Flour Power

People’s Company Bakery

Phil Anderson

Floury fingerprints of bakeries past dot the streets of South Minneapolis. Where once—in 1935—115 “Bakers—Retail” were listed in the city directory, by the 1980s and 1990s barely two dozen remained, and some of those were outlet stores or cookie shops.¹

Today, some of those fingerprints have become coffee shops, private homes, social-service agencies, nail shops, or small retail stores. One location, however, has retained a baked-goods function since 1915: 1534 East Lake Street. Over nearly a hundred years, this storefront at Bloomington Avenue has had 17 proprietors. Some brought their skills from other countries, and some learned the bread-and-cake business in the U.S. But the longest-lasting bakers at 1534 East Lake were a large band of counter-culture pioneers. They were probably the first to make and sell granola in Minnesota, and they nurtured and accelerated health-food trends that are still with us. Collectively, they were the People’s Company Bakery, tenants from 1971 to 2002.²

The story of People’s Company contrasts dramatically with those of its predecessors. In 1971 the new bakers actually did throw out the old ways of doing things—not only modes of working and marketing but also some typical bread ingredients. Additionally, they brought a social and economic awareness to replace old-fashioned boosterism. And by virtue of their setting, they were both witness to and sometimes a catalyst for South Minneapolis’s changing neighborhoods. In retrospect, they were a significant transitional enterprise.

“Neighborhood bakery” is a slippery term, often limited by nostalgia. A widely cited figure in American baking history is that in 1890, 90 percent of bread was made in the home. But as the twentieth century progressed, bakers’ ambitions and consumers’ budgets built a mutually supportive sell-and-buy relationship around loaves, pies, cakes, and doughnuts. Historically, bakeries were walkable destinations; a 1956 textbook proposed a two-to-three block radius for effective neighborhood service. (Bakers also typically lived either on the premises or within a few blocks.³ At multiple high-traffic intersections in larger cities, citizens could count on a retail mix of butcher shops, bakeries, dry cleaners, shoe repair, hardware stores, and the like.

Through much of the twentieth century, including PCB’s formative years, 1534 East Lake matched that picture. In 1905, when the storefront first had tenants, its corner was a hive of activity. Lake Street had long been an important east-west artery, first for carriages, then for weekend cyclists, and ultimately for motor vehicles and public transport—especially the Lake Street Cross Town Line, com-

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While bakeries big and small operated all over Minneapolis throughout the twentieth century, this half of the city—south of Franklin Avenue—was home to both more and longer-lasting ones. As the decades progressed, fewer and fewer neighborhood bakers and grocers held on, their numbers dramatically declining by the 1960s. Yet analysis of city directories over a century shows a more concentrated survival of Bakers—Retail in this area than others. A partial explanation of this anomaly could be the historically more residential, more Scandinavian districts east of Hiawatha Avenue, where neighborhood bakeries remained well into the 1970s, even as other parts of the city lost many of theirs.4

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entrepreneur who moved on to other locations and careers. By contrast, Caro M. Brown (1919–21), Minnesota born, seemed a harbinger of informed industrialism: She had a degree in cereal chemistry from the University of Minnesota and had worked for a Canadian miller.6

Brown’s position as a woman bakery owner was potentially symbolic. Before 1900, home baking dominated the field, but the new century’s commercial bakers had been industrializing rapidly—and disparaging the “competition.” Fueled by pure-food scares and the federal government’s new regulations, they had decided the housewife was their enemy. “One thing which we bakers in the larger cities see most plainly today is the absolute necessity of educating the housewife to quit baking at home,” insisted Paul Schulze in his 1911 presidential address to the National Convention of Master Bakers. He told of a woman offering him her “Health Bread,” which he described as sickness- and potentially disease-causing. By 1922, thanks to bakery proliferation and wholesaling through grocery stores, the American Bakers’ Association’s new secretary-manager could claim, “While the art of breadmaking is not wholly lost, it will no longer be practical. The housewife has finally had to admit she can buy better bread from her baker or grocer than she can make at home.”7

