

Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota

Craig B. Upright

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A careful study of consumer cooperation after World War II, *Grocery Activism* largely succeeds in addressing a long-standing lacuna in historical research on cooperative grocery stores in Minnesota. The state's reputation for cooperative organizing and the robust persistence of grocery co-ops across Minnesota make this history especially significant.

Craig Upright, an associate professor of sociology at Winona State University, draws on his deep knowledge of grocery co-ops, including personal experiences in the Twin Cities alternative food community in the 1990s, to show that efforts to blend the promotion of natural and organic foods with participatory and economic democracy define the history of most of the state's food co-ops. *Grocery Activism* unpacks multiple aspects of these efforts, including social transformation, policy fights, and changing ideas about food consumption. Grocery shopping, it turns out, is about much more than one might think. Power—how it is created, who has it, and whom it serves—emerges as a core concern.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first explores the long history of what became known as organic food, as well as the impulses that drove people to pursue it. Chapter 2 provides an especially good summary of twentieth-century cooperative movements with a keen eye on consumer cooperation after World War II. The third chapter focuses more tightly on Minnesota (in particular, the 1970s boom in grocery co-ops) and addresses methodological questions. Chapter 4 examines the so-called co-op wars in the Twin Cities in the late 1970s. Finally, the fifth chapter turns to the gradual development of the complex infrastructures that have sus-



tained cooperatives from the 1970s to the present.

Grocery Activism's careful organization is mirrored by careful inclusion. Co-ops in St. Cloud, Hackensack, Rochester, Duluth, Faribault, St. Peter, Morris, Brainerd, and Winona—to name just a few—take their rightful place alongside cooperatives based in the Twin Cities. The book's scope is truly statewide.

Grounded in archival research, government documents, interviews with participants, and the newsletters produced by co-ops, *Grocery Activism* makes its central point clear: alternative foods and alternative forms of capitalism and community found a home together in these popular consumer cooperatives that grew out of movement politics. Further, the book dives into the growing body of scholarly literature on food systems to provide crucial context that helps readers better understand the Minnesota-specific pieces of the story.

Much more than just a chronological accounting, *Grocery Activism* blends sociology with history and even adds a dash of memoir. Readers will encounter compelling episodes of organic

agriculture and cooperative organizing alongside stories about their own favorite grocery co-op. They will discover cogent takes on politics and economics in our daily lives. The book even accounts for the state's comparatively high number of grocery co-ops. *Grocery Activism* suggests that the long-standing cooperative and agricultural traditions in many communities, the strong consumer interest in otherwise unavailable natural foods, and the intentional establishment of political and distribution infrastructures in the early 1970s collectively marked Minnesota as a center for grocery cooperation in the years that followed.

The smooth integration of social science methodology into broader historical narratives creates novel insights even as it renders occasional weaknesses. A few topics—such as the section on the famed co-op wars in the mid-1970s—remain underdeveloped. More information on the 1990s and early 2000s would do much to help readers better understand how these institutions changed over time—and why some survived while others did not.

Even so, the unique approach to the subject generally pays off. Strong prose, careful analysis, and a passion for the subject mitigate the small flaws. Ultimately, *Grocery Activism* is a welcome addition to the Minnesota history bookshelf. In an era defined by middle-class food obsessions, there is much to appreciate about this focused and thoughtful book. Grocery co-ops play an outsized role in the daily life of many in our state. This book shows us why.

—Michael J. Lansing