



JO IMMIG reports on the transformative story of American farmer John Peterson who lost and then regained his farm.

# *The real story of* Farmer John

**H**ow does one man lose his family farm during bleak times, embark on a soul-searching journey for deeper meaning, redeem the farm with a vision for growing organic vegetables, and finally turn it into a biodynamic community supported agriculture (CSA)\* farm which feeds five thousand people?

This is the truly inspirational story of John Peterson from Illinois, USA, or 'Farmer John' as he has become known through the documentary film *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*.

Farmer John has been touring the world with the film for several years – including a visit to Australia last year – igniting audience's interest in sustainable agriculture, and the beauty and rawness of life on the land. But also the negative effects of industrialised agriculture on family farms, the soil, and the quality of food.

*“Agriculture is an underpinning of our culture. The irrepressibility of life on a farm continually manifests in myriad splendid expressions. This glorious unfolding provides us with the sustenance of food, while endlessly nourishing the creative spirit.” – John Peterson*

Why is Farmer John's story any more transformational than that of other farmers around the world who have struggled and survived or failed? Perhaps because he has managed to make it so personal, and because he is a compelling storyteller. Many farmers are unable to communicate the pain of their struggles, but Farmer John, before working on the documentary, wrote a play about losing his farm, and then toured it for two years. He's since written a cookbook come vegetable-growing guide based on his CSA farm, Angelic Organics (where he grows more

than 40 different crops), and is soon to publish another book, *Glitter and Grease*, telling his story in detail.

There's a poetry, wry humour and truth about his storytelling that is captivating. And his story is not just a fascinating account of his dramatic life, but a story with universal themes about farm life, growing food, our relationship with the earth and each other. It is also a very human story about creativity,

**Above:** John Peterson – 'Farmer John'.

**Facing page:** John Peterson as a teenager on the family farm.

endurance and redemption, which resonates at deeper levels. Here's a taste, drawn from *Glitter and Grease*, where Farmer John is being interviewed by a reporter from Chicago:

"You've really lived on this farm your whole life?" Harold, the newspaper reporter, asked me. Harold had driven out to Angelic Organics from Chicago early that morning to talk with me about our community supported agriculture program. We seemed pretty close to wrapping up the interview.

"Yup."

We stood outside the farm shop. I leaned against the rear tire of my Farmall Super A [tractor]. Its cultivating shovels were shiny from yesterday's work in the broccoli field.

"And your family – they farmed here?"

"Dairy," I replied. "I started milking when I was nine – that big barn there." I gestured towards the barn next to us. "Now it's the packing room."

"Were they normal? I mean, was it a normal family?"

Uh-oh, he was settling in. This happens sometimes with reporters. They come out for a quick story, get sort of dreamy, and then they can't seem to leave. Half of them end up buying a vegetable share [in the CSA scheme].

"Yeah, we talked about the weather a lot. And the crops. And we gossiped about neighbors."

An engine whined to the west of us. We gazed toward the vegetable fields. My orange pick-up crept towards the far corner of the farm where the crew was bunching kale. They were phantom-like in the morning mist. One crew member wore a yellow slicker.

"So how'd you ever get involved in Biodynamics?"

"I asked my homeopath if there was ... no, that's not exactly how it happened."

Did I really want to tell this man my

story? Today? I had sweet corn to cultivate; the Super A probably wouldn't start. And the crew – did I tell them to pick the Red Russian Kale, or the Winterbor? That Red Russian should be inspected for aphids. And I wanted bigger bunches this time.

But the past, the seductive past – I could feel it enveloping me. Harold looked at me expectantly. He was sitting on the



front tire of the Super A.

"Okay, it didn't really start with my homeopath. I used to own all this land. Up to that hill and beyond." I gestured to the hill beyond my woodlot.

"I had 186 acres. I lost it – 165 of it. By the time I was 32, I was a half million dollars in debt. It was the early '80s. I'd over-expanded, over-spent, and commodity values and land values collapsed. I had to sell all the machinery, the crops, the livestock, and almost all the land.

"I had had tremendous vitality up until that time, Harold. Stamina. Enthusiasm. I liked getting up in the morning. I liked farming. I liked the situation I was in. It seemed impossible that my life could fall apart like that. I had been with all those fields my whole life. I had the deepest sense of eternity about them. They were part of me. It was incomprehensible that I had to sell them. It was like selling an

arm. No, more like selling a child.

"Most of my friends at the time just completely bailed on me. That was just as bizarre as losing the land, maybe more so. I was sure I could completely count on these people for anything. They just disappeared.

"Two things I trusted completely to be there for me – the land and my friends – were gone from my life. I managed to hold on to a few acres of land and these buildings." I gestured towards the cluster of white farm buildings that spread out before us.

