

Economic Affairs Interim Committee

Montana State Legislature

Missoula, May 8, 2008

Mike Flynn's great-grandfather Michael Flynn came from Ireland and landed in the Missoula Valley in 1872. He and his wife, Catherine, grew their ranch until it was 1,374 acres when he died in 1910.

Today's Mike Flynn, who is the fifth Michael Flynn, and the Flynns before him raised hay and grain and cattle. They sold sugar beets to the sugar beet plant, American Crystal Sugar Co., two big brick buildings on the railroad tracks off Mullan Road. They sold grain to Missoula's three or four flour mills.

That sugar beet plant closed in 1966. Today, it's the offices of a computer software company near a Target store. The flour mills are gone. Today, Mike Flynn tells me, you have to sell your grain in Lewistown, Idaho. If the moisture content's too high, you have to pay to ship it back.

Three years ago, the Flynn family made the decision to grow a new crop: houses and condominiums.

Ironically, the family reluctantly made this move at a time when Missoula residents are demanding more locally-grown food. A quick walk in Missoula's downtown reveals "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" signs galore. Missoula's Saturday morning Farmers Markets are flourishing. The Missoula Farmers Market will begin its 37th season this coming weekend, and the Clark Fork River Market has more than 40 vendors in its third season. Its customers can also buy lamb, cut for chops and shish kebabs, chicken breasts ready for the barbecue and fresh sausage.

Missoula residents spend more than \$300 million on food each year; Montanans spent more than \$3 billion for food in 2003. But most of that food comes from outside the state. In 1950, 70 percent of the food we ate was grown in Montana. Through the 1930s, food processing was our state's No. 1 employer. Today, only about 15 percent of what we spend is on Montana-produced food.

In 2006, Montana farmers harvested 1.1 million bushels of oats. But our state has no plant to roll those oats. So we sell them unimproved and let other states reap the benefit of the added value. That added value can be substantial: For every dollar spent on a loaf of bread, the typical American wheat farmer now gets just 6 cents. That's not to mention the fuel consumption and environmental consequences of the typical food product as it travels 1,500 miles and changes hands 33 times before reaching the table.

We need to make hamburgers, not export cows. We need to make our own bread out of our own Montana wheat, not send that wheat out by the bushel. Keeping the money from those products in the state keeps our agriculture vibrant and our citizens healthy and happy. Investing in value-added agriculture just makes good sense for Montana.

Ginny Merriam

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