

I guess you'd say
we were poor, but
we had a lot to eat
and didn't know
we were poor.

– *Maurice Turney, 78*
Tahlequah, Oklahoma



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Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc.

PO Box 588

Poteau, OK 74953

918.647.9123 fax: 918.647.8712

mailbox@kerrcenter.com

www.kerrcenter.com

Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms and Families in Oklahoma A Centennial Report

Maura McDermott, Editor

Wylie Harris, Lead Writer and Researcher

Doug Walton and Mary Penick

Community Foods Grant Principal Investigator: James E. Horne, Ph.D.



Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture
Poteau, Oklahoma

*Closer to Home:
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A Centennial Report*

Editor, Researcher, Writer: Maura McDermott
Lead Researcher and Writer: Wylie Harris
Researcher/Writer: Doug Walton
Researcher/Writer/Maps: Mary Penick

Contributing Writers:
Emily Oakley, Mike Appel, Robert Waldrop,
Shauna Lawyer Struby, Shaun Chavis

Policy Priorities:
Maura McDermott, James E. Horne,
Wylie Harris, Doug Walton

Layout, Design, Production:
Tracy Clark, Argus DesignWorks

Photos:
Maura McDermott, Doug Walton, Wylie Harris,
Mary Penick

and

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p. 130: Duane Harrel, Oklahoma Department of
Agriculture, Food and Forestry

p. 131: Mandy Gross, Oklahoma State University
Food and Agricultural Products Center

p. 132: Todd Johnson, Oklahoma State University,
Agricultural Communications Services

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Principal Investigator:
James E. Horne, Ph.D.

Oklahoma Food System Assessment
and Report Project Manager:
Maura McDermott

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Turney quote from: Smith, Betty.
It's hot, but 1936 was even worse.
Tablequah Daily Press, July 21, 2006
[http://www.adaeveningnews.com/statenews/
cnhinsall_story_202111547.html](http://www.adaeveningnews.com/statenews/cnhinsall_story_202111547.html)

Table of Contents

Preface

Maura McDermott i

Introduction

Maura McDermott v

How to Read This Report's County Snapshots
Wylie Harris x

Chapter One: Nutrition and Health 1

Good Food for Good Health: Combating Poor Nutrition and Obesity with Locally Grown Foods
Doug Walton 1

A Strong and Healthy Oklahoma: State and Private Employee Health and Wellness Initiatives
Wylie Harris 7

Public Policy Priorities: Nutrition and Health 8

A Going and Growing Market in Muskogee
Doug Walton 9

Who Shops at Oklahoma Farmers' Markets? 12

Snapshot: Muskogee County 14

Chapter Two: Food Insecurity 15

Feeling Hungry: Food Insecurity in Oklahoma
Maura McDermott 15

Public Policy Priorities: Food Insecurity 19

Hands Together for Community Food Security: Community Gardens
Wylie Harris 20

Snapshot: Oklahoma County 24

Chapter Three: Children's Health and Food Education 25

A Garden to Grow on: The Leach School Garden
Doug Walton 25

Snapshot: Delaware County 27

Curing Our Kids: Better Food for Better Health
Doug Walton & Maura McDermott 28

Melons Carry Seeds of Change: Oklahoma's Farm to School Program
Wylie Harris 32

Public Policy Priorities:

Children's Health and Food Education 36

Stop the Supersizing of Oklahoma's Student Body: Integris CEO and the Fit Kids Coalition Lead the Way to Healthier Choices for Kids
Shauna Lawyer Struby 37

Chapter Four: The Cost of Good Food 41

Getting What You Pay for: Affording Healthy Food
Wylie Harris 41

The Teacher Only Sets the Table: The Community Nutrition Education Program
Wylie Harris 45

Meeting the Food Stamp Challenge with Local Foods: Slow Food for Low and Moderate Income People
Robert Waldrop 49

Public Policy Priorities: The Cost of Good Food 51

Fresh and Affordable: A Comparison of Farmers' Market and Grocery Store Prices
Emily Oakley & Mike Appel 52

Chapter Five: Access to Good Food 55

You Can't Get There from Here: Community Food Security in Oklahoma's Food Deserts
Wylie Harris 55

Coupons Worth Clipping
Doug Walton 59

Northeast Oklahoma City's "Grocery Gap"
Shaun Chavis 61

Public Policy Priorities: Access to Good Food 62

Chapter Six: Direct Marketing 65

Direct From the Source: Direct Market Produce from the Crows' Farm
Wylie Harris 65

Who Sells at Oklahoma Farmers' Markets? 67

Farm Direct: Direct Sales' Potential for Increasing Community Food Security
Wylie Harris 69

