Making Tracks: Matthew Booker

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

Why Did Americans Stop Eating Locally?

by **Matthew Booker**

I am a child of the 1970s. My family might be called “back-to-the-landers.” In our kitchen, on the redwood shelves made from recycled chicken coops, sat *Laurel’s Kitchen* and *the Tassajara Bread Book*. My mother drove our VW bus down the long dirt road and into town to shop at the community co-op and the health food store. My mom bought “natural” food. She bought no-spray, wholegrain, brown food. We made our own yogurt and bread.

We also got a lot of food for free. We always had a garden, though it seemed to grow lots of zucchini and little else. Animals were a problem: raccoons ate our chickens, one by one. In some years, deer and feral pigs destroyed everything. We canned Gravenstein apples from the windfalls we picked up at the orchards that covered Western Sonoma County. We picked each year’s jam supply in the blackberry thickets down by the Russian River. Sometimes we got unpasteurized milk from a nearby dairy, and we went to the remaining chicken farmers for eggs (fertilized, memorably on one occasion with chicken embryos inside). One year my mom invested in a side of beef and we kept it in the cold storage in Sebastopol. My mom did not do these things to support local farmers. She did them because it was cheap and because it was “natural.”

Today in the United States (and in much of the rest of the developed world) the great thing is “local.” Most of the practices my mother engaged in would be praised as supporting her local community. “Local,” according to at least one survey, has replaced “natural,” organic, and other labels as the most important characteristic for American

consumers. When and why did “local” take over? When did “local” become a proxy for natural, for organic, for sustainable, for community? This is a question with a history. Its roots run deep in the American past.

Incidentally, I became interested in the environmental history of food when I was writing a book about San Francisco Bay. In the archives I rediscovered the astonishing history of California’s nineteenth-century oyster industry: in 1900 it was the biggest fishery by dollar value in the American West. It led me to ask: Why did local foods like San Francisco Bay oysters disappear from American diets? There is a powerful, simple story that many people tell. It goes something like this: rising prices drove out local foods because it was more efficient to grow crops in faraway places and ship them cheaply to urban consumers. This seems commonsensical: in 1900, when food could cost half of a working family’s budget, cheap food was more important than tasty or familiar food. But this simplistic story about producers dictating the American diet fails on several counts. It can’t account for the fact that local foods were sometimes cheaper than distant ones. It doesn’t explain the environmental factors that made some foods more scarce and others more abundant in the early twentieth century. It can’t account for the profound shift from country to city occurring around the turn of the twentieth century, and it ignores the sordid scandals around food production in the early twentieth century that led to a wave of food safety regulations, favoring some products over others. Most of all, it denies women and men any agency in what they put on the table.

Consequently, at my time at the Carson Center I posed the question “Why did Americans stop eating locally in the twentieth century?” I think this question matters because food is the central aspect of the human relationship to the natural world. What we eat, where it comes from, who grows it, how it is grown, and what all of that means reveals and reflects our interconnections with economic, social, and ecological systems that radiate out from us to cover the globe. How people ate, and why diets changed, is a window onto the most profound shifts in environmental history. The answers are not yet clear, but the question is worth asking.