

Food co-op saves dollars, cultivates sense of community

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MT. JOY — People involved with agriculture use cooperatives almost everyday of their lives. But cooperatives are not just for farmers; co-ops are a good way of providing any kind of service you may need.

For a group of friends and neighbors in Ironbridge Manor near Mount Joy, a cooperative has meant a savings on their grocery bills, and a sense of community enjoyed by working together toward a common goal.

The Ironbridge Cooperative is a food co-op, now in its second year of operation. It is organized on the co-op principle of one member, one vote, and its by-laws are written

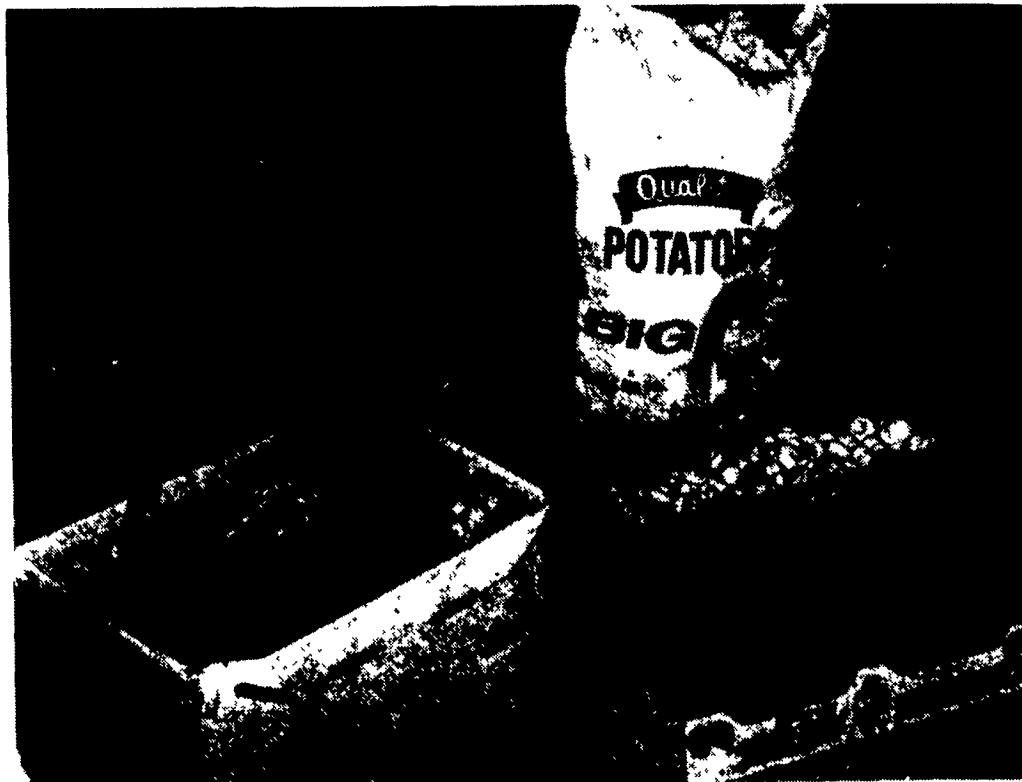
similar to a co-op in Stewartstown, York County, which was featured on the television show "PM Magazine."

For most members it is the combination of saving money and obtaining high-quality food that has attracted them to the co-op.

Ann Bernard, the treasurer, says, "It is really beneficial. I feel the savings are substantial enough. That's a big factor for me. And the quality is so much improved over what I get at the store."

Since savings was the primary reason for banding together, price becomes an important consideration.

Sue Weidman, one of the original members, says, "Our supplies give



These boxes of produce represent a portion of the total orders placed by Valley View Co-op members. The produce will be redistributed and boxed for pick-up by members.



Ann Place, left, and Barb Brown, count out chicken breasts to fill members' orders. Chicken is ordered by the co-op every three months.



Kathy Kenney, left, and Ann Bernard pack their orders into their red wagons as they move from one pick-up point to another. Most members are within walking distance so pick-up is easy.

us prices that are lower than supermarket, and they also have top quality."

Wayne Kennedy says it simply, "We eat better for less money."

Sarah Murr echoes his feelings and adds, "There is a savings, but it is also convenient and things are a lot fresher." Sarah says she is still learning how to buy things a month at a time, but adds, "I think it's great. I like it."

Of course, savings don't just happen. To take advantage of lower prices, the co-op must purchase most things in bulk, and then these are divided into individual members' orders. Sue pointed out, "As long as someone is willing to make a commitment, it will work."

The commitment by members is to be willing to make phone calls for orders from other members, to place orders with suppliers and to divide the products when they are delivered. Also, every member must show up on pick-up day for their order.

Most members feel the extra work is worth the savings and the good quality. Larry Stiffler, current president, says he doesn't mind the extra work. "It's worth it for the savings. We have a large family so it is a very significant savings."

Larry is the man in charge of meat and cheese, which means slicing large quantities of cheese and weighing out sausage and hot dogs. He says he got the job because people perceived it as a lot of work. "Once we got the system down we didn't need as many people." He and his wife usually do the job in about four hours.

Larry also extols the quality of what they buy, and says, "We haven't had a complaint for a long time."

Barb Brown, who was in charge of chicken orders, says, "It's really not a lot of work if everybody does their share. You have to hang around for phone calls and one day to sort it out." In this community of young families many women are home during the day with children.

Barb will soon be moving to Connecticut with her family and said she would like "to get a co-op started in her new community."

Kathy Keeney, a member of the co-op since it started, concurs with the others, "I really enjoy the price and the quality of the meat and cheese. I don't mind helping; it's worth it."

Ann Place, a recent member says she joined because "I was tasting everyone's meat and cheese and it tasted so good."

So far the co-op offers produce, luncheon meat and cheese, chicken, fish, snack foods and staples like flour, sugar and dried fruits. They are looking for suppliers of paper products, canned goods and frozen foods, but so far have not been able to match



Ironbridge Co-op president Larry Stiffler sits at the slicing machine as he prepares cheese orders for some of the families in the co-op. Processing the orders takes about four hours a month when the bulk is purchased.

supermarket prices in those areas. Treasurer Ann says, "We have three new price lists we're looking at."

Sue explained the process of ordering. Orders are placed just once a month, with the exception of chicken which is ordered just once every three months. This in itself is a challenge to most members.

Sue said, "You must think differently to know what you need for a month." Most of the items can be easily sorted or frozen and the only problem is that in the early days of the month storage for large quantities may be difficult. Sue said she uses a lot of cannisters and plastic containers.

Members place their orders on a Thursday and meet the following Monday for their monthly

gathering. It is at this time that orders are finalized, with members being asked to order more or less so that case lots can be bought. Once the order is called into the supplier, a date is established for distribution.

The by-laws require that each family be represented at the monthly meetings. This is important so that a spokesman for each family can help in increasing or decreasing orders as needed. If a family is not present at three meetings in one year they will be asked to leave the co-op. Rules are relaxed somewhat in the summer and attendance is not mandatory then.

To help cover the cost of phone calls, paper, bags, gas and other

(Turn to Page B4)

Homestead Notes