The Protracted Decline and Inevitable Bankruptcy of the Savannah Food Co-op

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An elderly gentleman in summer seersucker and white patent-leather shoes ducked into the store on my first morning behind the counter. He ducked, probably instinctively, because of the low, damp, and greenish ceiling. He wore a cigar in his breast pocket and carried a small rolled-up sack. He stared, politely, slightly ahead and down, like a person in an elevator. He waited for my attention.

It was dark in our store, even in summer. A distant gray light smoldered at the windows, and the overhead fluorescent bulbs were powdered with dust. Other businesses in historic downtown Savannah had capitalized on their beautiful eighteenth- and nineteenth-century structures: oak floors, cobblestone entry paths, life-sized framed portraits of Confederate generals. Tiny bells jingled at the entrance of customers to antique shops and ice cream parlors, and cricket- sized ladies in gingham welcomed their customers with south Georgia voices, cooing. But we were the real article: an unreconstructed Reconstruction-era dwelling, with Depression-era plumbing, and Paleozoic era roaches.

The elderly gentleman waited until we were alone in the shop. "I don't wish to cause any inconvenience whatsoever, young lady," he said. "I myself am a brand-new member of your co-op. The situation is this: last week I purchased one-quarter pound of millet here. Unfortunately, when my wife poured it into a kettle of boiling water, a cupful of insects came swimming to the top."

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"No, no, I've not come for apologies. I wish to learn what your policy is on refunds. That is, on ex changes."

"Full refunds! Full exchanges!" I cried, springing at the cash register. It had two operable buttons, one of which was sluggish in the early morning. You had to spring at it from the northwest quadrant of its surface, often half a dozen times, before it would open the cash drawer.

That embarrassed me. It seemed to undercut the air of professionalism we were striving for.

"I'm afraid I don't have a receipt," said the gentleman in white.

"No problem," I said. "This cash register hasn't given receipts since the year of the great hurricane."

"Eighteen ninety-eight," he said, and nodded mournfully. "My parents lost their home."

"I'm so sorry," I said, again.

"Well," he said, and looked bravely around the shop, as if the son of parents who survived the great hurricane could survive even the Savannah Food Co-op. "I suppose I'd be willing to take an exchange."

I disposed of his tightly rolled paper sack without inspecting the contents, carrying it ostentatiously to the trash bin outside. I returned muttering, as if pondering, "Now where on earth could those bugs have come from?" But when we measured out a new quarter pound of millet, a fat sleek palmetto bug sat smiling on the needle of the scale, behind the glass. The elderly gentleman in seersucker, a product of last century's genteel upbringing, said nothing.

"This is strictly a class joint," I said lamely.

He thanked me with a tender smile, ducked as he stepped out the door, closed it gently—but snugly —behind him, and proceeded up the street carrying his new sack gingerly, with his arm lifted far from his side. He was a lovely, lovely man and I never saw him again.

We sold goat's milk and raw milk and soybean milk. We sold whole-wheat flour, bulgur, yogurt, oat groats, brewer's yeast, alfalfa seeds, fertilized eggs, and wheat germ. We sold Red Zinger tea, and pink and blue teas made of chicory, hibiscus flowers, rose hips, lemon grass,

and wild-cherry bark. We sold bamboo tea strainers from the Orient and black coffee beans from Java. At Christmas time, we tied red ribbons around the jars of tahini, and untied them again in the spring. We tried for months to sell a single pair of Chinese dancing slippers, size 9.

Our shop was long, narrow, and wooden, like the back of a horse- pulled wagon. Fat glass pickle jars stood on shelves like spectators in the steep upper rows of a balcony. They were dusty and labeled with strips of masking tape: kidney beans, garbanzo beans, cashews. Occasionally, when opened, they emitted the quick foul odor of gherkins.

