

Jeff Poppen
Biodynamic Farmer, Educator, Historian, Event Organizer

We arrive on a Sunday evening at the doorstep of Jeff Poppen after climbing a winding “natural gravel” driveway marked by a yellow sign with the words, “Hungry Creek Farms”, inscribed in blue. Jeff sat on his porch, surrounded by friends and farm interns enjoying the coolness of the evening. Our first conversation was about a hay bale that caught fire that day on the farm. They thought it was under control, but the next day, just before we left, it burst into flames again. Our last activity was helping put it out again.

Jeff is an intense, tall, thin man with long hair and a dreadlocked beard which hangs below his waist. I learn later that Jeff has never cut his beard. With the name Barefoot Farmer, Jeff is locally famous after years of appearances PBS’ “In The Garden” show and with a weekly (or sometimes bi-weekly he admits) publication in the local Boiling Spring, TN, newspaper. He’s practically a house-hold name for many in these parts. In fact one of his interns, Olivia, is there because her mother suggested, after having watched his segments for years, that Olivia see if he had a position open.

Everyone is friendly with some shaking our hands and some remaining seated, though everyone is curious what we’re up to. After talking on the front porch to introduce ourselves and our project, Kristina, with an infectious bubbly personality, reminds everyone that they need to build some trellises on the mountaintop garden. The interns all gather around preparing to go and Anna and I offered to help them. Grateful for the extra hands, the interns accepted our help. We climb into the bed of their blue Ford Ranger to climb the hill.

As we ascend, Starfox the dog is running in the grass alongside the road, beating us to the top. It’s a magnificent view as we climb and with the sun only beginning to set we can see the lush garden surrounded by 8 foot fence, fields in the distance, rolling hills dotted with cattle, and forest surrounding us. We pull up next to the entrance and Alex, an intern of 2 years and also barefooted and dreadlocked, takes the post setter out of the bed while the rest of us pick up and carry the metal posts.

The trellis, we find out, is for purple beans. They’re still close to the ground and as we set the trellis Alex explains that the beans will find it and we don’t need to guide the vines at all.

Kristina, Alex, Johnny, and Olivia are the interns on Jeff’s farm. Johnny was back at the intern cabin at this time, but the rest explained a bit about themselves, how they arrived there, and their impressions of both Jeff and the principals of biodynamic farming. We learn that they all see the farm as a “living organism that feeds itself” and “a self-contained farm that sometimes uses hay from other farms for mulching” and all agree that the processes Jeff uses are valuable and make sense. Olivia tells us later that they have weekly “classes” where they discuss biodynamics and study from Jeff’s personal collection of farming manuals from as early as 1905.

In operation since 1972 Jeff has been operating as a biodynamic farm for 35 of those years. Biodynamic, coined and created by Rudolph Steiner, is a complex system focused on maintaining the farm with only the resources of the property. Limiting the input from the outside the farm requires “preparations” to keep the soil healthy and vital enough for Jeff to produce a weekly CSA offering (Community Supported Agriculture) for 150 people and an upscale, local foods restaurant, “Husk“. Biodynamics requires a holistic view of farming and care of the land which includes much more as part of the system than other farming systems. With attention to the movement of planets and stars, the utilization of crystalline powder (silica), intentional placement

of minerals and herbs into compost piles, and seemingly innumerable other practices. Biodynamics has in some circles become taboo. Hungry Creek Farms is has rich moist soils that need are not irrigated, lush leafy greens, numerous cows, and a continuous history of farming since before Jeff arrived to the land. Biodynamics is hard for many to swallow, but it appears to be working for Jeff.

Hungry Creek Farms with its lush fields has, as with any long standing business, had its challenges. Over the years Jeff and the farm, have weathered a variety of political, economic, and social changes while remaining biodynamic. Biodynamic farms are organic in the traditional meaning and HCF was once certified organic. But then politics entered organic farming. Now USDA owns the word “organic” and only those who follow USDA’s rules can legally use the term. When Jeff began farming, he says, he and many others were learning and exploring what organic was using concepts from old-timey farming manuals written before World War II. Since USDA appropriated the term, Jeff contends, organic is little different from conventional farming. “You just use different inputs.” In effect USDA’s approach to organic promotes purchase of external inputs. When applied to fields even organic fertilizers often remain unavailable to the plants consequently making them more susceptible to bugs and in need of synthetic pest control. This manipulation of the marketplace has led Jeff to drop his organic certification and opt for direct sales to customers through the CSA model. For over 15 years this has been his business model selling mostly to residents of Nashville. He sells some to his neighbors and community, but, unlike Nashville, most people in the area keep a small garden and don’t have the same need for his fresh vegetables.

