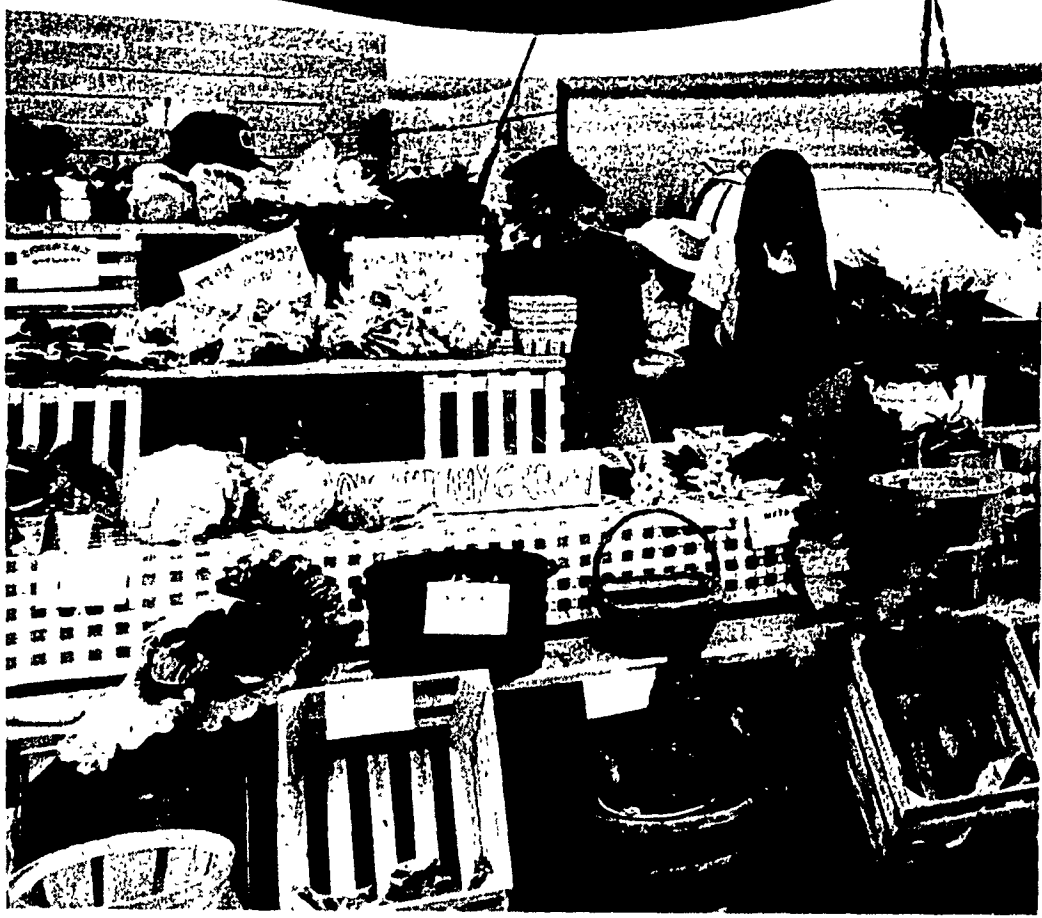


# Farmers' market eliminates middlemen, extra costs



Who will buy?

Fresh produce and vegetables, baked goods and homemade ice cream abound at the "Food for Thought" cooperative's farmers' market which operates out of the parking lot at Dean's Market on the Benner Pike each Friday afternoon. The market offers the consumer an opportunity to spare himself the middleman's cost.

By JOANNE KOLLAR  
Collegian Staff Writer

Rootbeer floats made with homemade ice cream and homemade rootbeer, organic whole wheat bread, homemade bagels, butter and sugar corn picked only a couple hours earlier, cherry pie baked that morning and a variety of other baked goods and produce filled the stands at the Farmer's Market on the Benner Pike.

"We didn't know what to expect when we opened last week," Dana Harlan said. "But people were waiting when we arrived and looked over our stuff as we unloaded it. We couldn't sell until 3:30, but people wanted to buy before that."

Harlan is a member of the "Food for Thought" cooperative, a group of five families in Coburn, who have joined with 17 others from Centre County to form the Central Pennsylvania Farmers' Market Association. Last March the association was organized to provide a market for locally grown produce.

Operating from the parking lot donated rent-free by Dean's Market on the Benner Pike, the market is one of about 90 farmers' markets throughout Pennsylvania, according to James Toothman, associate professor of agricultural economics. Such markets were the earliest form of markets in the United States. In Pennsylvania, they have been in operation at least since 1710 when market houses in Philadelphia rented stalls to area farmers.

The number of markets has varied throughout the years. But since 1973 there has been a surge of interest in continuing and starting more of these markets, according to Toothman. He attributed it to the rise in food prices, increased consumer interest in the nutritional value of foods and the sharp rise in marketing costs for the farmer.

For the small farmer, selling directly to the public is more profitable than dealing with a middleman, according to Toothman. He pointed out that between 55 and 75 per cent of the retail price of fresh produce in the grocery store is the costs and profits of the middleman. Toothman said that this marketing margin could be added to the farmer's net income by selling directly to the public.

