

Spotlight on Co-op History: an Interview with Betsy Bowen *Full Article*

Next year will be the 40th anniversary of the incorporation of Cook County Whole Foods Cooperative. The founding of our cooperative was itself an example of cooperation, involving the contributions of many activists. Betsy Bowen was one of the key players.

Betsy is a nationally known visual artist and illustrator. She is also a community activist, participating in organizations such as Good Harbor Hill Players, North House Folk School, Grand Marais Music Collaborative, and Grand Marais Play House to name just a few. She is also proprietor of Betsy Bowen Studio.

Over 40 years ago, however, this all started with what Betsy called “a hippie adventure.”

While growing up in the Chicago area, Betsy took dance lessons from Laura Grant, who also taught dance in Grand Marais. Through this connection, Betsy’s family discovered the North Shore while on vacations. In 1963 Betsy’s mother eventually came to purchase property on Good Harbor Hill, which is now known as Betsy’s Farm.

Around 1968 Betsy gravitated to this area, starting a back-to-the-land family. Wilderness had long been a fascination and joy for Betsy as a girl. Our forests and lakes became a natural fit.

Although farming was not her focus, gardening became a necessity and a great learning opportunity for someone with a suburban background. Subsistence farming involved some livestock as well as the garden. Back then it was not called sustainable, local food production. Betsy said that “we just called it the garden – and eating!” She said that this was simply a continuation of what early-day Scandinavian homesteaders had to do in their hardscrabble attempts to farm this region. To this day, cooperative gardening and horse ranching continue at Betsy’s Farm.

“I think it is good for kids to be part of the food happening.” Betsy added that it is a process of learning, or relearning, old skills. Cooperative living was also a learned skill.

“It was a part of the political tone of the times, more of a Socialist’s view of how the world could work ... You know, people of my age in the Sixties had kind of a collective disillusionment and annoyance with the dominance of corporate world and the business world, and what we were after was a more direct experience of making our lives happen.”

“We didn’t know how to get, like grain and rice, stuff that we wanted to eat, also. We had to go somewhere else ... The co-op movement was beginning in Minneapolis at that point, 1970 or so ... Word just got around ... We bought 50 pound bags of brown rice at the Qonton Noodle Factory, and they or someone else had tins of honey ... like 40 pound tins ... So we started driving to the Cities ... and loading up on beans and rice and honey and peanut butter, and then just distributed on my porch or somebody else’s porch ... Sometimes it was like a formal buying club ... but we also had bags that people could come and scoop from ... we had a scale and a can for money.”

“Hippies on the road” is how Betsy describes those early days. When the Bowen family decided to move to Arizona for a few years, Betsy and others wanted to keep the buying club going in her absence. That desire led to the process of incorporation and the genesis of Cook County Whole Foods Cooperative.

Our co-op is an example of the power of people working together. For Betsy, this community-building also expresses itself through her livelihood and passion, the visual arts.

“So much of that is done by the individual, but the support of that is a collective process ... the idea that the community benefits from what one person does ... collective benefit, collective fun ... its always more fun if people get together.” Betsy’s venue, What’s Upstairs, will be transitioning into studio space where visual artists will be able to pursue their individual work, but with a sense of cross-pollinating and sharing what they do with other artists. “Yes, it’s a lot of fun, because so much of that studio work is solo time ... everybody likes company at least part of the time. It’s encouraging to be around people who are doing kind of what you are doing.”

What is the role of an artist in her community? Is art a means of fostering activism? “It sure can be ... In my world of book illustration, you know, I think what I choose and have an opportunity to illustrate has an opportunity to affect the closer and broader community ... you know, I like making things that are about the natural world ... to be able to illustrate a book that’s about helping to restore native prairie plants, I like the idea ... that can be a little drop in the bucket of affecting the politics of preserving natural land ... That’s part of the way I like to think about my efforts.”

Betsy’s art work reflects our wilderness setting. Does this work connect the human and natural worlds? “We’re all really connected ... It’s not really separate, you get to the human body and then you get to air and you go ‘Well is that human or nature,’ and you can’t really separate it ... at some level it’s not separate.”

Coming out next fall will be two books written by Phyllis Root and illustrated by Betsy: One North Star, a counting picture book and Lost Forest, which is about a section of rare old growth forest.

“The value of something beautiful translates, and I think the content of art can be really provocative ... That is my hope ... That’s why we have all different people and all different artists.”