After setting the trellises and harvesting squash for the CSA shares delivery the next day, we ride back down the mountain to stay the night at Hungry Creek Farms. After a most beautiful sunset we spent the rest of our evening on the porch of the old cabin, built in 1924, playing music with Jeff and talking. It’s a unique cabin that, as Jeff’s carpenter friend told him, “was built by damn farmers!” With odd angles and sometimes slumped floors it has served as Jeff’s home for only a year and a half. He chose to remodel the cabin 2 years ago when a Tyson chicken farm was built right next to his old house--“150 feet from my kitchen sink.”

Jeff becomes even more intense as he talks about the debacle he and his neighbors faced as Tyson moved in. His old home was made of stone, and sat close to a cave where he used to keep vegetables after harvest. He’s not only relocated his home, he ended up purchasing a small building in town where he now keeps his vegetables. The basement with an air conditioner is sufficient but he clearly misses having the cave to use. “The only good thing that happened [during Tyson’s move in] was that my neighbors and I met every week to talk about the chicken farm”, Jeff points out that they used to be strangers. A mix of “hippie”, state trooper, and a Baptist preacher, they had never had any common ground until then. “Now”, he says, “we care about each other, and hug when we see one another.” This comes after a long road of learning about Tyson as a company and the food industry as a whole. The real breakthrough happened when a local news agency came to interview Jeff about the situation. His neighbors were witness to the whole interview and when they saw it later on TV, “it was totally different, and cut up to make it look like we supported Tyson”, making them question the power of the agro-industrial complex.

This close bonding was the only tangible thing that, in the end, worked out in their favor. After the fact Jeff spent a long time thinking about the problem, “sometimes, it was all I thought about.” At first he thought Tyson was the problem but he realized, “it’s the whole American agriculture system” which leads to huge companies like Tyson. With this realization he decided he needed to channel his anger into something productive. For 4 years now he’s been hosting

Local Food Summits in “very conservative places where they don’t get this kind of information” bringing his own knowledge with a host of other presenters. The last 3 years he’s recruited hosts of a mainstream church and two conservative colleges in Nashville and this coming spring the host will be Vanderbilt.

With this new spring conference he now hosts 2 events a year, the other is a fall harvest festival held on his own property for the past 30 years. It’s a time of, “celebration, inspiration and fun”, for the people in the area and not quite so formal. For 30 years he and others in the region have talked about organics, hosted musicians, and furnished a large feast from the bounty. On our second day Jeff took us on a tour of the property and showed us the stage with a small shelter next to it, the outhouses they built, and what used to be an old post office. This area is mostly quiet outside of the harvest festival but sometimes people will come and have weddings in the old post office or events on the stage.

Early Monday morning after our night of music and storytelling, Jim is up before dawn, barely beating the interns’ arrival. They live on the property near the Tyson farm where Jeff used to live. As I walk downstairs I can hear Jeff on the phone, and I smell coffee brewing. As the morning passes Jeff is on the phone frequently with friends and his market manager. We can hear the market manager say that customers are dropping out of the CSA due to low quality. Jeff is fixing us coffee, talking on the phone and answering our questions while his interns are in the fields harvesting fresh vegetables for the CSA. They’ve been harvesting and prepping here since before dawn. We can see have been infected by the Jeff’s intensity. He is always moving quickly from one thing to another. When he speaks though, he is calmer. Sometimes he doesn’t answer our questions at all. He just thinks for a while and begins talking about something else, only to come back to our original question later.

When we first sit down to talk with Jeff, the interns are up the hill harvesting greens for the CSA. Jeff says that he’s, “always had interns, though, they weren’t always called that. In the beginning people would just come to stay for as long as they liked. As he and other “free thinking people” started organic farms and built up the market demand, they hit a “critical mass”, and felt the need to start showing people what they were doing. In the 90’s the visitors became “interns” who were trying to learn how to farm for themselves. Dozens, Jeff tells us, have now become farmer on their own after interning with Jeff. These include the farms [Bells Bend](#), [Glen Leven](#) and [Green Door](#).

