

America the Bountiful Tour Scenes from a Road Trip

by Lisa Griffith

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Even before Niaz Dorry took up the reins as director of National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) on May 1st, she advised the board she wanted to travel across the country this summer to meet NFFC members and allies on their farms (or in some cases, in their boats). Niaz Dorry also serves as the Coordinating Director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA), and felt that the tour would help to bridge the farming and fishing communities she will work with while providing excellent first-hand knowledge of the situations and solutions they manage every day. This became known as the America the Bountiful Tour, and it departed from Gloucester, Massachusetts, in a 30-foot RV on May 29th for Washington, DC, and points South before heading to Kentucky and the Midwest.

On a hot, steamy morning in mid June, Niaz, tour intern Elliot Snow and I departed the RV campgrounds near Cahokia, Illinois. We had dined the night before in St. Louis with Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC) members and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) allies, and were looking forward to seeing more MRCC folks in mid Missouri. During lunching on a member's farm near Fulton, we learned about the encroachment of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) into their county and others throughout the state. (*More info at <http://bit.ly/MOfightingCAFOs>*). They explained that CAFO owners, such as Eichelberger Farms, Inc. of Wayland, Iowa, typically seek rural communities known to have generally low incomes and no county health ordi-



Free Range Chickens at Peterson's Farm

nances or well organized opposition. The idea of "more jobs" is often touted, even though the jobs are often low-paying with little to no upward mobility. The state's department of Natural Resources and Clean Water Commission (whose citizen representatives were recently replaced with industrial agricultural lobbyists) prioritize corporate profits over basic human rights, including accessible to potable water.

A discussion with more MRCC members and staff that evening focused on the current lack of political will to fight corporate agribusinesses. One recalled that Jesse Jackson, as a 1984 and 1988 Presidential candidate, stood with farmers calling for "parity, not charity"

during a campaign tour. The federal government's supply of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) dollars to CAFO's and reduced funds for successful conservation programs further exacerbate the problems caused by free trade agreements that promote growing surplus commodities to sell at prices below the cost of production for export.

We concluded with the idea the farmers worldwide need to organize. Need to organize people from all walks of life to regain solidarity and sovereignty and to elect governing officials who will represent them, not industrial agribusiness interests.

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After leaving Missouri, we passed many uninterrupted miles of corn and soybeans across Iowa, with the occasional sights and smells of CAFOs, until we reached Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Our hosts were Dakota Rural Action members who own a small farm and egg aggregation business on the outskirts of town. Their DRA committee is surveying area restaurants, schools and colleges to determine interest in and obstacles to serving more locally produced foods.

One late night, with a group of neighbors, they discussed fields formerly covered with wheat and barley that are now planted with corn and soy, which has supported CAFO expansion. DRA has aligned with several regional organizations, including Native American tribes and NFFC members, MRCC and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, to fight CAFOs, pipeline construction and other water-focused problems. They also employ "power mapping" exercises to identify who can help them win these fights and how to reach those potential allies.

Leaving Sioux Falls we crossed the Missouri River into "West River" territory. The rolling hills that became more closely spaced and considerably taller as we headed north to Spearfish. There we met a young couple who has used organic and no-till practices for the seven years they've owned their 3-acre farm. Unlike many young farmers they were able to secure a 0 percent interest loan on land that had been 'ditched' for irrigation, and even made enough on the farm to pay themselves a little last year through their market shares, on-farm store, farmers market and restaurants. In addition to growing various vegetables, herbs and laying hens, they planted apple tree and built straw bale greenhouse for winter growing and retreat. Their labors to improve soil health are obviously paying off well.



One trip highlight was spending a night in a campground near the foot of Devils Tower. This offered a view of some of the most beautiful skies imaginable and opportunity to enjoy some delicious bounty gathered en route. It was easy to appreciate why people settled and stayed there. After maneuvering switchbacks out of the park, we drove to Gillette, Wyoming, to meet Powder River Basin Resource Council members at the storefront farmers market there. This amazing food hub sells raw, fermented, canned, frozen, dried and baked foods from 30 local producers, thanks to the 2015 Wyoming Food Freedom Act. Like Maine's Food Sovereignty Ordinance, it allows farmers to sell directly to consumers without certifications and inspections (outside of meat), giving customers access to an array otherwise difficult to purchase from individual farmers.

Closer to Sheridan, where wheat and sugar beets once reigned, hay, alfalfa, oats and beef cattle are grown, although local dairies also existed until the late 1950s or early 1960s. Farms and ranches have been impacted by powerful coal, oil and gas corporations whose extraction breaks up natural habitat and access to water. PRBRC has helped to reform mineral rights through the Wyoming Environmental Quality Act and the Federal Strip Mine Act, although one creek was protected

from contamination by mineral extraction because the baseline data was collected in and since 1959.

The organic farm fed by Clear Creek offers a bounty of vegetables, beans and herbs, while cottonwood trees (the state tree), bees, wild turkey and other wildlife also thrive. A couple nearby raise animals for pleasure, protection, wool, milk and meat. They must drive three hours to a USDA-certified meat processor, but are able to sell through their on-farm store and other local venues. As for many farmers, there's never enough money or time, but they eat well and strive to be good stewards of the land, water and their four children. Keeping prices affordable for their customers is also important, as they believe everyone should eat well, but acquiring loans for their land was difficult as 'non conventional' farmers. USDA value-added producer grants and tree crop research project welcome additional support.

Through many conversations we heard several themes: the lack of political will to ensure local control over and protection of resources and markets, particularly from mining companies and agribusiness corporations; the need for governments to recognize the contributions of small- and mid-sized farms to regional economies, public health and food security; and the need for fair prices that ensure family farmers and ranches can afford to maintain their lives and livelihoods. Family farmers genuinely love tending land and livestock, and want to do it well because they know that if they don't they won't be able to enjoy clean water, healthy foods and spending much of their time outdoors.

This is but a small slice from the American the Bountiful tour experience - to learn more and see some amazing photographs visit <https://www.americathebountiful.org/>