During the winter, the Tabs in the Co-op soda cooler blew up every morning. They made a soft, distant sound, like offshore explosions, or like the far-off pop-pop-pop! of trap shooting. The blown-up Tabs plastered the shelves and other bottles with glass shards and an oozing, thick, bubbly brown, sugared ice. It never happened to the Cokes, or grape drinks, or fruit juices. It never happened to the Perrier. There must have been something particularly unstable about those Tabs. The Co-op soda cooler didn't drain properly, we were told. This we had suspected for several weeks, inasmuch as we had to mop up under it twice a day, as if it weren't house-trained yet. We were told by experts on the subject that we needed a new soda cooler. That gave us a good laugh. We were a nonprofit corporation in every sense of the word.

We sold a mealy-looking product called "Loveburger, A Delicious Vegetarian Alternative," with a polemic against killing animals printed on the reverse side of the "Delicious Recipes." We sold an unfortunate item called Veg-A-Links, two little cans of meatless sausages. During inventory, I often moved these little cans about, shelf to shelf, sometimes prominent and "On Sale," sometimes tucked away for a surprise. For ten months I rear ranged the two cans of Veg-A-Links until the inside rims of their lids turned black with despair.

We also sold, to attract neighborhood customers, Doublemint gum, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, and cigarettes. We sold white Sunbeam bread in long plastic bags and yellow cupcakes with yellow icing and spongy rolls with a whipped sugar filling. We sold popsicles in fluorescent colors and candy bars which, in summer, lay oozing side-by-side in their display boxes like pigs dozing in mud. We sold flat cardboard packages of bacon, salami, and bologna; and we sold cans of Swift beef stew, Beef-A-Roni, deviled ham, and sardines. We bought these items from David's, a local grocery store. It was once my job to drive weekly to David's and fill three shopping carts with canned

soups, dog food, meats, and cookies. They closed a check-out aisle behind me when I arrived. "You got the eatingest family I ever seen," the bag boy told me every week for two months.

Back at the Co-op, we unloaded my purchases, scraped off their price tags, and marked them up.

Or, if we were in a hurry, which was frequent, we merely scratched a thin line through the David's price tag. Bacon: "DAVID'S, $1.19 / SAVANNAH FOOD CO-OP $1.67."

The Executive board of the Co-op held emergency bankruptcy meetings on Monday nights. Twelve or fifteen of us came up a fire escape to a small apartment, rubbing our red hands together and flapping in our flannel shirt-sleeves. We hugged one another at the start and end of every meeting, and sat cross-legged. Herb brought provisions from the kitchen: apple cider, yogurt, spice muffins. All our kitchens had wooden shelves lined with boxes of herb teas, pitchers of molasses, beakers of olive oil, sacks of brown rice. Blunt wooden spoons hung from our walls. Bars of apricot soap dwindled on our sinks, and we washed our hair with honeysuckle shampoo and rinsed it with lemon conditioners, and smiled at each other over teeth caked with baking powder, flavored with peppermint. Sometimes we began our meetings with a moment of silence, holding hands. "Where are you at with that?" we said to one another, like a line from "The Cat in the Hat."

"Brothers and sisters," our flyers said, "Interested beings should report for work at ten o'clock."

"I never did understand all that Buddhist jargon," Elizabeth told me. "Halfway through the meeting, someone said, 'Okay! Everybody up! Time to energize!' And I said, 'Oh goodie! just like Star Trek! Where are we going?' But all we did was stretching exercises and someone tried to give me a back rub.

"They didn't think I was very funny," Elizabeth told me, "but what was a good Catholic like me supposed to think? What if I had said, 'Okay! Everybody up! Time to genuflect!"

We had emergency bankruptcy meetings nearly every Monday night for eight months. We were besieged with requests from distributors, banks, the landlady, the government, and other co-ops. No one inquired into our spiritual well-being, as we would have into theirs. They wanted money. Even our deliverers of goats' milk, of Loveburger, of alternative herbal soaps, called long- distance to discuss one thing: bounced checks.

We were famous for bouncing checks. We had checks bouncing around us like Ping-Pong balls. Every bad check cost us $6, and we were writing out bad checks for $5, $4, $2. When there was no money in the cash register, we had no choice.