It was also in the 90’s that congress passed the Organic Protection Act where, in Jeff’s words, “USDA had to decide what organic meant”. This led to the organic certification, and “monopolization” of the term by USDA. It was 2002 when Jeff gave up his certification because he, “didn’t want to play the game anymore”. Around that same time is when he gave up his Biodynamic certification as well. In the past he had been selling to small grocers who needed some kind of certification for their customers as an assurance. Since 2002 though, those same small grocers have in large part been bought out by a larger corporation, Whole Foods. Jeff is far more in favor of local economies and so chose to use the CSA model engineered by Rudolph Steiner. This is a model of Associative Economics where Jeff is, “exchanging nature with labor for monetary value as something the buyer and seller can agree on and neither try’s to take advantage of the other”. Some of his members have been buying from the CSA for 15 years!

Rudolph Steiner is a main influence on Jeff and thousands of others since he gave a mere eight lectures on agriculture around the turn of the last century. Rudolph, a philosopher, teacher of Eastern principals and mediation was asked to give his thoughts on agriculture as crops around the country were becoming weaker. These talks began to attract more interest shortly after World

War II as the fertilizer industry took off by producing nitrogen fertilizers based on the same technology invented by Germans to produce gunpowder. Extracting nitrogen from the air, it is in a form that is unavailable to the roots of plants. Biodynamics teaches that humanity has “emancipated itself”, from nature, falling out of rhythm with the cycles of the earth. Jeff explains that the “preparations” so key to biodynamic farming came straight from Rudolph Steiner to help harmonize humanity to the earth. He also sought to be true to the history of farms that found the nourishment needed from the land and animals, not from a fertilizer/gunpowder factory.

Cows and, “all animals of cloven hoof”, are the heart of biodynamics. Jeff talks about their digestive system that digests grass for up to 18 days and by the end creates exactly the nutrients plants need. Jeff says “organic farming is basically raising animals and utilizing the properties of the cow that, through its digestion, can fertilizer four acres while only eating two.” Not only do these animals create ready-made compost, their hooves act to till the soil and incorporate the nutrients to build up the soil. Moreover many body parts of the cow are used in Rudolph Steiner’s biodynamic “preparations” like the stomach, intestine, head, and horns to add additional nutrient to the land. Jeff compares biodynamic farming to the supposed “land of milk and honey” in the bible saying that where cows are raised, people tend to prosper and the ground is healthy. He challenges the common notion that over-grazing is a problem. He counters that *under grazing* is really the issue, and that since removing cattle from farms and replacing them with artificially fertilized monoculture crops soil health has been lost.

In the distance we hear the interns’ truck careening up the hill as Jeff complains that they drive too fast. The truck bed is loaded down with bushels of lettuce, spinach, and basil fresh from the field. Kristina hops out of the truck enthusiastically saying they harvested over 200 heads of lettuce and that she’s about to begin washing them. She and Alex begin filling buckets with water to wash the greens, Kristina talking and joking as they go. We move inside to continue the interview around the kitchen table.

Once inside Jeff begins to make breakfast for everyone. Whole wheat pancakes with a touch of honey, he soon cooks them on his antique stove in cast iron skillets. As he finds and mixes ingredients, he continues to talk with us about his farm and his life.

He moved onto the farm after turning 17. His brother had purchased it initially but didn’t stay too long opting to move nearer to their parents. Fortunately Jeff had some experience of organic farming thanks to his father, a mathematician turned organic farmer at the age of 40. His father had spent his whole life trying not to be a farmer teaching mathematics instead had an “epiphany” and chose to open an organic nursery. For his father this “epiphany” was founded in his desire to eat food that wasn’t poisoned by chemicals. Jeff’s “epiphany” came when, “it was wintertime and I didn’t have anything to eat.” He started small with a horse and a tractor that “didn’t work too well” to help him till the soil and plant his crops. Grafting apple and pear trees and planting small gardens he said he just “piddled” the first few years getting a grasp on growing vegetables. Anymore he says, “I don’t grow plants, I don’t necessarily even like plants, I grow soil. I put all my energy into creating soil that plants thrive in”. All over the farm now he has a variety of squashes, multiple other vegetables, heirloom corn, greens, garlic, onions, orchards, and herbs all growing in soil he has nourished by hand for thirty-plus years.