Caro Brown’s educated tenancy at 1534 East Lake was an anomaly. By the mid-1920s she had become an insurance agent. Subsequent bakers fit a more conventional mold. A father and son, immigrants from England, took over the spot for five years and resided two blocks away. Other immigrants (from Germany, Sweden, Latvia) followed over the years, alternating with U.S.-born bakers. The true entrepreneur at this address (1936–46) must have been Richfield-born Llewellyn Day, who retired from a 40-year baking career in his last year at 1534 Lake. And 1946 was a good year to turn over his business. Although American consumers were then buying 85 percent of their bread from commercial sources, most purchased it at grocery stores, including the new supermarkets. While some bakers had long been wholesaling to grocers, nearly 70 percent of bakeries were single-unit retail stores.8

The postwar era established what
People’s Company came up against in 1971. During those midcentury boom years, bread and pastries were increasingly made from mixes in larger and larger plants. A 1959 trade magazine showed an automated Indianapolis factory turning out 6,000 loaves an hour. The 1950s also witnessed the rise of supermarket “in-store bakeries,” new competition for storefront bakers. In addition, the Food and Drug Administration since 1941 had recommended enriching commercial breads and pastries with thiamine, niacin, riboflavin, and iron. Suppliers touted additives or processes that sounded like synthetic fabrics: Wytase, Flufulote, Frost-O-Fast, Meedo, Lev-U-Dex, Lezirol. National baking chains conglomerated, home delivery was a competitive option and, by today’s standards, the product range was limited. White-bread simplicity was the norm.

At the same time, editorials in 1959 issues of Bakers Weekly broadly mocked “Dizzy Diets,” food faddists, and legitimate nutritionists such as Minnesota’s Ancel and Margaret Keys (Eat Well and Stay Well), all of whom criticized the widespread enriched-white loaf, “the baking industry’s basic product.” Although another 1959 issue of Baker’s Weekly provided a whole-wheat sugar cookie recipe, flavor was the draw. Nothing was said about possible health benefits: “These have the physical characteristics of the regular sugar cookies but have a distinctive nutty flavor.” Similarly, a long 1968 feature honored “variety breads” and their rich histories but recommended new mixes and automated processes, assuring that the results were “superior to old fashioned methods,” with “noted improvement in keeping quality.”

And yet, some neighborhood bakeries held on into the 1950s. “It’s funny about how that market model worked,” said Mike Jurmu, a third-generation member of the Wuollet Bakeries clan. “I’d even say that Minneapolis in the 1950s and ‘60s was closer to how Paris would be today, with local shops always at hand.” However, “Supermarkets, frozen dough, more cars—all these trends made it so by the 1970s the small baker wasn’t ‘feeding families’ any more. We realized that to survive, we needed a niche, and so did the other survivors.”

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Rise & Fall

Neighborhood Bakeries in South Minneapolis

Through the first half of the twentieth century, neighborhood bakeries in South Minneapolis were both plentiful and easily reached on foot. As population density increased, the overall number of bakeries declined while the number of specialized stores grew.

*3 were thrift-store outlets; 1 sold only doughnuts; another, only croissants.

**Only 6 were multipurpose Bakers—Retail. 5 others sold mostly pastries or cakes; 3, Mexican-style goods; 1, Vietnamese; 1, Middle Eastern. 3 were thrift or outlet stores; 8, artisan bakeries.
The long history of People’s Company Bakery (PCB) could be told from many directions. Three people working in North Country Co-op started it in 1970, and within a very short time there were dozens more founding parents and, eventually, hundreds of workers. Born in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood and located first in a home, briefly in a church kitchen, and then in the West Bank People’s Center, the bakery was a logical outgrowth of the buying clubs and food co-ops of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet it was not a co-op in organizational terms. “Workers were automatically members and owners from Day One,” explained Dave Wood, an employee in 1971–72. “But that didn’t mean much, other than everyone shared the work and responsibilities.” The prevailing belief was “The co-ops belonged to the community.” Fellow pioneer Susan Hoch noted, “It never actually occurred to us that anyone would ‘own’ the bakery. It was more of a resource.”

