

LEWIS MUMFORD & THE FOOD FIGHTERS

A Food Revolution in America



ROBERT TURNER

"Radical, outrageous, insightful... the future of food."

- Kelly Ann Blount, USA TODAY Bestselling Author

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MORE PRAISE FOR
LEWIS MUMFORD AND
THE FOOD FIGHTERS

“Part Appalachian tall tale, part thoughtful critique of the global systems that feed us, Turner weaves an engaging story about people working together to create a new way to eat that is better for land, community, and the planet.”

– Laura Lengnick, author of *Resilient Agriculture: Cultivating Food Systems for a Changing Climate*.

“Warmer climate means two things: floods and drought... When that happens, crops fail. And when that starts to happen on a global scale mass migration becomes a strategic problem. There will be food shortages. There will be border wars. There will be water scarcity and countries will fight over water. Countries will fight over the fact that migrants are going from one country to another.”

– Mike McConnell, former United States Director
of National Intelligence

DISCLAIMER

This book describes the author's experience with farming and the industrialized food system and reflects his opinions relating to those experiences. Some names and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCHOOL OF POSTMODERN ACTIVITIES

One time I had to kill a guy.

In a clandestine hideout on a dark and snaky road deep in the woods of Appalachia, a grungy group of men made a terrible, fateful decision.

“We have to kill El Tigre,” said Butch in a cold, angry voice.

‘El Tigre’, as he was known in parts of Central and South America, deserved to die for all the trouble that he started. I figured we’d be doing the world a favor.

El Tigre had a first name—it was Tony. That’s right, Tony the Tiger, and he came out of New York, the creation of an advertising man from the corporate underbelly of Manhattan. Sure, he was a cartoon character and a brand mascot, but that didn’t make killing him any easier.

When I last saw ‘El Tigre’ on television, I couldn’t help but notice that he was looking bigger and stronger than I remembered him, like he had been working out, and I wondered if I could still take him. But I knew even then it was all just a false rendering of the truth and part of a sinister deflection and propaganda campaign, one that was designed to convince children that it’s alright to eat lots of sugar. Just get a little exercise and you’ll be fine, they said. Tony even wore a shiny coach’s whistle around his neck. He’s a dead man.

I was heading down a precarious path when I found myself in this meeting with a disorganized gang of revolutionary insurgents bent on disrupting the industrialized food system as we know it. I would eventually come to lead them for a brief time, haphazardly, with both feet slipping precariously on the greasy, slimy floor of a darkly lit Brazilian meat factory. International Corporate Kingpins had taken over the food supply, with all the stench of rotting waste and filth and corruption, and someone had to stop them.

For my cover, I was a manager of a small, experimental farm and I read research papers. I also wore reading glasses. After a decade undercover I decided that the modern, industrialized food system was not sustainable. It was heavily dependent on fossil fuels, seriously damaging to the environment, and a major contributor to climate change. But I could see something else much more ominous on the horizon: the complete and total collapse of the corn belt economy, resulting in millions of acres going fallow and economic devastation in the Heartland. Midwestern rural America was headed for a train wreck, and no one saw it coming.

So me and a bunch of oddball fuckups were going to try to do something about it. My neighbor Lewis Mumford was there to pull us back from the brink.



The School of Postmodern Activities, as it came to call itself, is not a school. It's a subversive, covert organization dedicated to dismantling the corporate control of our food supply.

Located fifteen miles outside of Asheville, North Carolina,

it's hidden in a tiny, one-room schoolhouse that was built in 1920, with asbestos shake siding painted brightly red, and tucked away nicely on a twisting mountain road deep in the green woods of the Pisgah National Forest. I'm talking about Western North Carolina, the heart of Appalachia, where the spine of the Blue Ridge mountains cut the eastern United States in half. The road dead-ends just a few miles past the old wood schoolhouse where the mountain gets too steep and says, 'go no further.' The school was the perfect hide-out for a clandestine operation, with lots of tree cover, and almost impossible to find or spot from a helicopter.

A small path behind the schoolhouse vanished into the trees as an easy escape route. If you knew the way through the nearby Pisgah Forest, you could make it to the Appalachian Trail in about ten miles, and from there flee all the way to Southern Georgia or Northern Maine, depending on which way you turned when you got to the dirt footpath, and you would never have to leave the woods. Bring food and water.

The organization is made up of various misfits, farmers, hippies, artists, petty criminals, poets and other beatniks, pranksters, and rebellious types. A couple rich people fill out the group to finance operations, but they didn't often attend the meetings. We listened mostly to the scientists, but we recruited as many guitar players and tree huggers as we could because we needed boots on the ground. They would become our food fighters, and as it turned out, they would do just fine.

In the artist group, many were bohemian by nature, because they believed first in freedom, (meaning never holding a real, full-time job, and a 48-hour workweek was laughable to them), free love when they could get it, and avant-garde art when they could create it from scrap materials laying around. Some lived in the Asheville art district down by the river, in old, dilapi-

dated warehouse buildings converted into art studios along the French Broad. Many of these artist-types slept on a couch, or a cot, or in a sleeping bag on the floor of their shabby little studio because they couldn't afford to pay rent anywhere else. The threat of fire was always present in these dirty, run-down warehouses by the river, especially with so many old kilns set up for glassblowing or pottery and just sitting there, waiting to torch the place.