Later in the day we got a good grasp on how diverse his crops are as we drove through the rolling hills of north central Tennessee. His fields are all nestled in patches of woods that cover the hillsides. Jeff explains that the wooded areas are crucial to the survival of his crops. He says the forest acts to shade and cool the ground, provide oxygen to the environment and, in tandem with the composting he does, raises the water table making it more available for his gardens. In fact, he

views all the aspects of the forest as crucial to the farm. The nutrients required by his plants come in part from the waste of woodland animals or plant life in the woods. I marvel at how he views his farm as such a large system interacting to sustain itself between wildlife and cultivated fields.

His thoughts on raising the water table come from a variety of sources from turn of the century thinkers like Steiner and Wilhelm Reich and from the small leather-bound textbooks he shows us between flipping pancakes. They're from 1905-1912 and intended for 7th graders to learn about agriculture. I gather that these are the same books he uses to teach his interns. These are books handed down from his father that in his first years of farming taught him to save seeds, compost, turn soil, rotate crops, and keep farm animals. In his opinion most of the published material now is aimed to get farmers to buy more products instead of actually farming.

Jeff extends a lot of energy spreading this information that he has. Whether it's talking with interviewers like us, teaching his own interns and the larger community or new farmers, he's always willing to share his knowledge. Right now he tells us he's consulting for a number of start-up farms in the area. In fact, as we continued exploring the Nashville region, we run into many farmers had either been taught directly by Jeff or were influenced by his teachings.

Jeff lives anything but a solitary life on the mountain, though he does feel that he is "childlike" in his understanding of the outside. He focuses on his farm, friends and conferences to educate people on what he knows and spread what he views as the real organic agriculture. As we left the farm, trailing behind Jeff's large white cargo van filled with vegetables, we planned to meet up with him again in Nashville at the CSA distribution site, to drop off a delivery to Husk Restaurant, and attend a meeting with Vanderbilt University to discuss the coming Local Food Summit in December.

Arriving at Husk, it's a busy affair with the restaurant closing down after the lunch rush and Jeff needing to deliver to the CSA. The restaurant is beautifully located in a renovated historic home on a hill overlooking downtown Nashville--far enough to be quiet and close enough to have a great view. Jeff is one of many local farmers listed on a large chalkboard by the front door--the suppliers for Husk. Specializing in local food, Husk finds unique ways to highlight their farmers with statement on their menu like, "mixed greens from the Barefoot Farmer". The staff seems used to Jeff showing up with no shoes and continue to work while Jeff mulls over the order sheet with their head chef. Jeff and the head chef talk for a few minutes about future orders before wrapping things up. We take pictures and jump in our truck to follow quickly behind Jeff to deliver the CSA shares nearby.

The distribution site is being set up behind a church with scales, order forms, baskets, and an array of labels to tell people what each item is. Jeff, Kristina and a phalanx of Nashville volunteers quickly unload all of the vegetables harvested that morning into the shade of an oak tree. Plenty of people are there, some waiting for their shares, and others like Al (the CSA market manager and operator of a food hub through Nashville Grown) are there to help distribute the produce. There are also other farmers who have their products to share. One is a Hare Krishna dairy farm producing Kefir, cheeses, and milk. I talk with a member of the local food pantry that is working with Jeff and members of his CSA to provide fresh produce to people in need. It's a great partnership for the food pantry and one that he hopes to expand in the future. Right now some of Jeff's customers have simply agreed to pay a bit more for their shares so that others can receive them at little or no cost. His main desire is to make sure he isn't taking any money from the farmers he works with, so having existing members offer to pay a little more keeps Jeff from giving anything away for free. We talk with some of the other workers and CSA members and set an interview with Al before heading out to secure a hotel room before the meeting with

Vanderbilt.

The meeting is at a place called The Stone Fox that our hotel desk attendant called a bit of a “rocker bar”. With a unique array of mismatched tables and chairs, records on the walls, a variety of local brews on tap, and menu items from hummus to hamburgers it’s certainly an interesting place to have a board meeting. The meeting itself is comprised of representatives of Vanderbilt, and community members involved in organizing previous summits. The main topic of the meeting is who to partner with for the December summit. It’s between a local organics group, or a larger philanthropic group known for its partnerships. Anna, Jim and I listen quietly noting that they want to be true to their ideals of organics, but are intrigued by the unique partnerships that the philanthropic group may lend in the future. By the time we left the meeting nothing had been decided, but some progress had been made.

As we got up to leave Kristina gave us all hugs, making sure we had each other’s contact information. Once outside as we neared the truck Jeff left his meeting to make sure he could tell Jim goodbye. He was wearing flip-flops to appease the restaurant owners.