Financially and legally, People’s Company Bakery began as an unincorporated partnership “because the tax accountant couldn’t find another category for it,” according to Mark Suchy, PCB’s longest-lasting worker (1971–2002). By 1975, after the dramatic and occasionally violent conflicts of the Twin Cities “Co-op Wars,” the bakery (along with many of its co-op customers) organized more formally, realizing the need to “tighten up for liability and control purposes,” as Suchy put it. From 1975 to 1985, PCB was officially a worker-owned cooperative, with required staff purchases of stock and profit-sharing. By the early 1980s a professional manager answered to a five-member board of directors at biweekly meetings. Workers had benefits (“premium health care!” Suchy asserted) and, because of incorporation, the board was not liable for bankruptcy debt.

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The original PCB planners, Keith Ruona, Jean Kreyche, and Bob Smith, saw a future in a simple appliance: “Keith was given a 20-quart Hobart mixer,” Kreyche recalled, “so we decided it would be a good idea to start making bread.” Smith added, “It was a grand idea, even though that Hobart mixer was really more of a countertop appliance. But Keith had a great visionary sense.” Once announced, the bakery quickly gathered in loans from people in the community. The business assets cost $5,000; the premises were always rented. Within a year, the start-up loans were repaid, as business became good—fast. “Beginning with North Country Co-op,” Kreyche explained, “other co-ops quickly sprang up and wanted bread and granola. The demand for whole grain, natural foods exploded in the community, and the need for more dedicated workers at the bakery expanded, too.”

The new enterprise made an immediate and singular impression on two impartial witnesses: Minneapolis bakery owners Bernie and Judy Postuma, whose shop became the overnight production plant for PCB for several months. Forty-plus years after she first met PCB’s pioneers, Judy Postuma quickly recalled, “Oh, they were just the nicest people. They made the best granola.” Questioned separately, her husband, Bernie, replied with lightning speed: “They were the nicest people! . . . You looked at ‘em and thought, ‘Hmm, those people are kind of dirty.’ But they weren’t. And they didn’t know anything about baking!”

In 1971 the Postumas ran Nebel Bakery at 1819 East Lake, three blocks east of PCB’s eventual location. A third-generation Dutch American, Bernie was born to the trade; a grand-uncle ran a baking school in Holland, and his grandfather and father operated a bakery in Iowa. Octogenarians Bernie and Judy still respect the 1970s pioneers of PCB: “Whole wheat, dark rye, granola, no preservatives—look at it now, it’s all over the place.”

1971’s early successes had quickly required increased effort and a more professional setting. “Jean was convinced people wanted to buy this bread,” Bob Smith noted. “At first we baked once a week and it sold like . . . [chuckles] hotcakes. . . . So Jean went out door to door, calling on these neighborhood bakeries to see if we could rent space. And Bernie Postuma was entirely willing.” Bernie explained, “Nobody would rent a space to them. But it was twelve hours I wasn’t working, so I thought, ‘Why not?’” At the end of his day, Postuma put his utensils away; at midnight the PCB people came in. They greeted their landlord in the very early morning. “There was only one restriction,” Smith remembered. “We could eat anything in Bernie’s store, but not his cakes.”

PCB needed Postuma’s shop for just a few summer months in 1971, though the relationship continued. “He was always coming through in the early times,” said Mark Suchy. “A lot of these people working at this time were what you call ‘freaks.’ And here was a very straitlaced white
Wooden sign advertising the goods at Peoples Pantry, predecessor to Minneapolis’s North Country Co-op, about 1970
Many of PCB’s founders dismissed the simplified moniker of “hippie bakery.” Historians of the era note that resistance to war was joined by resistance to anything “establishment,” including food additives. A new definition of natural became linked to non-establishment foods and their marketing. Suchy stated that selling whole-grain bread was “a moral idea,” and Jean Kreyche noted, “There was this idealism that somehow we had the power to change the world . . . [our] idealism took the form of ‘Flour Power.’ We wanted to educate people about how to live healthier, saner lives.” Idealism and trust also fed the company’s hiring and expansion. Susan Hoch remembered, “Friends spread the word and it was just in the air. There were no ads. No one recruited or . . . checked backgrounds . . . Media used the term ‘counter culture,’ but it was sort of like a new, exciting subculture village.” Nationally, the Twin Cities were among the leading communities to establish co-ops of all kinds. 