The farmers and growers were salt of the earth types; hippy environmentalists who sometimes wore shoes or muddy boots, but not always. More women than men, they were small scale, organic farmers and not like the large-scale industrial farmers of the Midwest. Most of them scratched out a living, or at least supplemented their income, growing on three acres or less on the hill tops or in the valleys of these mountains. They sold their goods at the farmers market or in a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, and they spent their days toiling in the soil and the hot sun trying to grow food in a more just and sustainable manner. The mountains here set the limits and boundaries for the size of a farm and determine the mind-set of what and how food should be grown.

I have a great respect for people who farm the land. They have deeper roots, more patience, and stronger values than most people I know in other occupations. They are the rock upon which our whole movement stands.

A couple poets and writers were recruited from another subversive entity in town; a bookstore on the west side of Asheville called Firestorm Books. West Asheville was a side of town that I didn't frequent very often, until recently, when I needed to start recruiting. It's mostly made up of small coffee shops, funky bars, hole-in-the wall restaurants serving vegan food, artists and musicians, the unemployed (by choice) and

the unemployable (by all appearances). It's very bohemian and a little scary, much as I imagine some streets in Paris were like in the 1920's. Creative types and heavy drinkers.

West Asheville is a strange neighborhood in a weird town. A good example of the crazy people that we attract to this part of Western North Carolina comes from a local news story. A giant sinkhole opened in the parking lot of a small strip mall, the result of a fractured culvert pipe that ran under the lot. You could stand close and look over the jagged edge of broken asphalt into a twenty-foot diameter hole that went deep beneath the surface. It was cavernous. When a local media company asked its readers what they wanted done with the giant sinkhole, about one-third of respondents said they wanted to turn the sinkhole into a new subterranean bar and supper club.

One respondent to the survey suggested that we let it grow to become the Grand Canyon of the East and another fine tourist attraction. All the interesting layers of fill dirt would illustrate the history of the parking lot. "Think of all we can learn!" he said.

While I like the geological and deep time angle of his idea, a nail salon and a yoga studio still needed the parking, and science and understanding must always take a back seat to progress. But I must say—What the heck is wrong with these people?

It might be the climate and the natural beauty of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains that attracts them, but only a culture steeped in counterculture would suggest building a subterranean bar inside a giant sinkhole. My point is that Asheville has attracted a lot of free-spirited, unhinged people over the years. It was the perfect spot to start a little revolution.

And there were plenty of places to start recruiting people for a movement like this, like lots of crystal shops and wholis-

tic herbal medicine stores, Zen Buddhism retreats, meditation centers, vegan restaurants and craft beer breweries, farmers markets and food co-op markets, the American Museum of the House Cat, the nearby Coon Dog Festival, and the Bigfoot Festival. The last three on the list because we needed people who can think outside the box (and sometimes outside the known universe).

I first heard about Firestorm Books, my main recruitment center for radical types, from a farmer girl named Anna who helped out on our farm and never wore shoes. She told me that she was in the bookstore and was surprised to stumble upon a copy of my recently published book, *Carrots Don't Grow on Trees: Building Sustainable and Resilient Communities*. That surprised me too, partly because someone actually carried the book, but mostly because I had never heard of that bookstore. My first thought was, "What kind of a sink-hole-in-the-wall bookstore is this?"

Later that day I googled the name Firestorm Books, and before I even clicked on the first link, I could read the first few lines on their website. It read; "We are a collectively-owned radical bookstore and community event space in Asheville, North Carolina." They used the word radical on the web site, and I scooped my chair a little closer to the computer screen. My google search then brought up a Wikipedia page that described the business this way: "Firestorm Books & Coffee is a worker-owned and self-managed anti-capitalist business located in the West Asheville section of Asheville, North Carolina, USA." Perfect. The sign out front could have said "Recruitment Center" as far as I was concerned.

The next day I walked into what was, surprisingly, a quaint little shop, brightly lit with a coffee bar on one side, and old, wood bookshelves scattered throughout full of colorful books. I expected something a little darker and more mysterious. A

young girl named Audrey was at the front counter, and I asked her if she could help me find my book. She knew right where it was, God bless her, on a side wall close to the counter. She had three copies of the book on the shelf, and I told her that I was the author and I asked her if she'd like me to sign them. I don't know if that helps sell books or not, but it makes me feel important, so I asked.

"Yes, that would be great. We love having author signed copies," said this little flower-child working in this anti-capitalist bookstore.

As I signed the copies, and she placed stickers on the cover, I asked her about the business.

"Your web site says this is an anti-capitalist, collectively owned, radical bookstore. What does that mean?"

"We don't make profit, or any profit that we make goes back into the community through the support we give to others," she answered. "As for radical, go look at some of the titles." She smiled.

"But it takes capital to buy and stock all of these books. And what about paying the workers?"

"There are three owner-workers here, and I'm not one of them yet, but I'm working toward becoming one also. We don't make much money working here. The owners agreed to work for minimum wage years ago, but just recently bumped it up to \$10 an hour so it could be closer to a living wage, which really, it isn't. But they're happy to put any profits over that back into the community in any way that they can, after paying rent and for book inventory, of course."

Just then a young man with long, blond dreadlocks and likely unemployed, who was sitting at a store computer accessing free internet, jumped into the conversation, and said, "Dude, this store is awesome."