As for the consumer's concern for obtaining fresh, quality produce at a reasonable price, Toothman said, "What better way is there than buying directly from the farmer?"

Dan Harner, association president, agreed on the importance of quality. "The only way to ensure quality is to grow your own," Harner said. "Everything must be your own is one of our rules."

Other producers at the market expressed similar ideas.

"We want to get people back to buying locally produced fresh goods," Barbara Broskley, another cooperative member, said. "We don't pick the produce until noon, and I bake in the morning."

Cynthia Yorks of State College, who sells baked goods at her stand, also emphasized the importance of freshness and quality. Yorks bakes her pies early Friday morning to sell in the afternoon.

"People don't want pies unless they are absolutely fresh," Yorks said. "They don't want canned fillings."

According to Yorks, customers ask her if all the ingredients are fresh. "I don't use any other," she said.

Howard Ardry of Howard RD said it's important to keep picking produce to ensure freshness. "If you want to keep produce fresh, you must pick twice a week," Ardry said. "Otherwise your corn and beans will get tough."

Ardry also sells at the Bellefonte Farmers' Market and to local grocery stores. He said he would like to see the market expand to two days a week to ensure the fresh quality of the produce. "You can't keep fresh produce in mint condition for long," Ardry said.

Ardry is one of the few full-time farmers in the association. Of the 22 members, only seven or eight work their farms for their livelihoods, according to Harner. The rest have plots larger than the average backyard garden but not large enough to make a fulltime living, Harner said.

For example, the five families in the cooperative are each cultivating about one quarter to one third acre of land, according to Harlan. At the same time, they are building their homes and holding down other jobs. Yorks works a full-time, nine-to-five job and does her own baking in the evenings.

Before the market opened, Harner said he made a trip to the Lewisburg farmers' market, which has been operating since the 1930s, to see how it is organized and to check prices. Harner said they try to keep their prices in line with those charged by other markets.

"Everybody sets his own price within the

association," Harner said. "But we're all farmers and it doesn't do anyone any good to cut prices."

According to Broskley, the association members have agreed not to undersell one another. However, they do try to price below the supermarkets because there is no middleman, Broskley said. "We don't want to charge for the freshness of our products," she said.

But Ardry pointed out that the farmer has to make money, too, because his costs go up like everyone else's.

According to association members, local response has been very good. "We've been very gratified with how people have turned out," Harner said.

Most of the producers were sold out within the first 90 minutes at last week's opening, according to Harner.

"We returned home with only one head of cabbage," Broskley said.

According to Ardry, the crowd was as large this past Friday as last. He said he pulled 200 dozen ears of corn for Friday's market and most were gone within the first couple of hours. Harner said he sold out his 32 dozen ears of corn within the first half hour.

"Today they took every pie I had before I could turn around," Yorks said.

Harlan said that last week many customers said they were happy to see the market and hoped it would continue every week. Many of those people were back this week, Harlan said.

"Knowing someone wants your product and enjoys it is important," Yorks said.

Depending on continued consumer response and the addition of more producers, Harner said they hope to operate the market every Friday from 3:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. through October. Harner said he expected that more farmers would be selling in the coming weeks as more crops are ready for harvest. For example, he said next week he expects a 16 1/2 more corn and some tomatoes to be available.

Harlan said they were striving for as much variety as possible. "But you can't count on your crops until you harvest them," Harlan said. He pointed out that the cooperative's fruit crop was lost this spring because of the frost.

According to Harlan, more producers are needed. "Anyone who needs a market for produce is welcome to join," Harlan said.

## Agricultural economist praises low overhead, fresh produce of farmers' market

Jim Toothman is one of the most enthusiastic supporters of farmers' markets. According to Toothman, associate professor of agricultural economics at the Pennsylvania State University, a good farmer could make a living on 30 acres or less if he grows a variety of crops and can sell his produce at a farmers' market. The average U.S. farm is about 385 acres.

"If he has access to a good farmers' market, a produce grower can often sell in a few hours what it might take him days to sell at a roadside stand outside

his farm," Toothman said.

Toothman noted that the costs of producing and harvesting most vegetables and small fruits in Pennsylvania and other eastern states is relatively high. But there are millions of consumers nearby, Toothman pointed out. Farmers can expand sales by selling at locations in cities and suburbs where the consumers are, according to Toothman. Farmers' markets provide an outlet with low-cost overhead.

Toothman, who helped organize farmers' markets at Harrisburg and

Wilkes-Barre, worked with the local group in setting up its organizational structure. According to Toothman, farmers' markets are organized in one of three forms. There are the seasonal, open-air markets with stalls located in parking lots. A second form are curb markets where the producer sells directly from his or her truck on city streets. The third are privately-owned buildings in which the owner rents space to a mixture of farmers and merchants for a year-round market. Within the last three years, 18 seasonal, open-air

markets have opened in Pennsylvania, according to Toothman. This brings the total to about 90 throughout the state, he said. According to Toothman, Pennsylvania is the leading state in farm-to-consumer marketing.

