliciting authentic, fluid responses. My first interview was with the orchard’s principal operator (PO) and his wife, the second with the PO’s parents, and the third interview...
was conducted in a group setting, with the PO, his wife, his parents, and his sister. I recorded and transcribed these interviews immediately after to preserve accuracy. My interviews provided a more cohesive sense of what the farm family's goals were for the orchard, their motivations behind certain business practices, and how their stated values corresponded with their observed actions. Together, the use of participant observation and interviews provided me a more holistic understanding of the orchard as a space, grants an insider view of how the farm operates.

Once I had compiled both my field notes and my interview transcripts (a combined total of 110 pages), I sifted through this textual data in search of themes. Once broad themes were identified, I further categorized and coded the data (Saldaña, 2011), breaking it down into fewer and fewer themes until narrowed down to three broad categories relating to civic agriculture: fostering social and economic ties, operating as an affordable farm, and maintaining a shared sense of place. The remainder of this paper will discuss these findings and identify how they support the assertion that WCO is a civic agriculture operation.

RESULTS

Fostering Social and Economic Ties

The first prominent theme identified within my data was the emphasis Wea Creek Orchard placed on community and local collaboration. These collaborations took many forms, with the most salient examples taking place during the orchard’s seasonal festivals. The farm hosts two annual festivals, a sunflower festival during the summer and a harvest festival in the fall. For a $5 parking fee, these festivals provide inflatable play areas and wagon rides for children and families, as well as space for local vendors to sell their products. While observing these festivals, I realized just how localized this event was. Speaking to vendors revealed that many lived within a two-mile radius of the farm, while the remainder came from the Lafayette and West Lafayette areas. Significantly, most of these vendors did not have brick-and-mortar shops, with the majority exclusively selling online or at farmers markets. The orchard’s festivals create opportunities for local businesses to expand their reach to members of the community, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship between local entrepreneurs and WCO. These community-based ties are both economic and social. Economic ties between vendors and the festival’s visitors ensure that money spent at festivals stays within the local economy, while simultaneously deepening relationships between the farm, its visitors, and local vendors.

In addition to the orchard’s festivals, the farm collaborates with local businesses in more casual capacities. I encountered one such collaboration during my fieldwork, when upon arriving at the farm, I saw children painting large canvases in the orchard. It turned out to be a painting class for children held by a local artist who, during the COVID-19-ridden summers of 2020 and 2021, used the orchard as a venue for classes in lieu of indoor activities. This same artist operated a booth during each of the orchard’s festivals, and when asked whether the farm charged her for land use, she explained that the PO refused her attempt to pay: “He said to give...
the money to somebody who needs it, so I donated it to a local organization instead.” When I brought this up to the PO in an interview, he and his wife brushed it off, explaining that it would be silly to charge a person just to use their land when it would otherwise be empty. Despite the revenue that charging for land access would have provided, the farm family opted to share their space with the community, creating opportunities to expand social networks with the orchard at the center. Mutually beneficial collaborations with local businesses that expand both economic and social ties are central to the farm’s operation, harkening back to the locally oriented social and economic development so pivotal to civic agriculture.

Collaboration with other agriculturalists constitute another aspect of WCO’s social and economic ties. It was readily apparent during my fieldwork that family-owned farms, particularly orchards, seem to be interconnected in a mutually beneficial way. The most salient example of collaboration with other farms occurred in mid-July when the PO lent a pesticide/herbicide sprayer to another orchardist. The PO and his father explained to the orchardist how to use the device while the farm’s employees and I loaded it into her trailer. I found this interaction significant, and when I inquired about it during an interview the principal operator had this to say: “Orchardists are very community-minded people. So, I mean, there’s a few that want to be left alone and they won’t give any knowledge away or won’t help, but that doesn’t happen very often. Part of that is because orcharding has almost gone the way of the dodo. Everybody’s getting out, and nobody is getting in, so, everybody’s trying to help everybody else. You know, a rising tide raises all boats.”

This statement is supported by Che et al.’s (2005) work emphasizing the importance of cooperation between orchardists, and encapsulates the collaborative ethos embodied by WCO. Amicable interactions deepen social and economic bonds between WCO and other agricultural operations, often leading to mutual benefit. In this case, the orchardist who borrowed the sprayer allowed the Wea Creek farm family to pick some of their late summer apples to sell at the sunflower festival, further underscoring the benefit of deepening social ties with other farms in the community.