That was my guy, I thought. I need that guy. That's the kind of guy who could get arrested, and I could bail him out, and he wouldn't lose a job or anything over it. Besides, he'd get three squares a day while he's incarcerated.

I decided then that I would need to stake out this place to find recruits. But for now, I would just walk the aisles and look for books related to starting a radical movement, and there were plenty. Entire shelving units full of books with titles like *How To Make Trouble and Influence People*. The book cover had a photo of a guy in a bear suit (it could have been some kind of rodent suit) getting arrested, hand cuffs around his furry paws, and being led away by London police—Bobbies in their funny hats. The poor quality of the photograph on the cover was convincing; this was a picture captured in the moment and this really happened.

There were other books by culture-jammers, like *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, and *D.I.Y. Resistance: 36 Ways to Fight Back!* There was also *Rules for Radicals* and another I liked, *Direct Action Manuel*. For those unfamiliar with the term, Direct Action is a form of protest where you actually do something, like Occupy Wall Street or chain yourself to a tree—fun stuff like that.

I purchased three books to get myself started down this path toward revolution. The titles were *How We Win—A Guide to Nonviolent Direct-Action Campaigning*; *This Is An Uprising*; and *Full Spectrum Resistance*. There was no turning back now—I spent money. I needed to learn about some of the pranks, protests, and political mischief making that worked for other nefarious, immoral, despicable, and reprehensible groups, like mine.

On the way back from Firestorm Books, I stopped by my neighbor's home just down Avery Creek Road. I found the sage of Appalachia, Lewis Mumford, out spreading compost in his garden. Mumford was a big reader and collector of books, and I thought he might like to take a look at the titles I had just purchased.

"You spend more time prepping your garden beds than anyone I know," I said as I approached the large vegetable garden in his front yard. "Just plant the damn seeds, Mumford!"

He looked up and smiled, and said, "Healthy soil makes healthy plants, which feeds all the animals, including me. I'm an animal."

He stopped working and rested his arms on top of the shovel, and said,

"Ya' know Robert, I was just thinking. I was reading a story in *Progressive Farmer* this morning, and what many commercial farmers are doing to our soil borders unethical and immoral behavior—they're destroying the soil that everything above ground depends on to gain short term profits. And they're doing it on such a massive scale. It's not prudent behavior. Soil health is so important to life on this planet."

He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his brow, and then continued,

"There are evolutionary biological principles that govern the life of entire systems on earth, starting with the smallest microbes in the soil, and we're either a part of that or not."

Lewis Mumford was a self-taught scientist of the first order. He read and researched everything related to the natural sciences and was an expert on soil health, among other things.

"Since we began agriculture about 10,000 years ago," he said, "and really since the 1950's, we've become completely

disconnected from the earth. We've transcended it, technologically. We really don't belong here anymore."

With those words he glanced over at me and feigned a smile and then continued raking the compost into his garden. "What'd you bring me?" he said.

We really don't belong here anymore. See, that's the kind of talk that starts a revolution.

I've played a few different roles in my life, including big-shot businessman, journalist, and farmer. It was time in my life that I played a more serious role, the role of radical revolutionary.

I decided that belonging to an anti-establishment organization could be my way of sticking it to the man, and perhaps make up for some of my own transgressions in my previous life. It would become my own path toward redemption.

I am reminded of an old TV commercial where a crotchety, rich guy, sitting in his mansion in front of a giant fireplace, says, "It's just my way of sticking it to the man."

His butler replies, "But, you are the man, Sir."

The old, rich guy says, "I know" with a weird smile.

I'm that old, rich dude, and I appreciate the irony of it all. I spent a career in business sourcing products from around the world and capitalizing on cheap labor in far off places. I would travel all over China, India, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Central America looking to save a few nickels. Now I'm trying to stop all that—at least when it comes to food anyway.

Why would I do that? Because cheap, taxpayer-subsidized corn and soybeans have enabled agribusiness to build up vast, monopoly power over farmers and our food system and to reap massive profits while leaving farmers broke and dependent on the subsidies. Meanwhile, large multinationals are outsourcing

the rest of food production to foreign nations and far-away places, including meat and vegetables, which is seriously eroding our food security and food sovereignty as a nation. That seemed like a pretty good reason to drop whatever it was that I was doing and join a renegade band of food fighters.



The word ‘school’ in the name School of Postmodern Activities is just a layer of cover for this organization dedicated to anti-establishmentarianism. And in case you didn’t catch it, I just used one of the longest words in the English dictionary. I’ll use shorter words from now on. The Oxford definition of this word is, “a political philosophy that views a nation’s or society’s power structure as corrupt, repressive, exploitative, or unjust.”

Please allow me to digress on this word anti-establishmentarianism for a moment. Take a stroll through a bookstore like Firestorm and you will not likely find another book with a longer word, except maybe the dictionary. Not many of your friends have ever read a book with a longer word, and that simple fact puts you in the upper echelons of the intellectual elite. We’ll go downhill from here. But if you’re going to follow me on this journey into radicalism, you have to learn a few of the terms and definitions, and most importantly, you have to learn the truth, because fighting lies and bullshit is like fighting weeds in a garden. They keep sprouting up and you’re always a little behind, and sometimes they take over.