My own paychecks bounced. It kept me up nights. Being a manager, I wrote out and signed a paycheck to myself from the Co-op and deposited it in my private account. Later, I wrote a personal check to the Co-op for groceries I purchased. Then my paycheck bounced. So my personal check—deposited, by then, in the Co-op account—also bounced. I couldn't figure out the beginning of the cycle, nor how to stop it. I hoped I wasn't embezzling.

We were furry, wintry creatures at our emergency bankruptcy meetings, huddled over cups of honeyed tea. We were shaggy — the men bearded, the women tossing cascades of wavy hair. We wore bulky sweaters and corduroy jeans, mountain-climbing boots and back packs. We shared tubes of Chap- Stick. Half the women were pregnant. Every co-manager who joined me over a ten-month period began gently ballooning after our first pleasant weeks together. I hoped it wasn't something in the toothpaste.

We were very serious, even grim, at our meetings. Both the state and federal governments pursued us because our quarterly sales and income tax checks had bounced. Only the city revenue department was not after us and that was because we had suspended formal relations with them.

"We show a profit of more than four hundred dollars for the month of October," I announced one November.

"Great! Incredible!" everyone exclaimed, but Marnie bent to her calculator. She had the sharpest mathematical mind among us and would prop up her nursing baby with her left hand and beat our budget charts with a pointer held in her right.

"But we owe quarterly sales tax in October," said Marnie, "of eight hundred and seventy-two dollars."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I wasn't counting what we owed."

"We owe," said Marnie, one particularly grim Monday night in January, "a total of four thousand dollars."

"Looks like time to get another bank loan," said Herb.

"A bank loan for four thousand dollars?" we cried.

"But then we'll owe four thousand dollars," said Peter.

"We already owe four thousand dollars," said Herb.

"But we'd be admitting that we owe it," said Peter.

Another Monday night we were forced to vote on whether we should cosign a loan for the Southeastern Confederation of Co-ops, of which we were a member. If they de faulted, we couldn't possibly make good the amount we were asked to guarantee.

"If they fold, we'll get repossessed," people argued.

"Oh hell," said Herb finally. "We're bound to go bankrupt before they do."

So we signed.

By December, the sixth month of my apprenticeship with the Co-op, Savannah was drained of color and infernally dripping. A sodden mulch of brown leaves plastered the yards and streets. In the Co-op, the bananas and pears blackened in their bins, the milk soured, and the potatoes grew fleshlike and soft, sprouting tiny wings and tails. I wore old sweaters, grew pale in the gloom, lived on nuts and raisins.

I had, for companionship, chiefly the soybean curd, or tofu, which arrived as porous, spongy cubes floating in jars of water. The interesting, and companionable, thing about the tofu was that its water had to be changed daily. I didn't know what the tofu did to its water exactly, and I didn't want to know. We sold the stuff, after all. But, on overcast, ironclad mornings, I carried the cubes of tofu to the bathroom, com forted them as I drained off their old water, and seemed to sense a sort of inchoate pleasure as I flooded them anew.

One day we resolved to acquire a beer-and-wine license. We sold beer and wine, after all, and had been selling it for three years, under the authority of a 1976 license. At first, it was a simple matter of having forgotten to renew the license. But then, for twenty-three straight months the issue somehow eluded our Monday-night agendas.

We had changed managers so many times, there was no one left to remember if we had ever applied for a renewal.

In January 1979, when we'd not had a new license for thirty-six months, we voted to do something about it. We voted to get a license. We voted to send someone to the proper authorities. I was elected to visit the state revenue office the next morning.

"Sugar, I sure can't find a license any which way for Savannah Food Co-op, Food Co-op of Savannah, or Co-op of Savannah Foods," said an official with a gray crew cut and sharp-blue eyes like marbles. "Are you sure you all have a current license?"

"We must," I said. "We've been selling beer and wine all year."

"Lucy, you go look, honey, would you?" he said to a tall woman with lemon hair, and she wordlessly rose and left the room.

