

A History of the Ypsilanti Food Cooperative

BY CORINNE SIKORSKI AND RODOLFO ALVARADO

The Humble Origins of a Movement

Since the 1800s, thousands of cooperatives (or co-ops) have sprouted up around the world to combat food insecurity and high food prices, promote food safety, and assist with other consumer needs. Although the Ypsilanti community has history with cooperatives dating back to the 1930s, the Ypsilanti Food Co-op officially incorporated in 1975. Its mission: to provide high-quality food and goods, produced ecologically and sustainably, while practicing cooperative economics.

The roots of this mission can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s, decades wherein people banded together not only to purchase natural foods that were not available elsewhere in the marketplace, but to ground itself in the community by providing healthy food options, people with jobs, farmers with a market, all while being owned by the shoppers using the store.

Prior to incorporation, the Ypsi Food Co-op grew out of a bag co-op which ran in the early 1970s. Orders of fresh produce, cider, or cheese—along with money—were dropped off at a member's house. The member tallied the money, prepared a shopping list, then drove to the Eastern Market in Detroit where goods were bought. An old orange refrigerator would be moved to various local churches in Ypsilanti, where the food would be distributed to members.

From Bag to Storefront

The transition from a bag co-op to a storefront co-op occurred on April 11, 1975, when members of the bag co-op formed a non-profit corporation called the Ypsilanti Cooperative Initiative (YCI). Under the articles of incorporation, the membership was empowered not only to supply high quality food at the lowest possible prices, but also to “organize and support community efforts aimed at improving the quality of life.” These

activities could include health, childcare, education, recycling, non-polluting energy systems, and cultural development.

The storefront Co-op, which was located at 955 Sheridan, was loosely organized, had no paid staff, and was run by volunteers. Bulk food was offered from five-gallon buckets displayed on milk crates, and a three-door glass cooler, along with the Co-op's original orange refrigerator, displayed perishable items. Granola was made at Faz's Pizza, a local pizza shop. When the time came to check out, if a volunteer was not available, customers paid by the honor system.

After firmly establishing itself as part of the Ypsilanti community, three years



Co-op shoppers

later, YFC was forced to close when the Sheridan building was sold. But by September of the same year, the store reopened at 308 Perrin, just across the street and down the block from Eastern Michigan University (EMU).

Aside from the goods that met mission standards, the store also carried whole grain breads that were

baked by the worker collective at the Wildflour Bakery in Ann Arbor. The bakery was one of a whole community of cooperatives in Ann Arbor that joined other co-ops like us, to set up the Michigan Federation of Food Co-ops. The federation owned a warehouse which served the food co-ops around the state, with products from around the country.

Being near EMU, YFC became stable, and since most members consisted of university students, YFC became a student organization. Being a non-profit in the state of Michigan made YFC eligible for this distinction. The only method of advertising an organization allowed on campus was to hold bagel sales. Unlike today, there were no fast food or coffee franchises on campus at the time, so student organizations were allowed to set up a table at Mark Jefferson or Pray-Harrold. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Co-op volunteers sold bagels, muffins, and fair-trade coffee. More importantly, the Co-op's association with EMU brought stability and greater recognition throughout Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor.

Stability and a New Home

Next came the challenge of establishing a framework for growth and stability. The challenge was addressed in 1982 when a general membership meeting was held, and the

member-owners charged the board of directors with developing a five-year plan. Once instituted, long-range plans resulted in changes. One of the most significant was the implementation of a one-person management system. The system replaced the collective structure, which had become cumbersome and inefficient. The board hired Corinne Sikorski as general manager, a position she holds to this day.

Aside from managerial reorganization, a capitalization plan was developed to raise money through the system of member-owner Fair Shares, which made members actual owners. The final measure recommended by the board was to secure a new site for the store. In time, the rented space in the Perrin Street building had fallen into poor condition.

A new location was found in Depot Town, and in February 1984, the Co-op moved to the Mill Works at 312 North River Street. Built in 1840, the building originally housed the Ypsilanti Machine Works, a foundry that manufactured grinders for flour mills. In 1850, a similar-looking building was constructed at 308 North River. The two buildings were soon joined in the middle, and the middle section was given the address 310 North River. Aside from flour mill grinders, over the next hundred years, the foundry produced corn-shellers, elevator heads, boots with pulleys, scalpers, centrifugal reels for sugar refining, and a special reel for separating salt for use by the Diamond Crystal Salt Company of St. Clair, Michigan.

The building was in poor condition; there was a plumbing shop at 310 and an auto repair shop with a garage door in the façade of 308. Nevertheless, YFC made repairs to their section and, before long, were again achieving their mission of not only providing healthy and organic food but being fully invested in the community.