The School of Postmodern Activities is not really an ‘institute of learning’ of any kind. It’s more like a movement or a way of thinking. It’s really more like a friendly mob. In a

normal mob, one guy yells, “Let’s get him?” and another guy yells, “Get who?!” and the first guy yells, “I don’t know, but Let’s Go!” and they all run down the street. In the mob I’ll be describing, it’s a more passive, laid back, we’ll get him tomorrow kind of attitude. The good thing about our group is that concepts like anti-establishmentarianism can be discussed over beer, and you don’t go running around when you’re drinking beer. Someone could get hurt.

The sign out front of the old schoolhouse is yet another layer of cover, and it reads “The Creekside Farm Education Center.” One of our more radical members wanted to take a paint brush to the sign and graffiti it to read “Re-Education Center”, but I stopped him. No sense in sending up a flag with the authorities.

I realized that we were a subversive organization at our first official meeting in the old schoolhouse when Butch made the opening statement, “We have to kill El Tigre!”

We were supposed to be there to discuss the concentration of power in the food industry, and right off I started to wonder if it was a good idea to even allow beer at these meetings and if I had invited the right group of people to attend.

Butch continued in an angry tone.

“And that goofy Cocoa Puffs bird, we need to kill him too, and that whole cartel of bunnies and elves. We need to wipe ‘em all out!”

He took a swig from his beer bottle and then added,

“Ya’ know, they kicked that frickin’ tiger out of Chile, and Peru doesn’t want him either. We just need to kill him. If we kill him, what’s left? Just a cardboard box with a boring picture of some sugary dehydrated corn flakes on it, and it’s over!”

I later found out that in preparation for the meeting, Butch read Bee Wilson’s book *The Way We Eat Now* and it radical-

ized him. It's not really a radical book, but in the hands of the wrong person, well, any book could be, like this one in your hands. Butch was now ready to wipe out every cartoon character on every box of fruit loops and sugar smacks on the planet. I knew that if he got riled up enough, he would end up getting caught drawing graffiti on cereal boxes in the grocery store, or worse, and then he'd get arrested, and then we'd be without a secretary. Things can spiral out of control like that quickly in any subversive organization.

Butch told me privately, in fact, about this very idea just after the meeting. He wanted to use social media to get a couple hundred people, maybe more, to go into grocery stores and graffiti boxes of Kellogg's corn flakes. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Good idea Butch, but it's a little risky, don't you think? You're too important to this movement. If you go to jail, what good does that do us when we need you. I like the spirit though," and I patted him on the shoulder and we both smiled at each other.

I regret it now. Was I a chicken-shit or what? Why didn't I just say, "Go for it." I could see it happening, Butch getting pulled out of Ingles grocery store in hand cuffs for defacing boxes of Frosted Flakes because he drew a little mustache on Tony with a black magic-marker, and little devils' ears, and maybe a pointed tail. Then he'd write something stupid across the front like, "They'rrre Poison!" Besides, someone could bail him out the same day. No big deal.

That's a pretty harmless act of semi-passive resistance, and no one would get hurt. Why did I try to stop him? Was I just some beatnik quasi-intellectual afraid to go out and actually do something? Never again. I needed to get into the game here. I could organize rallies and email campaigns, and I could write books and articles and letters to congressman, but why would I

stop someone from taking direct action, no matter how stupid it was?

Butch was right about Chile. Chile and other countries in South America had recently outlawed “El Tigre” and other cartoon characters on sugary cereals in a dramatic move to combat the significant rise in childhood obesity rates in those countries. This of course came with serious legal opposition from the cereal manufacturers like Kellogg’s and General Mills, but they did it anyway. That took guts.

Butch wanted to be David, and Kellogg’s, for the moment, was his Goliath. That’s because Butch knew that Kellogg’s was one of the ten most powerful multinational food corporations in the world that control most of the food that we buy in grocery stores. These ten companies control over 60 % of the brands and foods that we all know, and they own the center isles of the supermarket. About 140 people sit on the boards of those companies and decide what we’ll all be having for dinner tonight. Suffice it to say that they all likely come from similar educational and socio-economic circles.¹

They are the evil nemesis against which we will take our fight. They are the enemy. Every resistance movement needs a target. That was lesson number one from my radical book library. And yet I tried to stop Butch from an act that meant something to him. I wouldn’t do that again.

Because this is the story of the everyday man fighting against all odds. An underdog story in a fight against injustice and the massive multinational corporations who control more and more of our daily lives, and not just food, but technology, energy, the media and just about everything else. It’s the story of regular people (and I use that term very loosely here) just trying to do the right thing in a messed-up world. We were going to take back control of our food and give it to the people.

How could it all get so messed up, from the very beginning, at the very first meeting? The guys over at Kellogg's probably weren't drinking beer at their meetings. We were going to get crushed, and I knew it.

"Now slow down a minute Butch," I said, "we need to set an agenda for these meetings. You can't just blurt out bullshit like that."

"OK," said Butch, "but I just have to ask, has anybody seen the news that the USDA is paying out over \$100 million to buy pork from the Brazil-owned JBS corporation, using taxpayer funds that were intended to help U.S. farmers in the trade war with China? Can you believe that shit! JBS is notorious for their role in the burning of the Amazon rain forest so they can set up more livestock farms, and they've been nailed for offering bribes to government officials about 2000 times! And how about this, the two largest pork producers in America are now owned by foreign companies, and JBS is one of them, and some Chinese company that bought Smithfield is the other. It's frickin crazy!"