PCB’s ideology was fueled by health-food gurus of the time, such as Euell Gibbons (Stalking the Wild Asparagus), Adele Davis (Let’s Eat Right to Keep Fit), and Zen monks who published The Tassajara Bread Book. In addition, some founders had been near-witnesses to one of the era’s signal political experiences. Jean Kreyche, Susan Hoch, Bob Smith, and Jean Gorman had all been at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970, the day the National Guard killed four student antiwar protesters. All moved to Minnesota for practical reasons (entering medical school or following a spouse or friend), but the fresh start of more positive activity was also a draw. Minnesota-born Mark Suchy found the connection significant: “Those people from Kent were kind of turned off to how violent the peace-movement activity had become, and they really wanted to get into something that was constructive. They wanted to build a counter-institution. And that was the period of ‘you are what you eat.’” Bruce Yarwood, at 24 a Vietnam veteran and not fixed on any career, showed up in 1972 and stayed into the 1980s. He remains in awe of the bakery’s founders: “These
There was this idealism that somehow we had the power to change the world . . . [our] idealism took the form of ‘Flour Power.’"

People’s Company Bakery may have confounded reporters and traditionalists, but it became a legitimate business. Wholesale distribution to food co-ops and conventional supermarkets grew regionally. “Goodies”—lime cake, sesame cookies, walnut coffee cake, fruitcake—joined their variety of breads, which competed with mainstream brands. “You
have to remember what a grocery store used to be like, before the co-ops,” said Jim Haefermeyer, PCB’s only “experienced” bakery worker in its early days. (In his Nisswa home, “I was the lackey who fried doughnuts and drove the truck.”) In the 1960s, “All the vegetables were in shrink-wrapped trays. I think Adele Davis might have said at the time that there’s two types of bread in Minneapolis: white bread and colored white bread.”

Davis’s remark may be apocryphal, and veterans like Bernie Postuma and Mike Jurmu assert that local bakers knew how to fashion hearty Old World whole-grain loaves and pastries without additives. Local bakeries such as Scandia, Ingebretsen’s, Egekvist’s, Wuollet’s, and Hove’s kept Scandinavian staples on the shelves, and Northeast Minneapolis shops sustained other immigrant traditions. Occasional articles in Bakers Weekly and Bakery Production and Marketing from the late 1950s to 1970s discussed “hippie” and ethnic “hearth breads” throughout the nation. A casual review of local newspaper ads between 1958 and 1972, however, revealed that the spongy, standard white loaf predominated. Offerings like stone-ground whole-wheat or dark Russian rye were pitched as special-occasion, connoisseur-oriented products.

One staple product of People’s Company Bakery may have been a Minnesota first: granola. According to Bob Smith, “Granola was not even trendy yet” in 1970, and other veterans from different eras at the bakery insist PCB was the first to make and market granola. The Postumas, who used PCB’s recipe in their own shop, had never tasted it before; Bruce Yarwood, who had been in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district before Minneapolis, said it was a restaurant specialty there. No evidence has been found to support or disprove the claim; small bakeries did not advertise much and counterculture ones, even less. But late-nineteenth-century health-food devotees could buy products called Granula and Granola, and middle-European immigrants as well as Seventh Day Adventists knew the benefits of rolled oats mixed with nuts and/or fruits.

Most likely, granola was a counterculture rediscovery. Susan Hoch asserted that the original PCB recipe came from a widely available cookbook, and she sheepishly admitted that when a major local food marketer called for the recipe, she happily recited it. (She also vowed that the eventual corporate product tasted like sugar-frosted discards from some other cereal.) Dave Wood remembered joking, “‘Someday, some big company will discover it [granola] and start making lots of money.’ It was the most outlandish thing anybody could think of.”

