The Food System of Aroostook County, Maine

Eliza Huber-Weiss, 2017

Aroostook County is the largest county in the state of Maine, laying claim to nearly seven thousand square miles of land, and the smallest population of the counties in Maine, as its top grossing industries are land intensive and require few laborers: timber, and potato farming. This project examined the food and farming system within Aroostook County, and its connection with food distribution and consumption outside the county. In this examination came an analysis of the problems with the food system, discussions with people trying to solve these issues and experimentation with the tools they are creating.

Aroostook County used to be considered the potato capital of the eastern United States. In the early to mid 1900s, nearly everyone in Aroostook County was a farmer, and many were able to make fortunes in the potato industry. Railroad lines extended to Aroostook County specifically for the purpose of distributing potatoes. However, much of that economical activity has since been lost, due to post-World War II technological developments that made shipping potatoes east from the midwest much easier. The railroad stopped running completely in 2003. Farms are decreasing in number, and increasing in size, meaning that some farmers have a monopoly on the profitable part of the industry, while others are struggling to make a living from the payments received from big potato distributing companies. Very few farmers in Aroostook County are organic or diversified, which means that most farmers are still under the thumb of large distributors, since there is no longer a way for farmers to ship their produce down to southern Maine, where the markets are. These systemic and intricate issues were communicated to me by people whose families have been living in Aroostook County for generations, when I was able to make a trip up to Caribou in the middle of my summer to conduct meetings and interviews and get a better sense of the county.

While these problems seem a bit overwhelming in their scope and nature, many people throughout Maine are working on creating plans and tools aiming to make farming in Maine a more attractive, less backbreaking line of work. I was lucky enough to be able to work with some of these people. I worked with Ken Morse on the Maine Food Atlas, a mapping site designed to allow farmers to create profiles for their farms that are then searchable by geographical location, so consumers in the area can find whatever local product they might need. I conversed with Tanya Swain of the Maine Food Strategy and Bob Dorsey of the Aroostook Partnership for Progress about methods of doing food data inventory so as to have a better sense of the state of agriculture within a certain geographic or economic boundary. I spoke with many farmers in the county, asking them about their ideas on the problems within the food system, what kept them farming through it all, and their hopes for the future. These meetings and interviews, along with research on food systems analysis across the country, allowed me to construct a detailed annotated bibliography, as well as direct the focus of my research into a question that will hopefully directly aid these organizations in their work when I continue my research in the fall. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who worked with me this summer, especially Eileen Johnson, my faculty advisor, and to the donors of this fellowship that made my summer possible. Thank you.