THE BLACK FARMER WHO SHAPED AMERICA’S COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO FOOD

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By Femi Redwood

Coop members volunteer our time and pay up-front membership fees because we believe these shared investments make our food systems stronger. Also, this makes our produce cost less than at traditional grocery stores, and farmers earn more profit than they would selling to large chains.

This is the same idea behind Community Supported Agriculture, commonly known as CSAs.

You might think CSAs started in the 1980s in affluent Northeast communities, but they were actually started by a Black horticulturist, Booker T. Whatley, who pushed this model decades earlier to help small farms. His vision continues to empower communities to make grocery shopping affordable, while also investing in local farmers.

Born in 1915 in Anniston, Alabama, a predominantly Black community, Whatley and his 11 younger siblings were raised on their family farm. “My granddaddy made all the syrup that came out of his community, castrated all the hogs, shoed the horses, built the doorsteps …he was one of those guys who could do everything,” he told *Mother Earth News* in 1982.

That early education in farming and self-sufficiency helped shape the rest of his life.

> AT TUSKEGEE, BOOKER T. WHATLEY DEVELOPED 15 VARIETIES OF MUSCADINE GRAPES, NAMING ONE “FOXXY LOTTIE” AFTER HIS WIFE.

After earning a B.S. in agriculture from Alabama A&M University, a historically Black

college and university (HBCU), he was drafted into the army and served in the Korean War, where he worked on a hydroponic farm. The scientist he worked under urged him to earn a Ph.D. in horticulture from Rutgers University, which he did in 1957. He then became the chairman of the horticulture department at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Later, in 1969, he was offered a professorship at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University).

At Tuskegee, Whatley developed 15 varieties of muscadine grapes, naming one "Foxxy Lottie" after his wife. He also worked on sweet potato breeding, developing five varieties, and advocated that Southern farmers grow sweet potatoes to help them compete with the growing corporatization of agriculture.

"With sweet potatoes, Alabama could compete with the Midwest in carbohydrate production," he told *Neighbors* Magazine.

Throughout his life, he noticed that family farms were being replaced by large companies, and Black farms were declining. According to a collaborative report by the National Black Farmers Association and other organizations, 14 percent of all US farmers were Black in 1920. By 1964, less than 6 percent were Black.

> WHATLEY CREATED A PLAN AS EARLY AS THE 1960S THAT HE BELIEVED WOULD ALLOW FARMERS TO MAKE MORE MONEY WHILE USING FEWER RESOURCES.

One issue Black farmers faced was unfair treatment from the federal government. A 1965 report from the Commission on Civil Rights (PDF) found that the USDA discriminated against Black farmers when providing loans and conservation payments.

This impacted the financial stability of Black farmers and contributed to land loss. As a solution to this, and the increased competition from corporate-owned agriculture, Whatley created a plan as early as the 1960s that he believed would allow farmers to

make more money while using fewer resources. A significant component of his plan was a shopping model similar to contemporary CSAs, what he called Clientele Membership Clubs.

Members would pay an upfront fee for a season of produce. He suggested fees should be due at the beginning of the year, which is often a farmer's slow season. Families would pick their own produce. These clubs would guarantee that farmers would have income and that families would save 40 percent on food prices.

Clientele Membership Clubs wouldn't be limited to produce; some might have places for families to catch their own fish or buy slaughtered livestock.

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In 1982, he told reporters that his plan could make farmers $100,000 per year, and he later published a book detailing it. "The clientele membership club is the lifeblood of the whole setup. It enables the farmer to plan production, anticipate demand, and, of course, have a guaranteed market," he originally told *Mother Earth News* in a 1982 interview.

Whatley believed small farms couldn't compete with large ones on things like corn and potatoes, but they could compete in other ways, like having membership clubs. "You got to have a farmer who likes people and who has the knack of making that membership feel like his farm is their farm," he told *The Morning Call*.

He didn't believe farmers' markets would be competition because they were too expensive for most families. At both farmers' markets and grocery stores, the cost of picking and delivering produce is built into the prices. But with his membership clubs,

cutting out the middleman saves everyone money. “The farmer now gets such a small share of the housewife’s food dollar. Under this plan, he gets it all,” he told the paper.

Some farmers believed his plan would turn off potential members, because it would feel like farmwork. Whatley understood that not all farmers would embrace his ideas. “I’m not trying to change the spots on a leopard. I’m not wasting my time,” he detailed in that interview.

But one person who didn’t doubt his plan was Thomas Monaghan, the founder of Domino’s Pizza and owner of the Detroit Tigers.

In 1984, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article about Whatley (PDF), introducing readers to another Alabama farmer who was using his methods with success. According to published reports, Whatley received a call that same day from Monaghan, who loved his ideas and wanted to begin a partnership to build a farm that would provide toppings for some Domino’s franchises and also allow Domino’s employees to join its Clientele Membership Club.

In addition to offering produce, the pair planned a catch-and-own fish pond, a place where members could also buy freshly slaughtered lamb, Christmas trees and more.

> OVER THE YEARS, WHATLEY REMAINED A SOUGHT-AFTER SPEAKER BECAUSE HE OFFERED A MORE HOPEFUL OUTLOOK THAN OTHER ACADEMICIANS AND POLITICIANS.

According to *Mother Earth News,* the Booker T. Whatley Farm at Domino’s Farm opened in 1987. They planned it in phases and hoped their efforts would save 100,000 of America’s small farms by 2000. Unfortunately, their complete vision never came to fruition because Monagah sold his stake in the farm, and its operations shift-

ed from the original plan.

Over the years, Whatley remained a sought-after speaker because he offered a more hopeful outlook than other academicians and politicians, who believed there was no commercial success for small farmers. Whatley, who died in 2005, disagreed, arguing that, while the government favored large farms that grow soybeans, cotton and nuts, it could solve the problem by subsidizing small farms that grow more niche crops, like purple cabbage.

“The research money has gone to those money crops,” he told the *Washington Post.* “We all think for anything to be good it’s got to be big.”

The next time you buy produce at the Coop, please remember Whatley, whose legacy continues through the many CSAs feeding our neighbors.

Femi Redwood is a Murrow Award-winning journalist. For over a decade, she has worked in prestigious newsrooms including VICE News and CBS Newspath, holding a range of roles from on-air correspondent to department manager. She lives in Crown Heights with her wife, Julie, and their cat, Leo.