Central to Minnesota’s alternative food movement of the early 1970s, People’s Company Bakery followed innovations now widespread: using organic ingredients and whole grains in everything, ordering from local providers, and rediscovering artisan, preindustrial recipes or techniques. Historians of this shift in American taste, such as Warren J. Belasco, give “Flour Power” its deeper context.

In its day, People’s Company Bakery happily shared its granola recipe. Here it is again, transcribed from a typed copy minus the handwritten calculations for enormous increases in quantity. Note that the raisins go in after baking; like many traditional family recipes, this one is not a step-by-step guide.

6 cups rolled oats
6 cups rolled wheat
3 cups coconut
2 cups roasted peanuts
2 cups sunflower seeds
1½ cups oil
1½ cups honey
1 cup sesame seeds
1 cup wheat germ
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
as many raisins as you want

- Mix in large bowl.
- Spread mixture thinly on cookie sheets.
- Bake at 350 degrees.
- Stir frequently to brown evenly.
- When it is as done as you like it, sprinkle in raisins.

Experiment with other ingredients: walnuts, cashews, dried fruits, crushed rye, barley, corn meal, wheat bran, flax seeds, soy grits, cinnamon, ginger, etc. The secret is to keep the mixture in a proportion of 21 cups dry ingredients to 3 cups of wet.

Recipe courtesy Susan Hoch
Poster from the bakery's early years, about 1972, and worker in the kitchen bagging “goodies,” which came later.
might lead to being different in many things. This, not generational rebellion, was the implicit agenda of the countercuisine: food was a medium for broader change. If dietary rebels seemed a bit self-righteous, perhaps it was from their renewed sense of moral purity and political consistency . . . dietary rightness could be lived 365 days a year, three times a day.

Belasco summed up the era’s polarities: “process, not product . . . brown vs. white . . . slow foods vs. fast foods . . . craft vs. convenience.”

Mainstream bakers were not entirely blind to these trends; by 1972, Minneapolis-based Peavey Company was marketing natural and stone-ground flours and mixes, including PCB. Handcrafting became a national marketing concept, and products like Catherine Clark’s Brownberry Farm Bread appealed to nostalgia and this new approach: “The way it used to be. . . . Too good to stay in the past,” boasted its 1973 ad copy.

As the 1970s anticipated the 1980s, the broader food co-op movement weathered dissent. Market forces inevitably affected the bakery. According to Suchy, “As people got older, then they started saying, ‘Well, you know, we really need health in-

Early PCB work had notes of monkish sacrifice. In 1971 Don Olson, one of the Minnesota 8 draft resisters, spent “only a few months” at the bakery because of his upcoming federal prison sentence for raiding a draft board. But he remembered his first night at PCB: “I thought I was going to die from working so hard. It was the middle of summer, and it was so hot.”

Nonhierarchical equality reigned. Workers rotated through three different eight-hour shifts and multiple tasks: bread, granola, goodies. Pay was $10 per shift (about $46 today), and no one could have more than three shifts a week. (Later, the bakery changed to a piecework pay system that lasted into the early 1980s.) Because many PCB workers were also students or had other part-time interests, the schedule was not seen as a problem. According to Dave Wood, “Everything was very ad hoc, casual, informal. There was a lot of energy. . . . We didn’t feel deprived [by the wages]. It made us feel aligned with poor and working-class people, and many of us took satisfaction in participating as little as possible in the war economy.”

People’s Company operated in a context of truly alternative modes of eating, working, and paying. Food activists in other cities called their markets “conspiracies” and dreamed of fully separate “Food Systems.” Some co-ops resisted paying higher wages on ideological terms, feeling they would lead to a “managerial class.” Laughing at the implausibility, Susan Hoch recalled that an academic visitor to an early-days meeting “told us we should have our own monetary system. He was quite insistent!” Suchy mentioned with a chuckle, “In the mid-70s our bookkeeper said, ‘The price of flour went up and we’re starting to lose money because of inflation.’ And one of the guys said, ‘Oh, we don’t want to get into that inflation bag.’”