"What is the Savannah Food Co-op anyway?" he asked, and I leaned back smiling.

"Well, it's sort of a natural-foods grocery store. We sell wheat germ and brown rice, but we also sell hot dogs and soft drinks."

"And beer," he said.

"Oh, and beer."

"And wine."

"Yes, and wine."

"Without a license."

"We have a license," I said. "I'm sure we do."

"Sweetie-pie," he said, "we mail new applications every year to all current licensees. All you had to do was send it in."

"We lost ours."

He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, narrowing his eyes. Lucy returned empty-handed.

"All right, sugar," he said. "Now what do you suppose happened to that license of y'all's?"

"It might be under the name of the manager," I suggested.

"Okay, who's the manager?"

"I'm a manager."

"And what was that name again?"

"Well, there are actually four managers now; I'm just one of them." He held his pen over a note pad, his head lowered, and his blue eyes slid forward toward the creased forehead, watching me.

"Oh," I said. "You want the names?"

"The names. Yes. The names."

"Melissa Greene, Marnie... Herb... Janet..."

He read them back to me.

"That's it. Oh, but last January, when we would have gotten the license, there were other managers. None of us were there then." He stared at me for an instant, then his lower lip puffed out.

"The names?" I asked.

"The names," he said. "Yes."

"Nell Odum and Sandy Kirby.

"Nell Odum and Sandy Kirby," he said. "Is that all?"

"Yes. But, oh, Sandy wasn't Kirby then, she was . .

"Yes?"

"She was Sandy Sprouse, and then she was divorced and took her maiden name again, Sandy Austin, and then she married Andy Kirby, and then she decided to hyphenate her name. So you better check for Sandy under Kirby, Austin, Sprouse, and Austin-Kirby."

"Anybody else?"

"Not just now," I said.

We sat quietly for a while when Lucy left to check the files.

"What is the Savannah Food Co-op anyway?" he asked again.

"Well, we're a nonprofit organiza tion," I said. "In fact, we're such a nonprofit organization that the question of what we'd do with the profits has never even come up."

Lucy returned, empty-handed again. It was nearly five o'clock.

"Hell," said the official. "I don't know what on earth happened to that license of yours. We can't find it under no kind of Kirby Sprouses, hyphenated or anywhichway. It sounds like a hell of a business you all are running there." He swiveled in his chair and looked out the window. I was nearly in tears. "I bet you all don't sell much beer or wine or anything much anyhow."

"No! We don't!" I assured him.

"Lucy," he said. "Why don't you type up this young lady a license?"

Our earliest backers were abandoning us. Or they were buying more selectively—an occasional newspaper, for example, or a roll of paper towels. They still paused to chat, hoisting their grocery sacks and grunting, as if we didn't notice how light the sacks were, how devoid of expensive food.

They'd hoped for a flourishing little open-air market, a street corner ringing with bicycles and pushcarts, a striped canvas canopy. They'd pictured old women in black dresses pawing over melons and bins of icy spinach; Chinese families arriving for the soybean oil and the size-9 Chinese slippers; and city councilmen inquiring after the imported cheeses. They'd expected, perhaps, a white-aproned, big bellied butcher, with broken jovial English and a push-broom.

Our earliest backers deserted us altogether when Brighter Day opened.

Brighter Day's trademark – a fat-faced, happy, rising sun – burst overnight upon billboards and park benches and newspaper advertisements throughout Savannah. To us, those yellow happy faces were like the first few locusts winging into town and taking stock.

What we wanted to know was: brighter than *whom?*

Another natural-foods store, before Brighter Day, had attempted to open on that very corner two months earlier. It was a populous corner, in which we might have been interested if we'd had any money. (We denied this later. "A terrible location," we muttered.) But the first proprietors, a widow and her daughter, were robbed there one night, at knife-point, by a man wearing a grocery sack over his head. The two women closed the store and left town. We received that news with chagrin. We might have bought some of their equipment when they sold out, if we'd had any money. (We denied this later.)