Local-plicity: The Large Economic Multiplier Effects of Small Farms <i>Wylie Harris</i>	72	Snapshot: Carter County	107
Public Policy Priorities: Direct Marketing	74	Just Right in the Middle: Sam's Sweet Onions as a Model for Diversification <i>Wylie Harris</i>	108
Chapter Seven: State of the State's Farms	75	Public Policy Priorities: Farm Diversification	112
Changing with the Times: Oklahoma Farms in Transition <i>Wylie Harris</i>	75	Chapter Ten: Local Marketing	113
CSA in Oklahoma: Linking Farms and Communities, City and Country <i>Wylie Harris</i>	78	Local Food, Local Prosperity: Local Farm Sales and Community Food Security <i>Wylie Harris</i>	113
Snapshot: Creek County	81	A Cool Peach of an Idea: Regrowing a Local Specialty at Peach Crest Farm <i>Wylie Harris</i>	116
It's Not Quite the Middle of Nowhere: CSA Goes Country <i>Wylie Harris</i>	82	The Buyer's-Eye View <i>Wylie Harris</i>	117
Snapshot: Comanche County	85	Public Policy Priorities: Local Marketing	120
Green Grass and Murray Greys: Beaver Creek Farms' Direct <i>Wylie Harris</i>	86	Chapter Eleven: Making Something New: Adding Value to Oklahoma's Crops	121
Public Policy Priorities: State of the State's Farms	88	LOVAs for LIFE: Value Added Processing and Community Food Security <i>Wylie Harris</i>	121
Chapter Eight: Food Imports and Exports	89	Adding Value to the Country: Oklahoma's Rural Food Processors <i>Wylie Harris</i>	124
Eating Cooperatively and Locally: The Oklahoma Food Co-op <i>Wylie Harris</i>	89	Snapshot: Cleveland County	125
Town and Country: Kim Barker's Grassfed Beef and Lamb <i>Wylie Harris</i>	93	Snapshot: Kiowa County	127
Balancing Trade for a Balanced Diet: Oklahoma's Farm Exports and Food Imports <i>Wylie Harris</i>	94	Snapshot: Kingfisher County	129
Growing What We Eat? <i>Mary Penick & Maura McDermott</i>	96	Public Policy Priorities: Locally-Owned Value-Added (LOVA) Processing	132
Importing Oklahoma's State Meal <i>Wylie Harris</i>	97	Chapter Twelve: Something Different: Food Labels	133
Public Policy Priorities: Food Imports and Exports	98	Demand for Health: Community Food Security Surfs the Wave of Value Added Food Labeling <i>Wylie Harris</i>	133
Chapter Nine: Farm Diversification	99	Spirit in the Dust: Organic Wheat and Natural Beef at John's Farm <i>Wylie Harris</i>	137
From Horn of Plenty to Plenty of Horns: Crop and Livestock Diversity on Oklahoma Farms <i>Wylie Harris & Mary Penick</i>	99	Public Policy Priorities: Food Labels	140
Land of Opportunity: Steve Upson's Vision for Oklahoma Farms <i>Wylie Harris</i>	103	Snapshot: Major County	141

SPARC-ing Change on the Plains: Soil, Health, and Sustainable Wheat <i>Wylie Harris</i>	142
Chapter Thirteen: Saving Farmland: Urban Sprawl and Family Farms	145
Farmland Preservation in Oklahoma <i>Mary Penick & Wylie Harris</i>	145
Farming the Family Way: Conrad Farms <i>Mary Penick</i>	149
Snapshot: Tulsa County	151
Public Policy Priorities: Saving Farmland: Urban Sprawl and Family Farms	152
Chapter Fourteen: Keeping It Closer to Home: Food Miles and Regional Markets	153
Food Miles: The Long Road to Community Food Security <i>Wylie Harris</i>	153
How Far Can Food Miles Carry Community Food Security: The Case of Braum's Dairy <i>Wylie Harris</i>	155
Public Policy Priorities: Keeping It Closer to Home: Food Miles and Regional Markets	157
Concentration in the Food System <i>Wylie Harris</i>	158
Snapshot: Grady County	159
Farming and the Environment: The Local Food Connection <i>Maura McDermott</i>	160
On the Menu: A Taste of Oklahoma <i>Maura McDermott</i>	161
Appendix A: Price Comparisons Tulsa Cherry St. Farmers' Market and Tulsa Grocery Stores 2005	162
Resources	163
The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture FAQs	168
The Oklahoma Food Policy Council FAQs	169
Building a Foundation for Food Security in Oklahoma	171
The USDA Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service: Community Food Projects	172
Endnotes	173