This was typical Butch. He jumps around on subjects like that when he gets excited or drinks beer.

"Butch, we need to set an agenda for discussion before you go off on a rant like that," I said.

"What are you saying about killing Tony the Tiger?" someone asked. A few chuckles came out from the group.

"Yea Butch, that's my childhood you're talking about," said another member. "I loved Frosted Flakes as a kid."

"Of course you did!" replied Butch. "Because it got you all juiced up on sugar! You were probably bouncing off the walls and driving your mother nuts. Don't you guys pay attention to what's going on, man. Chile just outlawed 'El Tigre' on cereal boxes. He's gone, man. Now we need to kill him off. We don't

need him pushing his sugar crack on our kids any longer. Radical change is coming, boys. There's got to be a war. And Big Brother isn't going to give up easy."

Any anti-establishment organization, such as this one, needed guys like Butch. But still, I was concerned about the way this whole thing was getting started. "Please sit down, Butch," I said.

"OK, you guys just go on being good little consumers," Butch said. "Don't make any waves. We wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelings."

He dangled his beer bottle between two fingers, and waved it back and forth, and said in a soft, drawn-out voice as if trying to hypnotize the room, "Just drink and forget...Drink and forget..."

"Butch, how many beers have you had already?" I asked. "Don't get your feelings hurt, we're all in this together, but we just need a little structure and organization to these meetings, so let's begin, everyone. We need to come up with some language for a ransom note tonight."



Butch wasn't a bad person. In fact, he was a good guy with a big heart. He just tended to rub people the wrong way when he got riled up. Anyone can understand why a person like Butch could become angry and even radicalized, particularly when something involves children. Butch had kids of his own, although they were mostly grown now.

In many respects, he was dead right to be angry. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released a

report saying that forty percent (40%) of our children in the United States will likely face type 2 diabetes in their lifetime. For children of color, it's 50%—that's half.² We are facing a health care crisis of epic proportions in the decades to come, and it's all related to unhealthy diets of high sugar, high fat, high calorie processed foods. Who's going to try to stop that?

What the future may hold for many of these children is blindness, the amputation of limbs, heart disease and shorter lives. Diabetes also happens to be a very expensive disease to treat, and we'll all pay dearly in skyrocketing health care and insurance costs and an economy weakened by illness and lost work, reduced output and absenteeism. The illness will affect everyone under the burden of rising national debt as we try to cover those health care costs through Medicare and Medicaid.

The coming crisis is clear, but we fail to recognize it or really deal with the root causes. The CDC also reports that 20% of our kids are clinically obese, not just overweight, but obese; 40% of our kids are seriously overweight. The same is now true for kids in Central and South America, and in China, as their snacking and junk food diets have followed our lead. 70% of American adults are overweight and that number continues to rise, meaning less than one-third of the adult population is living at a healthy weight.

This is a recent phenomenon that started in the 1950's with the corporate take-over of our food system and the dramatic increase in processed foods, easy carbs, sugars and soda pop. And it's gotten much worse since then as the food industry consolidated and concentrated power. Butch was mostly angry at large, multinational food corporations because of the power they now wield over our lives. Maybe this is what it takes to create change in a world entrenched by big money and power-

ful corporations. No more pussyfooting around. Grab your magic markers and Let's Go!

I have come to view it this way. There are two opposing forces that operate in our society—one works toward mass-consumption and mass-concentration, where everyone shops at the same places, and eats the same foods from the same fast-food joints all around the world; and the other force is driven by a group of people trying to stop all that by taking back some control in their lives—first by taking back some control of their own food. Fuck it, I'm with them.

I've invested millions of dollars in agriculture only to find out that we need a better way to feed people. There's just too much pressure on the earth's life support systems, and the concentration of power and environmental degradation threatens our long-term health and well-being. What are we going to do about it? What's the big solution? I kept waiting for some big 'Aha' moment that would give me some answers. What I do know is that capitalism is a game with winners and losers, which is OK until someone tries to stack the deck. I think we need to level the playing field so that the little guy has a chance to compete. And I believe that there are tools within capitalism to help solve our problems, because we can all vote with our wallets.

The globalization of food has reached the point of insanity. We currently import about 20% of our food in the US, but this average doesn't describe the whole picture—which tells a more troubling story. Still, that's one out of every five bites that you take. The U.S. imports about 35% of its vegetables, over 50% of fruits, and 90% of seafood.³

Of all the food grown and produced in this country, one state, California, produces 90% or more of our fresh produce, most of our homegrown fruits and nuts, and 40% of our

dairy supply.⁴ This kind of concentration in food production is unwise under any circumstances, but it is especially foolish given the extreme and growing drought risks in that region, which I'll describe later.

When it comes to our food security and food sovereignty, it's very risky business to become dependent on foreign nations and far-away places for our food supply. We'll hear more about this later from a guy who should know, former United States Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell. But I believe it is in our own best interest, in the interest of our national security, to reduce our imports of food. Not all of it, we can keep the bananas and pineapple, and coffee, of course. What are we going to do—not have coffee? That's crazy talk.

As the owner of a small farm, I understand how local food strengthens a supply chain that creates jobs and food sovereignty in our community. The recent Covid-19 pandemic and then Russian hackers in our oil and beef supply created food shortages and higher prices that revealed the weak links in our globalized food system. Locally produced food is like an insurance policy, a buffer, for when things like that happen. And they will continue to happen.

