

History of ...

PART 2

FIRST YEAR OF FAMINE FOODS

By Roger Lacher

BACK IN THE OLDEN DAYS when I was young, 1971, there was no food co-op in Winona. The first rumors started over coffee in Winona State's "Smog" during the winter of '71-72. Larry Hiel from the big city told us about North Country Co-op in Minneapolis, and a small group started to talk it up around Winona. Our motives were rather vague and mostly political — there had to be a way to circumvent the Super Piggly Owl tendency forcing out the "mom & pop" corner grocery, a way to skirt the trend toward monopoly and monoculture with its attendant overmechanization and unnecessary middlemen (and middlewomen), a way to sell food with the grower's price in sight. Not until later did we become aware of some of the other factors implicit in the idea of "food co-op;" indeed, if you think about it, Famine Foods relates directly to the entire social fabric of this era — agricultural, esthetic, economic, medical, political, spiritual, ecological, etc.

So in the beginning we had no idea of the holistic impact the co-op would eventually have. We entered into the project as whole wheat weaklings and tamari dilettantes. Our empirical foundation was shaky — what we had was that feeling of "knowing" that it was right common to survivors of the late 60s. We could barely bake, hadn't practiced hefting sacks, were suspicious of words like "inventory," and failed to impress family and friends with our soggy unseasoned brown rice. Obviously with beginnings like that the co-op had to succeed — we lacked enough business sense to know when to quit — so we didn't.

Organizational meetings were held at Antic Arts theater and later, when we went big-time, the Lake Park Lodge. We sold memberships and "food coupons" (short-term loans repaid with food) to raise funds for initial purchases — a \$30 scale, \$25 bins, \$100 first food run to warehouse in Mpls. So by the spring of '72 a co-op of sorts existed, a movable feast since the six bulging bins were trucked from place to place or stayed stuck in the truck. Then our big foot

came to get a chance in the door of the New Way School. We dragged the bins upstairs to a back room and started business in the dust, unkempt and furtive. Customer relations were at the "help yourself" stage in the truest sense, since the food and scale were simply left in a house frequented by all sorts of people 16 hours a day. All summer the food dwindled, change accumulated, and cryptic IOUs were left on the window sill (in the wind!): "I picked up \$17.42 worth food for Jane's cousin's brother's wife, John." But we came out close enough to even replenish stocks and keep searching for a real storefront. After many disappointments, that good man, Jim Mullen, discovered our present Second Street location. We met Ernie Kupietz, shoveled out a few hundred pounds of onion sets, and set out to make \$30 by the end of the month (Oct.) for rent.

Making the storefront presentable was hot, dirty, and from our perspective, expensive. Finally, the old flooring was scraped off, glass replaced and new paint dry. For our first inspection by the health department, we placed a table leg in strategic position to cover a mouse hole in the floor. The original group by this time was fairly exhausted after a year of strictly volunteer work, so it was a relief when other folks started "discovering" the co-op and donating time and energy.



ONE IDEA FOR A LOGO, '73