TABLES

Major Diet-Related Illnesses in Oklahoma	2
Nutrients of Concern	3
Recommended Daily Amount of Fruits, Vegetables, and Grains	5
Farm to School Programs 2004-2006 and County Poverty Rates	40
In Comparison: Fresh, Frozen, Canned	43
Busting a Myth: Farmers' Market Produce is Fresh and Affordable	53
Food Desert Counties; Severe Food Desert Counties	57
Change in Numbers of Food Store Types by Food Desert Status, 1998-2002	58
Rural Counties, Population Change, and Food Access	63
Food Desert Counties with Schools Participating in Farm to School Program	64
Potential Increase in Average per Farm Income from Direct Farm Sales	70
Direct Sales in Oklahoma and Selected Other States, 2002	71
More Than Enough: Top Crops for Export	96
Not Growing Enough: Food Imports	96
Percentages of Oklahoma Farms Producing Selected Crops and Livestock, 1930-2002	100-101
Percentages of Oklahoma Farms Producing Selected Crops and Livestock, 1940 and 2002	102
Number of Oklahoma Farms Producing Selected Fruit and Vegetable Crops over Time	102
The Most Important Factor that Buyers Consider When Purchasing Fruits and Vegetables	117
Suppliers of Fruits and Vegetables to Buyers	117
Types of Post-harvest Services Oklahoma Buyers Would Expect Local Producers or Their Cooperatives to Provide	117

FIGURES

Prevalence of Overweight among Children and Adolescents Ages 6-19 Years	29
Percent Change in Number of Food Stores 1998-2002	57
U.S. Direct Sales Farms and Sales, 1982-2002	69
Oklahoma Direct Sales Farms and Sales, 1982-2002	69
Oklahoma Farm Size, 1992-2002	75
Oklahoma Farm Operators by Age, 1982-2002	76
Oklahoma Principal Farm Operators by Gender/Ethnicity, 1982-2002	76
Percent Change in Market Value of Farm Products Sold and Farm Numbers, Selected Farm Sectors, 1992-2002	76
Per-acre Net Returns for Top Oklahoma Commodities, 1996-2004	106
Peanuts in Hughes County, 1987-2002	109
Environmental Costs of Food System, Farm to Table	154
Concentration in Selected Food Industry Sectors, 1982-2004	158

MAPS

Maps created or adapted by Mary Penick

Oklahoma Registered Farmers' Markets	13
Percent of Total Population in Poverty, 2003	17
Poverty Rates and Number of School Districts per County Interested in Farm-to-School	40
Oklahoma Counties Serviced by Community Nutrition Education Program (CNEP)	46
Food Deserts in Oklahoma	57
Food Deserts and Farmers' Market Access	60
Food Deserts and Farm-to-School Interest per County	64
Oklahoma's Wheat Belt	143
Oklahoma: Farming on the Edge (Farmland Loss)	145

The Land We Belong To Is Grand

1. You're doin' fine, Oklaboma!

This declaration caps the chorus of *Oklahoma!* – title song of the Broadway musical and Oklahoma's state song. It's a simple statement that Oklahomans sing proudly, even fervently.

Unfortunately, as the state approaches its centennial in 2007, Oklahomans are really not doing so fine when it comes to health.

Oklahoma ranks dead last in the nation in the percentage of adults who eat the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Over one-third of Oklahoma adults are overweight; one-quarter are obese. About a quarter of high school students are overweight or obese.

Only one other state outranks Oklahoma in deaths from heart disease, a condition associated with overweight. We have high rates of diabetes and stroke, conditions also related to overweight and ultimately to not “living (or eating) right.”

More of us are poor in Oklahoma than in 41 other states. Ironically, poverty, too, is associated with being overweight.

The most troubling statistic of all is that far too many of us don't know if we will have money to buy enough groceries next week, or worse, are downright hungry today. Oklahoma in 2004 ranked first among the states in the percentage of households with people who are going hungry.

These stunning facts are all related to food. It is clear that in Oklahoma our health is not as good as it could be and that this is partly because of the food we eat.

Which brings up an important question: Can Oklahomans eat better? In other words, do Oklahomans understand what good food is and do they have access to it?



2. We know we belong to the land.

If taken to heart, this simple statement points the way to a healthier Oklahoma.

In story and song, Oklahoma is forever associated with the joys and tragedies of life on the land. *The Grapes of Wrath*, Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl ballads, and the Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* have made Oklahoma and the family farm inseparable in the public mind, even as Oklahoma has slowly but surely become more urban.

Today only about a third of Oklahomans live in rural areas. About 10% of the rural population is engaged in farming (just 5% of the state's population). Poverty rates are high in rural Oklahoma counties, per capita income is low, and farming for many is barely profitable.

Do Oklahomans still belong to the land? Some would say no and feel no regret. Yet others feel a



connection, a strong pull that has them planting a backyard garden or going to a farmers' market on a Saturday morning or looking for the "Made in Oklahoma" sticker on grocery store shelves.