As I write this, the meat processor JBS was just hacked by the Russian mob, which followed on the heels of a hack on the Colonial Pipeline that supplies gas along the East Coast. And that hack came soon after a hack at Solar Winds that uncovered security threats in several branches of the US government and at hundreds of companies. This was just a warning. A hack on our electrical grid would be far more devastating. Fresh food, like meat, produce and dairy, spoil quickly without refrigeration, and food deliveries stop without warehouse lights, communications, and computers.

JBS is the largest meat processor in the world with six

massive meat processing facilities in the United States, and it's a Brazilian owned company that has been mired in legal battles for corruption and bribery in both the US and Brazil. The meat supply dropped 25% when processors shut down for a brief period during the Covid-19 pandemic which created shortages at grocery stores and higher prices.⁵ Meat prices went up again after the hacking at JBS.

Food shortages and price increases from the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the risks and fragility of a globalized food system that promotes itself as a source of plenty for all but actually creates monopolies for wealthy corporations and inequalities and food insecurity for the rest of us. And the impact on low-income households, and for people of color, was disproportionate and unfair.

Food sovereignty at the national level, and also at the community level, is critical to our health and security. Food sovereignty includes the control over all means of food production and processing, including land, soil, seeds, and the knowledge and skills to produce our own food. I believe that retaining the ability to produce some of your own food locally and regionally is, if nothing else, a necessary insurance policy, just in case.

It's also better for the environment and a buffer against climate change. Making our peace with the biosphere and reducing the impacts of climate change will require building closer relationships between sustainable food sources and local communities—relationships that build and sustain human life and the life of the ecosystem on which we depend. We must not forget that everything comes from nature. Everything. Even a Twinkie.

Most local, small farmers that I know in my region use the best agricultural practices that include protecting the

microbial life and health of the soil, and they grow a diversity of plants in an organic and regenerative system. Not just because the food tastes better, but because it protects and preserves our food producing capacity and the healthy soil which we depend on. But our global, monocropping industrialized system works in the opposite direction and is decimating our soils, leading us all down a dangerous path. This is what Mumford was talking about.

Local farms represent biological and cultural assets that we need to preserve. Farming is a big part of our cultural heritage in this Asheville region where I live, and we need to protect that. But it's also true that every community in every country around the world needs to protect and preserve some capacity to grow some of their own food. That creates food security—for when shit happens.

Food is national security. The short of the problem is this—we are outsourcing our food production to foreign countries at an alarming and increasing rate. We'll continue growing way too much corn and soybeans here in the U.S., but we'll be turning over the rest of our diet to people in far-away places, including meat production in South America. Here's just one interesting fact related to global food that might surprise you—one in four pigs living in the United States is owned by a Chinese company.⁶

According to a recent report from the USDA, by the year 2027, over 75% of our fruits and half of our vegetables will come from a foreign nation. Currently it's about half our fruits and one-third of our vegetables, but the rate is increasing quickly.⁷ In California, the current source of over half of our vegetables grown in this nation, severe droughts are quickening the pace of dependency on foreign food.⁸

The average person in the U.S. eats ten pounds of meat per

year from a foreign country, without even knowing it.⁹ That's because the law doesn't require country of origin labeling on meat products.¹⁰ It's more than enough meat to eat a quarter pounder every day for a month, and you have no idea what country it came from. It just amazes me that everything we buy must have a country-of-origin label on it except for the important stuff that we put into our bodies. You can thank big brother for that—and the man behind the curtain pulling the strings.

The food system in the United States is a complex, global supply chain that circles the planet. It's complicated, and I've spent years trying to figure it out. The most difficult question for me is this: How do we create a just and fair regional food system that pays farmers and farm workers a livable wage, and still keep food affordable?

Here is a truism about farming in this global food system: if a multinational food corporation can grow a pepper cheaper in Mexico or Peru, then that's what they're going to do. It's just business. The average wage for a farm worker in Mexico is \$8 per day.¹¹ Not per hour—per day. As a small farmer here in Western North Carolina, I don't know how to compete with that. And that's why, very soon, over 75% of our fruits and half our vegetables will come from a foreign nation, even in the summer months.

We can't fully understand or control how this global food system affects people in other developing countries, like how powerful drug cartels have taken over lucrative avocado production in Mexico by way of kidnappings and extortion. In developing nations, where there is money to be made, even in avocados, there is often corruption¹².

The organic food trend helped to establish a stronger local food movement here in the Asheville region, but local food still only represents a small percentage of the total food consumed

in Buncombe County. Organic farmers here are competing with massive organic factory farms in California, Mexico, and Brazil, and those factory farms are setting the consumer price expectations that people are willing to pay in this crazy, risky race to the bottom. Farmers across the US are feeling the pinch in this globalized food system. They're getting squeezed by rising costs for inputs and lower prices for their produce.

Migrant workers and other farm laborers on U.S. farms are paid very low wages for all the hard work that they do feeding the rest of us. The average hourly wages for migrant workers in 2020 was \$13.68, with an average of \$14.62 for all farm workers.¹³ This is just half (51%) of the average hourly wage for all workers in the U.S. in 2020, which stands at \$28.78 per hour.¹⁴ So, it's not like farms in the US are paying great wages while other countries don't.