Operating as an Affordable Farm

While the Wea Creek family certainly did not want to lose money operating the farm, my fieldwork revealed a strong commitment to financial accessibility. This ethos of financial accessibility was made most apparent at the fall festival, during which a woman asked the PO’s wife and me about the cost of wagon rides. After explaining that wagon rides and all other activities at the festival were free, I noted to the PO’s wife that many people had asked me about activity costs throughout the day. She replied, saying, “Well, that’s what we really want to avoid, you know? Our goal for this place has been creating a space where parents of young kids can engage with farmland, regardless of economic background. You go to [other comparable farms] where every activity costs something. We want to keep this place accessible.” This was a common refrain from the farm family. A similar response was given when asking the PO whether the farm was organic. He replied no, citing issues with labor intensity and financial accessibility: “I don’t believe organic is sustainable anyway because it’s too expensive. And yeah, you’ve got the rich white people who can afford it, but you don’t have the lower SES who could afford organic, and so, you got to decide and, not that we have low SES come out here anyway, I’ll readily admit. But if we increase the price of what we’ve got by 20 or 30 percent, there’s so many people who can’t afford [the orchard’s produce].”

These quotes highlight both the farm family’s commitment to maintaining a financially accessible space, and a common issue with many small-scale farms. Civic agriculture, whether CSAs or a direct sale operation, tend to serve a specific sect of the population, primarily white, educated, and wealthy patrons (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). The WCO family actively works to minimize the financial aspect of these socioeconomical barriers, and while financial accessibility is not a tenet of civic agriculture, these practices allow for wider community engagement with the orchard.

Financial accessibility at Wea Creek Orchard also extends to field trips. Multiple members of the farm family are trained educators, and providing affordable and educational field trips is a priority for the farm family. Staffed by the PO’s parents, wife, and retired teachers from the immediate community, a local elementary school teacher I met during the sunflower festival had
this today about the orchard’s field trips: “This place is great. Wea Ridge and other elementary/pre-schools bring kids out here on field trips. It’s only $5 a head, and they take the kids on wagon rides and let them bring home either apples or pumpkins depending on the plan of the trip. It’s hard to find affordable places for field trips, so this place has been great.”

Despite the extra help it takes to host these field trips, the farm family places high value on providing elementary-aged children with educational and enjoyable experiences on the farm. The affordable nature of these field trips allows for wider community engagement with farmland, and collaborating with local schools creates a deeper sense of shared place on the farm.

**Pride in Legacy and Place-Based History**

The intergenerational nature of Wea Creek Orchard is an important factor when considering this operation as civic agriculture. Originally settled in 1855, the farm family has a long place-based history on this property, with an established legacy that is projected into the future and continues to influence the strategies employed on the farm today. This pride in history can be identified on any given day the farm is open to the public. Whether in the market or the orchard, it was a frequent occurrence during my fieldwork to find any member of the farm family chatting with visitors, often outlining the farm’s history. Beyond simply telling their story to visitors, the farm itself is a museum of sorts. On the property, two barns (each over 100 years old) have been maintained to be usable today, agricultural equipment from the prior generations of ownership are displayed throughout the grounds, and old photos from the farm’s past hang within the market. By maintaining both oral and material histories on the farm, a more cohesive sense of common place is established in a way that can be shared with visitors. This common sense of place is particularly salient for those who live in the farm’s immediate vicinity, with many of these residents having intergenerational interactions with the orchard.

One such intergenerational interaction was mentioned during my group interview. The topic of interacting with visitors was being discussed, and I was surprised by how many members of the family had encountered individuals who had either done business or been acquainted with the now deceased previous generation of ownership. One such example came from the PO’s father, who told this story on the topic of nostalgia among visitors: “I had a guy [visit] that was, uh, a former professor from Purdue that had Alzheimer’s one Sunday afternoon. His wife came to the market, but he had to sit in the car. So, I went and got him, asked her if I could get him out, and I took him by the hand and showed him the barns. And we talked for two or three hours about, you know, everything. I don’t know if we talked about the tractors or not, but we did about livestock. Because he was a livestock professor. He knew [PO’s mother’s] dad. And then, he got back in the car, and his wife said she’d never seen him that verbal and interested.”