The packing barn shielded us from the morning sun; vapor drifted lazily from its red roof.

"For two years after the sale, I could hardly get out of bed. I hardly recognized myself. Land gone. Friends gone. Money gone. Rashes over my body. I was terribly weakened.

"Just cleaning my house back then was the biggest struggle – just sweeping the floor. 'This is a broom,' I'd think to myself. 'A broom sweeps the floor, but in

order to sweep the floor, I'll have to take hold of the broom with both hands. How will I accomplish this huge task, of taking the broom with two hands and then pushing it about on the floor?"

"Who is this person?" I would ask myself. I used to run a big farm. I rented hundreds of neighboring acres, raised corn, wheat, soybeans, hay. I raised hogs, cattle. I milked. I made things happen, kept things going. And there I was, sweeping the floor of my house – I was not sure I could do it. Perhaps I could sweep half of it now. Then take a little nap, and maybe then I would be able to sweep the other half."

John then goes on to tell the reporter the story of his return to health. How he felt drawn to go to Mexico, discovered homeopathy and a remedy that worked (after trying everything under the sun).

John explains that a couple of years

after returning to his farm community, one day he asked his new homeopath if there was a homeopathic system for farming. This led to radionics and then to hearing of Rudolf Steiner and biodynamics.

“I didn’t even know who Steiner was at the time; I just knew in that moment he was part of my future.”

“That’s how I came to Biodynamics.”\*\*

## Caught in the counter-culture

But what of his time before redemption and renewal? He wasn’t your average farmer then either.

John inherited his farm as a young man when his father died in the late 1960s, and he took on the mantle of caring for the family farm, looking after cows, pigs and crops, while juggling his college education and social life.

At the time, he was also drawn to the excitement and promise of the counter-culture movement. He slowly turned the farm into an experiment, fusing art and agriculture, making it a hangout for hippies, radicals and artists – much to the suspicion of his ‘straight’ farming neighbours, who began to ostracise him.

Thanks to John’s mum, an early adopter of technology who bought a home movie camera in the 1950s, there is precious footage of John’s life as a boy and young man growing up on the farm learning the tricks of the trade from his dad. John’s mum documented family events and farming life, and he has said it was her dedication and fascination with farming that really left an impression on him when young, and later kept him going as his health returned and he worked in the 1990s to rebuild what was left of the farm.

Bringing the depleted soil back to life after years of synthetic fertiliser and pesticide use was hard work and

economically tough.

Call it providence or luck, but John was approached by people living in Chicago who had an interesting idea. They wanted to pitch in with money up front, in effect sponsoring the farm, providing him with much needed capital to expand, in exchange for providing them with weekly boxes of organically-grown vegetables.

This arrangement caught on and has



now grown into an international movement called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). In the USA it is a very successful model with over 2000 farms offering the program. This arrangement does two extraordinary things: it provides the farmer with capital, and it takes the burden of risk off their shoulders and shares it with the members.

John says of CSA farms: “I think what happens when they sign up to be a member of the farm is their relationship to the community changes because then they are intimately involved in the workings of the weather in their community, in the workings of the soil, the climate and the farmers’ life.

“The other thing that is of immense importance to parents is that they can take their children and show them their vegetables growing out in the field that end up coming into their kitchens every week.”

Though Farmer John received lots of

help from friends, he’s still amazed that he managed to get his bit of land operating again. While in Australia, he spoke with presenter Phillip Adams on ABC Radio National’s ‘Late Night Live’, saying:

“Even with all that work that I was doing to resurrect it, it’s still a miracle that it actually got its footing. How does a farm really do that today? It is so hard to keep a farm going, let alone to build one back up from nothing.”

*\* Essentially the way a CSA works is that people pay an upfront fee for membership and that entitles them to a season’s worth of crops. It also means that for those people off the farm that they agree to accept the risk for a shortfall in the crop, should that occur.*

*\*\* Biodynamics is a system of organic agriculture first described in 1924 by Austrian social philosopher Rudolf Steiner. He gave recipes for nine special ‘preparations’ which are at the heart of the biodynamic practice. The preparations are added to compost and sprayed directly on the soil and plants at different periods in the growing year. Each preparation stimulates and enhances biological activity in a specific way.*

## More information

- Angelic Organics website: [www.angelicorganics.com](http://www.angelicorganics.com)
- *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* DVD, directed by Taggart Siegel, has just been released through Madman Entertainment; W: [www.madman.com.au](http://www.madman.com.au).
- *Farmer John’s Cookbook – the real dirt on vegetables* is published by Gibbs Smith, and distributed in Australia by Bookwise International. Price \$49.95. See full review in the next issue (July/August 2008). **OG**