The US farmer's percentage of the retail dollar keeps shrinking as processors, wholesalers, distributors and retailers grab a bigger slice of the pie. Here are just two examples from a recent study: For an eleven-pound Butterball turkey that retails for \$16.39, the farmer got .66 cents; for one pound of tomatoes retailing for \$3.39, the farmer received .33 cents. On average, the US farmer receives less than .14 cents on the retail food dollar.¹⁵ This means of course that farm workers, families and the surrounding rural community are also getting a smaller piece of the pie.

I don't really know what the answer is. Maybe we need to pay a little more for our food so that farmers can actually make a living at it. Most farmers work a second job off the farm just to get by. The truth is, we pay a lot less than our grandparents did for food as a percentage of income, about half.¹⁶ (We spend a lot more of our income on bigger homes, cars, and gadgets than they did.) And we pay a lot less for food

than people in Europe do, as a percentage of income (about 9% vs 16%, on average.)

Breaking up the largest monopolies in the food system, those large corporations that are putting the squeeze on farmers and consumers, will help. But are people in the United States willing to pay more for food in order to improve our own food sovereignty and food security in this country? It's a tricky question.

Localization in our food supply can offset the pressures from concentration and globalization that we've been seeing in the food system. Localization, or 'regionalism', is the alternative to global corporate control of the food system. It doesn't mean eliminating trade or absolute self-reliance. It's simply about creating a more sustainable and resilient economy by producing and consuming goods closer to home.

Localization means shortening the distance between producer and consumer. It is a leveling of the economic playing field that currently favors large, transnational corporations and banks. It means reducing our dependence on import and export markets in favor of production for local needs. And in that way, we can keep a closer eye on things, like the health of the soil beneath our feet and the ecosystem that supports it all.

That may come with a price tag that includes higher wages for farm labor. And maybe part of the problem is that some people find it easier purchasing a \$400 smoothie machine than paying a little more for the ingredients that go into it. Like I said, it's complicated.

We just don't grow food anymore; we manufacture food. Corporations have taken over and in their zeal for efficiency they stripped the land and subjugated the farmer. I have come

to believe that by taking control of the food system, taking it out of the hands of multinationals and putting it back into the hands of farmers and the local and regional community, is the only way we're going to be able to survive long term on this planet. As resources like topsoil deplete to a certain point where profits dry up, the corporations will fold or move on to other businesses anyway, and food production will go back to the people in a much-diminished state.

I was frustrated, and about to give up. The problems were too big, and most people were complacent about it. I knew that many of the world's great civilizations collapsed because of environmental degradation, mostly related to the depletion of the soil, from the Maya to Easter Island to Angkor Wat to the Romans to the Vikings in Greenland. The fertile crescent, the birthplace of civilization, was once fertile and now it's a desert. Environmental collapse, and the collapse of agriculture, took out the ancient Babylonians, the Phoenicians, and the Macedonians.¹⁷ Why should we be any different, except that we're looking at environmental collapse on a global scale?

The low point for me came when I learned that we had already killed off half the insects and a third of the birds in North America, largely due to the overuse of deadly pesticides. Then a United Nations report came out that suggested we had enough topsoil left worldwide for about 60 years—that means 60 harvests.¹⁸ Would my kids and grandkids have to live with desertification, water wars and the turmoil of mass migration on a scale that we can't even imagine, with millions, even billions of people on the move?

Then Lewis Mumford started teaching me about regenerative agriculture and its ability to rebuild the soil and pull carbon from the atmosphere at the same time, and that gave me hope. Regenerative agriculture, Mumford told me, could

solve climate change, reverse desertification, increase yields for a growing population, and reduce the need for hazardous chemicals.¹⁹ Corporate led industrial agriculture was destroying the soil and the environment, but regenerative farming could reverse all that. That was a turning point for me; it was a life changing moment. Something shifted in me, in my head. I spent years looking at how bad things were getting in the food system, and struggling on my own farm, and suddenly my eyes were opened. It wasn't about sustaining, or sustainability, it was something bigger. We could actually regenerate the land and build up the soil faster than we ever thought possible. That was worth fighting for. That became my 'why', and that's when I joined a quirky band of rebel food fighters.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FAR-DISTANCE COMPANY

“That just don’t make no sense,” Butch said as he stoked the fire with a stick. “It’s that kind of senselessness that worries me.”

On a warm and calm July evening, we were sitting around a campfire on a small hill at the farm, looking out at black hills against the nighttime sky, drinking beer. Lights from homes on the high hills twinkled like the stars just above them. Butch took another bite from his chicken leg and tossed it into the fire, then licked his fingers and wiped them on his pants. He stood up, grabbed the pint bottle of whiskey, and took a swig, passed it on to Mumford, and then sat down again.

“It makes no sense, and it’s been going on for so long, and gettin’ bigger all the time,” Butch said. “And the more you read or hear about it, the more you know, and it just makes less sense. And you begin to question people in general and if they’re just going to get what they deserve. I just get so mad at the government for letting it go on, even encouraging it.”

“I don’t have a lot of respect for the government right now,” Butch added. “The politicians got all the big money corporations in their pocket to keep ‘em getting elected. They don’t care about fellas like us.”

“Those farmers got to look out for their own families,” Butch said. “They just get trapped between the prices they

get and what they have to pay for seeds and supplies. Maybe they're scared, so they get mad. But they don't really know who to get mad at."

