

COMMENTARY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, COLUMNS AND ESSAYS

THE NEW URBAN AGRARIANS

Time for a hoe down right here in the city

In the midst of all the election-year rhetoric, we hear a lot about where the female vote, the African American vote or the white working-class vote is most likely to go. That got me thinking about the boxes we put ourselves in. Specifically, I'm wondering who fits in the farmer box these days.

The official definition of a farm, used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for census purposes, has changed nine times since 1850. A farm is currently defined, for statistical purposes, as any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products are sold or would normally have been sold during the year under consideration. That's a farm. But what's a farmer?

Wendell Berry, noted poet, farmer and writer, often speaks of "urban agrarians." Berry posits that it's "useless and probably wrong to suppose that a great many urban people ought to go out into the countryside and become homesteaders or farmers. But it is not useless or wrong to suppose that urban people have agricultural responsibilities that they should try to meet. And in fact this is happening. The agrarian population among us is growing, and by no means is it made up merely of some farmers and some country people."

All over town we see examples of urban "farmers." Portland Parks & Recreation provides land to hundreds of urban agrarians at 30 sites throughout the city through its community gardens program. I'm one of those urban agrarians. As I hoed my city field the other day, I reflected on a time in our country when there were many more urban agrarians.

Today we have the Department of Homeland Security, but back in 1917 the federal government sponsored a program called the United States School Garden Army. The School Garden Army was created to encourage urban and suburban youth to garden in order to increase the production of food in our country during World War I. Organized by the federal Bureau of Education with funding from the War Department, this was one of the first attempts to nationalize a curriculum in the United States. You could say it set a precedent for No Child Left Behind. But in this case, it was Leave No Child Out of the Garden.



DEBORAH J. KANE

IN MY OPINION

By the end of World War I the School Garden Army estimated that several million American youths had enlisted as "soldiers of the soil." Many believe it was those same children who went on to so successfully tend the Victory Gardens of World War II.

There is an old expression: "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." This might be one bit of history worthy of repetition.

As we fight yet another overseas war and simultaneously watch our food bills rise ... and rise ... and rise, we all might consider a new career path. Let's become farmers, or at the very least, our own urban agrarians.

Deborah J. Kane is vice president of food and farms at Ecotrust and a W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food & Society policy fellow.



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