Part of the reason behind this growth is the active support provided by Pennsylvania's Department of Agriculture. According to Albert Papa, economist and head planner of the marketing project at the Pennsylvania's Agricultural Department, the department's efforts were spurred by the loss

of 4,500 dairy farms in Pennsylvania in the last two years.

To reverse the trend and to encourage small-scale farming, the department has helped to organize federations of food clubs that buy directly from farmers. The clubs save money and the farmers increase profits.

The department also certifies and inspects farmers' markets. If markets need help, state and local governments step in. Further, as a guide to consumers, the department prints farmer-to-consumer directories, listing far-

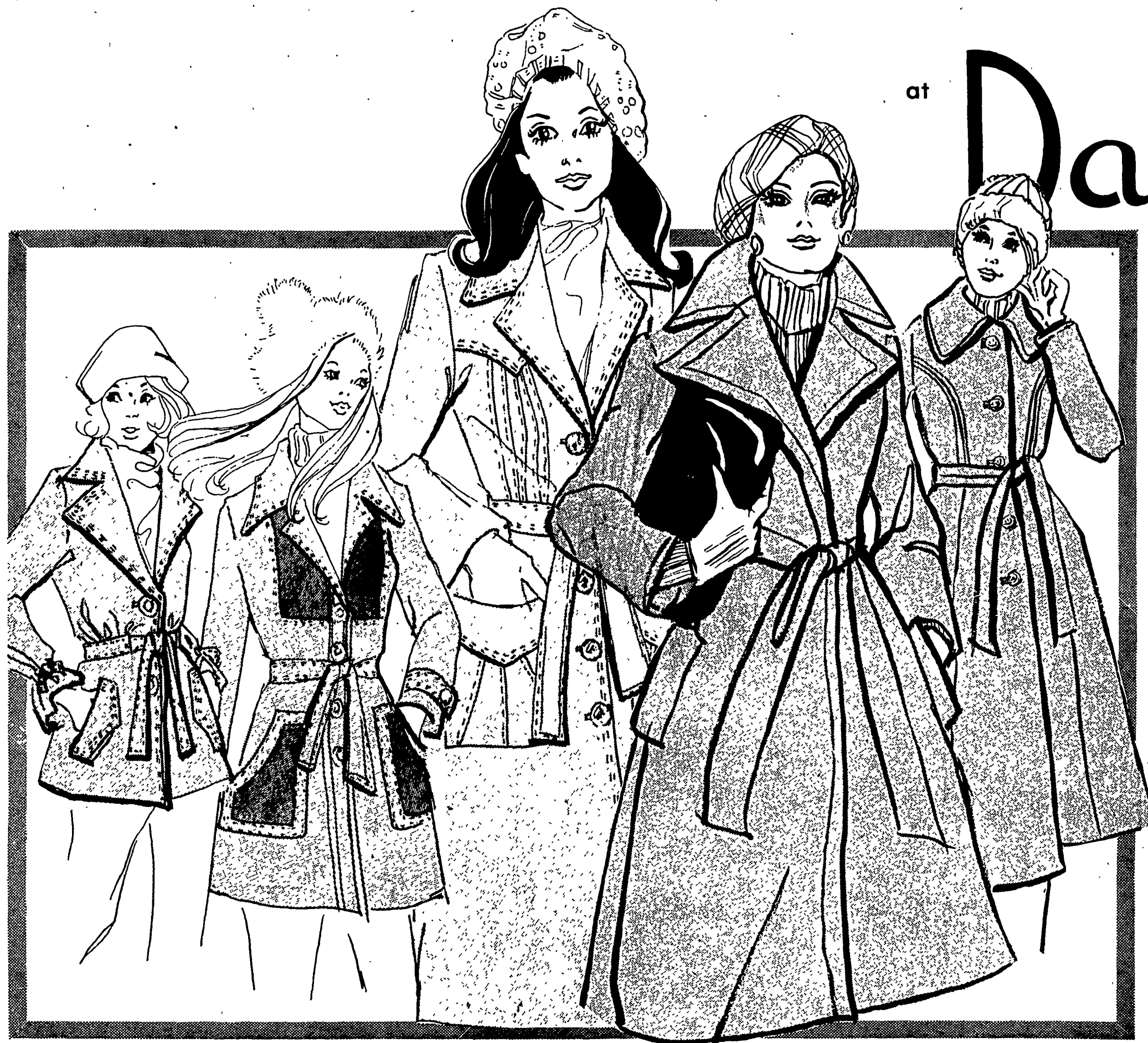
mers' markets, roadside stands and "pick-your-own" farms throughout the state.

According to Papa, food shoppers can save 25 to 50 per cent by buying directly from the farmer. The savings represent the retailer's markup for waste, spoilage and handling costs, he pointed out.

The farmer also benefits. "Direct marketing enables growers to gain returns higher than market wholesale prices which are usually only 20 to 50 per cent of retail," Toothman said.

—Joanne Kollar

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