The historical sense of place cultivated by the farm family was beneficial for this gentleman, demonstrating how the personal nature of WCO paired with the farm’s place-based history allows for visitors to connect with the space. This example was not an isolated event, with time spent in the market revealing the frequency in which visitors shared their own farm stories, whether they currently lived on a farm or had grown up in an agricultural setting. The intergenerational nature of WCO, and the pride the farm family holds in maintaining this legacy, laid the foundation for these kinds of interpersonal interactions. This common connection to place, centering around food production, is a key aspect of civic agriculture (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). As both a business and a gathering place, WCO operates as an arena in which the past can be relived and community can be cultivated.
DISCUSSION: LINKING WITH CIVIC AGRICULTURE

This section links my results with the tenets of civic agriculture, the strongest of these relating to the social and economic ties cultivated at Wea Creek Orchard. The farm’s frequent interactions with community members and businesses creates an agricultural arena in which social ties are formed through mutually beneficial economic relationships. One key tenet of civic agriculture is met here, in that WCO operates in a way that encourages deeper social bonds within a given community centered around food (Clark & Record, 2017). This claim is further supported by Brune et al.’s (2021) work analyzing the influence of u-pick activities and on-farm markets on consumer behavior, ultimately finding that these sorts of farm experiences increase the stated likelihood of consumers shopping locally. WCO draws visitors with both fresh food and a social experience, fostering social bonds and economic ties in the process.

The intentionally affordable nature of this farm also contributes to the idea that WCO is a civic agriculture operation. By keeping prices low and most activities free, the farm family actively works to make the orchard accessible to all members of the community. Financial accessibility in this case works to address common barriers to engaging with civic agriculture operations (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). More opportunities to engage with a common agricultural space allows for the further development of social ties within the community, as well as opportunities to support a local economy.

The farm family’s pride in heritage and place constitutes perhaps the most important aspect of WCO as a civic agriculture operation. DeLind and Bingen (2008) warn...
against the “local trap,” where locally owned farms are labeled as civic agriculture without any shared sense of a place. Caution around conflating local ownership with a common, cultural sense of place is valid, however, not the case for WCO. The farm’s intergenerational nature and embeddedness in community has established a deep sense of place that is felt not only by the family, but also by visitors who have history with the farm. Beyond those who have history with the farm, the provision of opportunities for local entrepreneurs allows these individuals to both expand their social networks while simultaneously deepening their sense of cultural place by engaging with a local farm.

WCO fits most tenets of civic agriculture, specifically, a shared sense of place and the fostering of economic ties through social bonds, but this research falls short by failing to prove the presence of civic agriculture without a doubt. An important aspect of civic agriculture, particularly in more recent scholarship, is the capacity to bolster civic engagement and improve social welfare (Kaika & Racelis, 2021). Though civic engagement and social welfare are not measured in this project, Clark and Record (2017) show that locally owned firms with direct-to-consumer sales are associated with higher levels of political engagement, while Kaplan’s (1992) work espouses the psychological benefits of engaging with nearby nature, a loosely defined term including any sort of plants or green spaces. While these studies suggest that WCO improves community well-being, further research is necessary to verify this claim.

CONCLUSION

This project outlines the ways in which Wea Creek Orchard operates as a civic agriculture operation. A locally owned orchard historically embedded in its community, WCO works to provide members of its immediate community with fresh food and enjoyable experiences at affordable rates. Due to its embeddedness in place, with an emphasis on bolstering a local economy through collaboration and the provision of opportunities to deepen social ties, I believe WCO can effectively be described as a civic agriculture operation.

Despite being unable to prove improved social welfare or increased civic engagement, this project contributes to anthropological scholarship focusing on small hold farms, as well as work regarding the benefit of locally owned farms. The qualitative, exploratory nature of this research provides a novel glimpse into the function of an intergenerational farm, with a focus on the benefits it brings to its community. Future research on small-scale farms and civic agriculture might benefit from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, with a greater focus on measuring community benefit.

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REFERENCES


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