

## **Mourning One of America's Great Activist Farmers**

*John Kinsman died five miles from where he was born, but his legacy of food sovereignty and family farming reverberates around the globe.*

By Steve Holt



In his final months, John Kinsman was worried about his cattle. The second-generation Wisconsin dairy farmer was agonized by the thought that the 36 cows he raised on organic pasture would end up at a factory farm when he died.

“It shows how much he cared about animals,” said John Peck, executive director of Family Farm Defenders, the organization Kinsman cofounded in 1994. “He cared about everyone.”

This story, Peck said, epitomizes a man who was, at his core, ordinary “country folk” from Lime Ridge, Wis. But through his activism he became so much more: a fierce opponent of GMOs and the biotech companies that make them; an advocate for farmers; a defender of animal rights; and a global leader in the food sovereignty movement—among many other titles.

In the end, though, he became an advocate for farmers because he was a farmer himself—and the vocation nearly killed him. Kinsman turned to organic practices for his cattle and the alfalfa he grew for them after he was hospitalized and nearly died from acute exposure to agrochemicals.

“When that happened to him, that instance was very transformative. John realized this stuff was toxic,” Peck said. “He quit cold turkey and transitioned to organic. He really became a pioneer of organic farming in Wisconsin.”

Kinsman vociferously fought Monsanto as well, and he was one of the first to do so. Beginning in the mid-1980s, he began opposing the use of recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) in dairy cattle; Monsanto was the first biotech company to receive approval to produce the drug. In the early 1990s, Kinsman discovered that half the dairy products being served on the University of Wisconsin campus came from cows being experimented on with the untested synthetic hormone. Hardly anyone at the school knew this was taking place, despite the potential risks rBGH posed to humans and animals.

“Because we couldn't get any attention, I used my civil rights experience and wrote up a placard, or a sign on a stick. It said, ‘Do you know you're a guinea pig’ and so on, for this experiment,” Kinsman recalled in a 2011 interview with the [Food Rights Network](#). “Then I

made up some, at the beginning very crude, information sheets, and I would go in front of the Memorial Union and hand out this information.”

A few years later, Kinsman founded Family Farm Defenders “to promote sustainable agriculture, fair trade, workers rights, animal welfare, consumer safety, environmental stewardship and—above all—food sovereignty.” His work centered around re-localizing food and agriculture economies and loosening the grip of Big Food and Big Ag on American farming. He also advocated for food companies to pay farmers a fair price for their food, and Peck says Kinsman’s pressure on Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack sparked the investigations into price fixing among agribusinesses and eventually led to antitrust hearings. (In the end, Big Ag won, as the government dropped its interest in the issue.) Kinsman’s work would also take the Wisconsin native around the world, and he stood in solidarity with family farmers in diverse locales such as Mexico, Senegal, and France. Through Kinsman’s collaboration with La Vía Campesina, which later launched the global food sovereignty movement, Peck said Kinsman began to break the stereotype that it was “U.S. versus the world” when it came to agriculture and food policy. When he marched with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida, Peck said some of his fellow marchers were surprised to see him—they’d assumed farmers didn’t care about farmworkers. But Peck recalls that Kinsman was quick to remind people that family farmers and farmworkers had a common enemy: corporate agribusiness.

“[John] had a broader notion of the food system and who’s in the food system,” Peck said. “It’s not just farmers—it’s farmworkers, workers in meatpacking plants, right up to your checkout person at Walmart. They’re all part of the food system and all deserve a living wage and dignity on the job. That was a radical idea in the mid-’90s.”

John Kinsman died on Jan. 20 at the age of 87. He passed away at home on his farm, Peck said, able to look out his window at some of the hundreds of trees he’d planted on his land over the years.

As for his beloved herd of dairy cows, which he kept until last November, they, like Kinsman, also found a new home—on an organic farm in Eau Claire, Wis. The cattle avoided that factory farm after all, just like John wanted.

*Steve Holt writes about food for 'Edible Boston,' 'Boston Magazine,' 'The Boston Globe,' and other publications.*