For some this connection to the land is in the blood, part of being an Okie. For others it is simply a desire to eat better. This yen – to eat fresh food, grown locally – is a healthy one. If more individuals had this impulse, Oklahoma would likely be a healthier state.

Which begs the question: Can we encourage this yen? Can communities make it easier for individuals to eat the fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats and whole grains which experts tell us will keep us healthy?

3. The land we belong to is grand.

Oklahomans can make this simple statement without boasting. With its eleven ecological regions, Oklahoma encompasses humid cypress swamps and dry high plains. Oklahoma has 2,500 different types of soil, from the red clay of the prairies to the dark loams of the river bottoms.

Farmers and ranchers work hard to make Oklahoma an agricultural powerhouse, contributing \$8 billion annually to the state economy. We rank near the top among the fifty states in production of winter wheat,

cattle and pecans, eighth in hogs, and twelfth in watermelons.

Oklahoma can grow everything from A to Z, asparagus to zucchini, yet most of the foods that Oklahomans eat are grown and processed elsewhere. Over the last fifty years, farms have become less diverse, instead specializing in one or two crops. At first glance, the "chicks and ducks and geese" in the way of the famous Oklahoma "surrey with the fringe on top" have scurried out of the barnyard for good.

Yet not all the farm scenes familiar from *Oklahoma!* have been blown away by the wind sweeping down the plain. A small yet growing number of farmers are diversifying their crops and their markets (even free range chicks are making a comeback). Farmers are selling their fresh fruits and vegetables directly to consumers at local venues such as farmers' markets. Ranchers are taking direct orders for grassfed or natural beef from consumers concerned about their cholesterol, but unwilling to give up hamburgers. Innovative farmers are taking orders over the Internet. Some have "gone organic;" some are acclaimed for their gourmet cheddar cheeses; some are known nationally for their successful regional marketing strategies.

And as in other parts of the country, Oklahomans are slowly rediscovering their food roots and seeking

out Oklahoma-grown in restaurants and groceries.

Which brings up the question – can this trend make us healthier? Can Oklahoma farmers help us to eat better?

4. You're doing fine, Oklaboma!

To be able to say (or sing) this, without reservation, is the motivation behind this report.

Funded by a grant from the USDA's Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, this publication attempts to answer the questions posed above:

Can Oklahomans eat better?

Can communities make it easier for individuals to eat better?

Can Oklahoma farmers help us to eat better? How?

We explore these and related questions such as:

If Oklahoma farmers can help Oklahomans eat better and therefore become healthier, can consumers in turn help Oklahoma farms become healthier – more diversified, more profitable and more ecologically sustainable?

Will these healthy farms benefit us by making our food supply more secure?

We look for answers in the stories of Oklahomans growing, processing, selling, cooking, and eating the bounty of Oklahoma's fields and gardens.

Alongside these portraits, we delineate the issues that Oklahomans should consider when thinking about how to make Oklahoma's families, farms and communities healthier.

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture is uniquely qualified to have undertaken this report. A non-profit educational foundation, the Kerr Center was established by the family of Oklahoma's first native-born governor, Robert S. Kerr, who had a profound love for his home state.

Since 1965, the center has served the farmers and

ranchers of Oklahoma with an array of outreach efforts including on-farm consultation, demonstration crops, producer grants, educational publications and events. Under the leadership of Kerr Center president Dr. James E. Horne, the center has worked to make Oklahoma agriculture more sustainable: economically profitable, environmentally friendly, and socially just.

In 2001, the center sponsored the groundbreaking *Bringing in the Sheaves: A Symposium on Hunger, Farming, and the Fairness of the American Food System*. The symposium brought together, for the first time in Oklahoma, speakers on hunger and food insecurity, sustainable agriculture, and community development. At that symposium, the Oklahoma Food Policy Council was formed as a joint project of the Kerr Center and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. Dr. Horne was named as co-chairperson of the council.

The council was charged with looking at the whole food system, from field to table, in order to find ways to increase opportunities for Oklahoma farmers as well as improve the nutrition of all Oklahomans. For its first project, the council researched and then organized Oklahoma's farm-to-school program.

The Kerr Center has prepared this report for use by the Oklahoma Food Policy Council. However, we believe that advocates for public health, food security, and sustainable agriculture will also find it useful. Indeed anyone who cares about the future of Oklahoma will find plenty of food for thought in these pages.

As Oklahoma celebrates its 100th birthday in 2007, it is indeed time to take stock. So we invite you to continue reading. We hope that when you are done you will be inspired - to cook up some lean beef chili, or bake a loaf of whole wheat bread, or slice a juicy "Cherokee" tomato - and experience the good taste of food grown on Oklahoma farms. Hum a few bars of *Oklahoma!* and remember: the land we belong to, indeed, is grand.

– Maura McDermott



You've got to go out
on a limb sometimes
because that's
where the fruit is.

– *Will Rogers*