



BY CONNIE ZEIGLER

W E 21ST CENTURY HOOSIERS WHO ARE embracing the concept of buying food from local farmers and even raising it ourselves tend to feel a bit smug in our earthy greenness. We've even coined a new term for self-definition that immediately alerts others of our kind that we are traveling in the same not-so-wolfish pack.

We've become locavores.

Although the term is new, the concept is, of course, old. Most of the generations before ours ate what was grown locally because they didn't have access to exotic foods. Even as recently as our grandparents' generation, most people were gardeners. Generally, our grandmothers were also canners. They spent the hottest days of the year cooped up inside the house or in their summer kitchens boiling jars of green beans and stirring pots of jams. The fruits (and vegetables) of their labors continued to feed the family well into the stark Indiana winter.

The city dwellers of prior generations – even those who lived on tiny postage stamp yards that might not have the space for large gardens – had access to fresh, locally produced farm products only a streetcar ride (electric-powered or horse-drawn) away. In addition to the City Market, which offered a vast array of locally produced victuals, a huge farmers market once occupied blocks on South Street on what is now part of the Lilly campus. Although it dwindled in size over the decades, that market operated as late as the 1980s.

Many of those who sold their harvests at the Southside farmers market were the German-American truck farmers who lived even farther south along Raymond, Banta, Madison and Harding streets and Bluff Road. The Indiana Historical Society has the records of the Gardener's Benefit Society of Indianapolis formed by these German immigrants in 1867. By the 1900s the society had over 50 clubs in the county, providing educational, social and cultural outlets to the farmers and serving as a mutual benefit society whose pooled resources helped its members in time of



▲ Canned vegetables were produced under the Ko-We-Ba brand in this Delaware Street building located just north of Conseco Fieldhouse.

When Indy was a city filled with 'locavores'



History 101

sickness or death.

These German farmers and their descendents lined Southside roads (now city streets) with greenhouses. They trucked their tomatoes, lettuces, beets,

asparagus, green onions, spinach and kale to groceries all over the city. According to the Historical Society's collection guide, by the 1940s this society had 80–85 growers and the largest collection of greenhouses in the country. Most of the greenhouses were along Bluff Road and many remain or have been replaced with modern greenhouses. A historical marker on Bluff Road commemorates the contribution of these immigrant farmers.

Truck farmers were just one source of locally produced foods in Indianapolis in the past. In 1913 The Indianapolis Star promoted a contest for local groceries. The object was to see which grocery could create the most interesting display of "home foods" – those that were produced in Indianapolis. At that time, the list of foods produced or processed in Indianapolis was vast.

Among the local processors was Stokely-Van Camp. Van Camp began a canning business on Missouri Street in 1861 and sold provisions to the Union Army during the Civil War. According to the “Encyclopedia of Indianapolis,” Van Camp merged with the Stokely Co. in 1933. That year the company introduced frozen foods to its line of canned goods, though it’s very likely that in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, many Indianapolis residents were finding the company’s canned goods a more affordable option than the newfangled frozen items. Stokely-Van Camp operated in the city for more than 100 years, was eventually purchased by Quaker Oats, and then became Stokely USA. It finally closed its East Street plant around the turn of the 21st Century.

Other locally produced canned goods came from Kothe Wells and Bauer, which opened in 1889 and distributed Ko-We-Ba brand canned vegetables from its 102 S. Delaware St. building. Ko-We-Ba brand was sold throughout Indiana and adjacent states. In 1924, the well-known Indianapolis architecture firm of Rubush and Hunter designed the new Ko-We-Ba warehouse at 240 Virginia Ave. The firm closed its Indianapolis operation by the mid-20th Century. Although its original Delaware Street building still stands (used most recently as the Community Corrections Center), the city demolished the Virginia Avenue building to make way for the WellPoint Operations Center in 2000.

Canned goods weren’t the only locally processed foods. In years gone by, hometown-produced meals could be rounded out with a variety of meats and some fine local brew.

Kingan and Co. was a local meat-packing firm with national and international distribution. Kingan introduced pre-sliced bacon in the United States. By 1945, according to the “Encyclopedia of Indianapolis,” Kingan employed more than 3,000 workers, including many of the city’s Irish and Eastern European immigrants, and its facility covered 27 acres on the city’s Westside. Kingan was sold in 1952 and the building closed in 1966.

Due to its German-born population, Indianapolis also became a brewing city. C. F. Schmidt opened the first large-scale brewery in the city in 1858. His firm merged with the renowned Indianapolis Brewing Co. in 1889. The last incarnation of the IBC, famous for its Dusseldorfer Beer, closed only a few years back.

The list of “home foods” once planted, picked, pickled, processed, produced and pigged-out on in Indianapolis is long and by no means exhausted by the few offerings presented here.

Although our Indianapolis forefathers and mothers didn’t use or know the word “locavore,” they, too, sought out foods made and grown in Indianapolis. Before we become too awfully snobby about our “new” local-foods lifestyles, we may want to acknowledge that it’s not the generation of hippies and their children who brought us these ideas of Community Supported Agriculture and local eating; it was our long-ago ancestors for whom a local-eating lifestyle was not a choice but a fact made easy in this formerly food-producing city.

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