Two years after moving into the Mill Works, the building came up for sale. A group of concerned member-owners formed the Mill Works Partnership. They bought the building with the goal of guaranteeing affordable rent to the Co-op in order to ensure its continued use of the space. The purchase was completed by 1989, and the Co-op was able to expand into the adjoining space at 310. Arches separating the spaces were cleared of bricks. Renovations, which included rectifying the now condemned areas of the building, were undertaken.

Simultaneously, the Wildflour Bakery of Ann Arbor opened the Depot Town Sourdough Community Bakery and built a brick oven. When the bakery failed, YFC took over the bakery business, and it has been running successfully ever since. Continuous additions and renovations were made to the spaces including laying linoleum tiles, installing double-hung windows, brick tuck pointing, painting, replacing the metal iron front door with a wooden door, and adding an awning over the front entry.

By 2000, the Mill Works Partnership renovated spaces on the first and second floor into offices. They removed the garage door and added a stairway leading to the second floor, an area of the building that had no electricity or usable space. They also built two new apartments above the bakery, both with an art deco style that kept much of the brick work visible.



Mill Works, 1800s



Ypsilanti Food Co-op, 2022

A Sustainable Future

With long term plans met and exceeded, the coming years witnessed one accomplishment after another. The YFC became the Ypsi Food Co-op, and in 2002 joined ten co-op stores to form the Great Lakes Grocers Association; in 2004, it became a member of the National Co+op Grocers Association. These organizations work cooperatively to build stronger independent organizations through both individual and collective efforts.

In 2005, solar panels were installed for the bakery. In 2008, the Co-op obtained a liquor license and began to carry beer and wine, focusing on local and organic brews. In

2010, staff offices moved into a vacated second floor space to allow the Co-op to expand into the entire ground floor footprint of the Mill Works building.

In the same year, the Co-op founded a demonstration beekeeping effort called the Local Honey Project. Each year, up to thirty volunteers devote hundreds of hours of their time to increase survivor populations of honeybees, maintain hives, harvest urban honey, and enhance this critical aspect of our local food system.

Showing its commitment to a sustainable future for the local economy, in 2011, the Co-op underwent further building renovations and expansion. Materials recycling was implemented, and in-line hot water was installed, as were high-efficiency heat and light fixtures. Additional solar panels were installed, allowing the Co-op Bakery to be 100% renewably powered, while contributing a portion of its power to operate the store.

While the challenges overcome by the Co-op have been significant, none prepared it for the COVID pandemic and the unexpected success that came with it. On March 13, 2020, just three days before the country went into shutdown, the Co-op had its largest day in sales ever, and sales for the rest of the year were up 31%. With the increase in sales, employee wages were raised, and the Co-op moved ahead with plans to add a café. Completed in 2022, the café has a fully functioning kitchen, serving counter, restrooms, and sitting area. It is located on the south side of the Millworks Building, which means that it took the Co-op a little over thirty-eight years to fill the structure's entire first floor.

The old adage says that you cannot go back in time, but that is not true, because a stroll through the Ypsi Food Co-op is exactly that. More importantly, a stroll through the Co-op is proof positive that its founding mission has never waned. Shelves are filled with organic produce and locally sourced products, bakery goods are handmade and its operation self-sufficient, and the café is a source of healthy foods and a welcoming atmosphere.

No one knows what the future will bring, but one thing is for certain: the Ypsi Food Co-op will continue to fulfill its commitment to provide high quality food in an economically sustainable way, in close connection with Ypsilanti.

A Note on Sources

Images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives and the authors.

About the Authors

Corinne Sikorski came to Ypsilanti in 1974 to figure out a way to help change the world and begin her studies at Eastern Michigan University. Majoring in biology and geography, she was especially interested in environmental sustainability. While a student, she found the Co-op in her search for good food and became involved as a volunteer and, eventually, employee. While working parttime at YFC, she held various other positions including gardener at Matthei Botanical Gardens. She went back to EMU for a Master's

in Public Administration and was a member of the Downtown Development Authority board and the Friends of Ypsilanti Freighthouse board. Through all of the renditions of YFC, Corinne has raised a daughter and now enjoys two grandchildren.

Rodolfo (Rudy) Alvarado was elected to the Ypsi Food Co-op's Board of Directors in 2022 and has been an owner of the Co-op since moving here from Texas. He holds a Fine Arts Ph.D. from Texas Tech University and an MA in History from Eastern Michigan University, where he was a University Fellow and a Parks/King/Chavez Fellow. He is an eclectic writer whose academic work has been published by the University of Michigan Press, Michigan State Press, Alpha Books of New York, and the University of Houston's Arte Público Press.