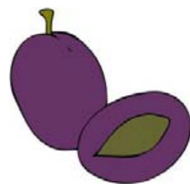
And then came the gaga trademark, the beaming rising sun of a new natural-foods store, the owners of which had bought out the widow.

The equipment in Brighter Day was brand new and faintly humming, white and sterile like the drills and hands of a dentist. The refrigerators shut with a quiet suck. The shelves were smooth as porcelain; the scales and knives glittered like sterling. Brighter Day was well-lit, newly painted, deodorized, fumigated, and freshly mopped. Wildlife posters adorned the walls. The young husband and wife were small, and soft-spoken as pharmacists. They had wheat-colored hair, laundered overalls, soft plaid shirts, pleasant south Georgia voices, and we hated them.

Nothing oozed or slopped over in that store; no sour milk pooled on the floor of the cooler; no bran or brown rice crackled underfoot like small bones. There was no mystery in that store; no black closet where fifty-pound sacks tried to lean on you, no Tabs exploding to catch your attention. The only snack was yogurt; the only carbonated drink, Perrier. They played flute music from a stereo in the back: Telemann, Vivaldi. Everything was prepackaged, weighed, stapled shut, and labeled with fat childish printing, the "i"s dotted with daisies.

If an insect had tiptoed across the doorstep of Brighter Day, he would have been assaulted through every nostril and ventricle by pine-smelling disinfectant—dizzying at floor level, the fumes dense. An insect in that store would have been an outlaw, scrambling for its miserable life.

We had an emergency board meeting one Monday night on the subject of Brighter Day, soon after they bought out the widow. "All right," said Peter, pacing and looking at us, one by one. "There's only one thing to do. Who knows how to reach the guy with the knife and the grocery-sack mask?"



We ceased flopping about like puppies at our emergency board meetings—four pairs of Earth shoes crossed on top of a coffee table, voices rising vertically from speakers who lay supine. Now we all sat up straight.

There were four co-managers, of whom I was one. On Monday nights, we faced the combined wrath and bafflement of our board. The ship was foundering, and we, allegedly, were the helmsmen. The myth advanced by the board on Monday nights was that our gradual bankruptcy—coming upon us slowly as dusk, surely as night—was somehow within our control. The theory advanced by our discussions was that the disaster that was swallowing us could be tamed. It merely called for a new set of instructions, or an original theory.

"I don't think Brighter Day will hurt us at all," someone would say.

"No, it'll probably stimulate the market for natural foods," said someone else.

Our charts plunged, no matter what direction we propped them.

Finally, we wearied even of banging them with the pointer.

One night Marnie softly said, "We need help."

"We need professional help," we concluded, babies adrift together.

We voted to acquire an accountant, for a weekend. And we closed that meeting with a group hug.

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We mailed, forthwith, a round- trip Greyhound bus ticket to an accountant in Atlanta, a Mr. Charles Foster. He was reputed to have lent guidance to the largest purveyors of natural foods in the Southeast—real businesses, with offices accessible only by elevator. We considered sending an airline ticket to Mr. Foster, but we would have had to mortgage something to do so.

We gathered at Janet's house at 8:30 AM. on a Saturday morning, and we dispatched Frank to the bus station forty minutes early. We stood nervously in the front hail, sweating the covers off our rolled account books and tucking in our shirts. Marnie quickly seated herself apart in the shadowed living room and laid her notebooks open across her knees. Nell in the front hall checked the batteries in her calculator. She had brought extras.

We waited in whispers and silence for the tweed sport coat, the manicured hands, the morning edition of the Wall Street Journal, and, perhaps, a black leather briefcase with gold hinges. We considered the possibility that we might become the subject of jokes and snickers in the offices and locker rooms of Atlanta accountants. But we believed ourselves indifferent to it.

Frank suddenly entered, and be hind him was a pale, baby-faced man in overalls and tennis shoes. His long brown hair floated out behind him and he wore a "No Nukes" button. "This is Charlie Foster," said Frank.