His eyes grew wider and reflected the red embers from the fire. "Those farmers who are strugglin'... I'm going to stand with those folks."

Butch and Mumford had lived on Avery Creek Road for most of their lives. Mumford lived in an old farmhouse so close that he could walk to my farm in about ten minutes, and he often did. Butch lived up the mountain a little further, in an old wood house built in 1930, with a front porch, and on it, a couple old wood chairs that he made himself. Both homes were kept up nicely, painted white, with the lawns mowed regularly. I considered them good neighbors.

"We have to start thinkin' about doing stuff that means something," Butch said as he stoked the fire again.

"But what kind of stuff can people like us do?" he added. He leaned over and grabbed another beer from the cooler. "We 'aint got the kind of money it takes to go up against those lawyers and corporate bigwigs. And the law 'aint necessarily on our side."

"We don't really need to go up against anybody," Mumford said. "We just need to get people to come around, to understand what's going on, and maybe give them some other options, that's all."

"We need an army of those folks to make a difference," said Butch. "It wouldn't make no difference if it was just us and the few other people around here."

His southern accent, his wonderful Appalachian drawl, seemed more pronounced now that he was drinking beer. Maybe the alcohol vapor in his breath distorted the sound waves ever so slightly as they meandered at a slower and irreg-

ular pace across the air between us, raising and lowering the pitch. Maybe it was just the alcohol in my own brain that made his voice sound so musical, so I just didn't say anything and hoped he kept talking.

Butch leaned forward and spoke to the fire and the distant hillside.

“How we goin’ to wake them up in the first place? How we goin’ to get their attention to make them understand? How we goin’ to make them see the freight train that’s barreling down on us all? The headlight on that train is dimmer than that porch light way off at Curt Lowe’s place across the valley. How we goin’ to make them see that and know what’s coming? Most people can’t see or think that far off, or maybe they just choose not to.”

“I’m afraid to say it,” Mumford replied, “but maybe it’s going to take a serious drought or natural disaster of some kind, something that stops the food trucks in their tracks and wakes people up. Hopefully it won’t be something really bad, but just enough to wake people up a little.”

That little campfire burned in the summer of 2019, before the pandemic hit, and before the serious droughts hit California in the summer of 2021.

Butch said, “Maybe it’ll be some kind of civil unrest or a labor strike that spreads across Central and South America, and we run out of some vegetables for a while. Then people might realize we ‘aint so self-sufficient and safe as we think we are.

“What if farm workers in Central America got tired of making eight dollars a day and just said the heck with it and went on strike? Who’d grow the food then?” added Butch.

A squeal of protest came from the pig pen in the distance as one of the hogs jostled for a middle position and another objected. All three of us looked over toward the pen.

“What if the pigs went on strike? No more bacon!” Butch said with a chuckle as that last shot kicked in and his mood suddenly changed. “That would be funny. We should do that. Make up some signs that say, ‘On Strike’ and put them in the pasture. Tell the media, ‘No food until our demands are met.’”

“Not one chicken egg!” he added with a snort. “They’d come out for something like that, wouldn’t they?”

We were all smiling now.

“It reminds me of a running joke that was in the media a while back,” I said. “Someone started a hoax called ‘The Society for the Decency of Naked Animals’ or something like that. This made-up organization had rallies and slogans in the media to push for the clothing of naked animals, including pets, barnyard animals, and bigger wildlife like deer and bears. They had slogans like, ‘A nude horse is a rude horse.’ What a riot!”

We all laughed.

“What about chipmunks and squirrels?” Mumford snickered.

“I think they had a policy or limit on the size of animal that was morally acceptable to be naked, like four inches tall,” I said.

We all laughed again and washed it down with another swig of beer.

“They did it just for fun. But humor has a way at getting at the truth and making it stick. We should try to use that somehow,” I said.

“How about we hold a pig hostage,” said Butch, “and we send out a ransom note to the media that says something like ‘Fulfill our demands, or the pig gets it!’ I think the press might come out for something like that, don’t you? Especially if we add a picture of a cute little piglet, like Albert over there. They’d probably come out just to see him and take a picture.”

“OK then,” I said as I smiled and reached for the cooler and another beer, “What are our demands?”

As I sobered up the next morning, I came to realize that stupid acts of resistance can only take you so far, and sometimes you get sidetracked, like we never got around to writing that ransom note at the first meeting at the School of Postmodern Activities a few days later. But we were starting to formulate a plan.

We were going to stand up to the man and the concentration of power that he has accumulated. That’s called resistance. And it started, for me, with a few guys sitting around a campfire drinking beer in the back woods of Western North Carolina, and I think that’s appropriate, because I think that’s how a lot of important stuff gets started anyway. Beer is so important. In fact, local beer from small, micro-breweries really started a much larger resistance movement. Someone had the balls to go after Anheuser-Bush. Someone early in the craft beer industry said, “I can make a better beer with more body and flavor than this piss-water we’re all drinking. I’m going to make my own beer and sell it.”

That took elephant balls.

Early Spice Traders

Corporate control of the food system is not really a new thing. It all started about 400 years ago.

In the year 1602, early spice traders gave us the first example of a powerful, multi-national food corporation, and it began with a small business enterprise called The Far-Distance Company, which eventually grew and consolidated into The