Mr. Foster unshouldered his backpack and dumped it onto the glass-topped table, its buckles flying. "Greetings!" he said. He sat down, shucked off his army jacket, clapped his pink hands onto his patched knees, and said: "First, why don't you all just tell me where your heads are at."

A hippie accountant. He wore a laminated mandela on a chain around his neck and cheap rings on his fingers, and he asked once, disconcertingly, "Got any good smoke?" But, he was deft with a slide rule and could muse silently upward on difficult multiplications and percent ages.

"Do you all ever advertise?" he asked at one point.

"We were interviewed by the local newspaper once!" said Peter.

"Oh yeah," said Herb. "But they took photographs."

"Oh yeah," we all said, gloomily, remembering.

"The photograph they printed," said Peter, "showed Sandy standing, smiling, in front of a sign that said, 'Even insects are into natural foods! Please close the jars tightly."

"All Savannah saw it," said Elizabeth.

"The sign had cartoon drawings of insects all over it," said Janet.

After two hours of sifting through the reams of account books, receipts, and leaflets we urged on him, he requested privacy for a short time. We left him alone, paced nervously on the sidewalk outside, and returned when he announced himself ready to divulge his findings.

"Most co-ops," he began, and our hearts sank. "Most co-ops devote approximately eight to ten per cent of their budgets to 'remuneration,' meaning salaries, wages, discounts, and in-kind payments to volunteers. The most I have ever seen was twelve per cent, and that was at a co-op in a period of crisis.

"The Savannah Food Co-op," he cried, "devotes approximately *twenty-six per cent* of its budget to remuneration."

He sat back in bafflement at his own words. "This is the most incredible thing I've ever seen. To encourage volunteers, you offer the following system of discounts: if the volunteer works one hour one month, he gets a ten per cent discount the following month; a fifteen per cent discount for two hours worked; twenty per cent for four hours; twenty-five per cent for eight; and a thirty per cent discount for sixteen hours worked.

"Now, you pay your co-managers minimum wage, two dollars and eighty cents an hour. Let's look at what you're paying your volunteers. A person who spends an hour in June stacking bottle crates, and buys fifty dollars' worth of groceries in July, is making a ten per cent discount on his fifty dollars, or five dollars for the one hour worked. A person who spends four hours one morning making trail mix, and buys, say, two hundred dollars in groceries the following month—not a high estimate for a family—has made forty dollars on his four hours worked, or ten dollars an hour.

"You all," he said, a shriek entering his voice, "are giving away money hand over fist. You'd have to be a fool *not* to shop at the Savannah Food Co-op. This is the most outrageous bargain in the state. This is what you ought to advertise! You'd get customers from all over the country!"

"I figure," he said finally, "that you all are losing a penny on every dollar of merchandise you sell. You have a profit margin of about seventeen dollars a month. The only time you are stable, in other words, is when you are closed.

"Your best days are Sunday," he said. "You ought to observe more holidays." He sat back wearily, pale and sweating. "At least do yourselves this favor: stop shopping there!"

The last I heard, they were selling the equipment. I co-signed a $3,000 bank loan before I left town—a gesture more of solidarity than of optimism. My financial stability hinges on their finding buyers for that equipment. Somewhere, I tell myself, somewhere in this vast country, there must be a proprietor of a small business, or perhaps a fancier of odd antiques, who will be beguiled by the notion of a cash register with only two operable buttons, and one of those mercurial.

The last I heard of the soda cooler—our single largest piece of equipment, and the basis of our belief that we could offset our debts by selling the equiprnent—it was jumping.

‘ "What, was it running for the border?" I asked the friend who’d called long-distance with the news.

"No," said she. "Just jumping."

"Did they turn it off?" I asked.

"No. They didn’t want the drinks to get warm. Customers might complain."

"We couldn’t have that," I said. "What happened?"

"Oh, it turned itself off."

"Oh."

"Yes, And it turned the rest of the block off with it."

Personality, I think, is what they should emphasize when advertising the equipment.