PCB’s employees were a diverse crew. In 1980 a longstanding worker listed “one Negro, one mulatto, one native-American, one half-native-American, two Druidic witches, one independent witch, one Chicano, one suicide, one orthodox Jew, a bunch of Catholics, a couple Children of God, a few Ananda Margiis [The Way of Bliss], drug-dependency half-way people, prison half-way people, a couple bisexuals” as coworkers. The bakery was determined to guarantee gender equality; the first of five purposes listed in its 1983 employee manual was “striving for a balance of the sexes in responsibilities, work and membership.”

Early women workers attested: “Oh, it was a hard job” (Jean Kreyche); “The hours, the all-night shifts. We had to heave 55-gallon drums of honey and huge things of oil, and the bags of flour you had to get up on your shoulder!” (Jean Gorman); “30-pound boxes of raisins!” (Susan Hoch).

The weightlifting seems metaphorical. Adele Davis’s influential advice on nutrition in the 1960s and 1970s still assumed that housewives prepared the family’s food. Kreyche summed up the feminist perspective on her attraction to the bakery’s combination of food ethics and hard work: “Much as I love my mother, I did not want the relationship nor the life my mother lived. And so you just go out looking. . . . eliminated what you didn’t want, and you look for what might be a healthier, more liberated—at that time—work for women, and more creative outlets.”
surance. Plus, this is not really paying me enough, now I’ve got a child.” More divisive issues, involving mass-market products and sugary foods as well as leftist politics, fractured several consumer co-ops in the historic Twin Cities Co-op Wars of the mid-1970s, when strict ideological factions collided in showdowns, lockouts, and intermittent violence. While People’s Bakery experienced some of these tensions, what Suchy called a “third force” of “just the food people” prevailed there. Two more radical employees left and “the food people evolved into trying to be more smart as business people.” For example, as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, annual profit-sharing declined, sometimes to nothing at all.31

In the earliest days, though, as Susan Hoch and others explained, everything depended on “Sunday potluck meetings, consensus, and trust.” With everyone a stakeholder and no one a middle manager, decisions were slow to come. According to Bruce Yarwood

We went through an evolution . . . [at first] insisting we don’t have any management . . . . When it was your turn, you wrote the checks and divvied out the money for the shifts and ordered supplies. It took us a couple of years to realize that some people are better at some things than others. And some people just simply did not want to have anything to do with decision-making. And of course there were other people who really got charged up!32

Management structure, wages and, ultimately, marketing concerns evolved toward mainstream conventions. By the early 1980s Suchy, originally a walk-in employee, was full-time general manager working on a business degree. There were five seniority levels. At that time, PCB brought “co-op friendly” consultants into its welcoming, awning-sheltered Lake Street storefront, as sales were declining. Realizing that it was primarily a wholesale operation, the bakery developed a business plan and stuck to it. This tactic carried the co-op for another 20-some years.33

Granola and sugar-free goodies kept PCB going, and whole-grain bread distribution was a solid niche for a good while, but by the 1980s healthy breads and treats had both more converts and more suppliers. First Cub supermarkets and then the Rainbow chain sold PCB loaves; 100 in-store metal racks and custom banners touted their products in mul-

Diverse crew brandishing tools of the trade, 1970s. Mark Suchy stands second from right.
tiple locations—next to other brands. By 1986 half of PCB’s sales were to traditional retailers. A number of commercial bakeries made inroads into the market, too. Besides going to Hove’s, Lund’s, or Byerly’s, South Minneapolis shoppers could purchase sophisticated, artisanal baked goods at Gelpe’s (1979), Pam Sherman’s (1980), Great Harvest (1983), French Meadow (1985), or Turtle Bread (1994).  

Competition does not entirely explain the 1985 arrival of Steve Spoering, PCB’s first professionally trained baker, but his addition to the staff was vital. Fresh out of Dunwoody Institute’s one-year baker training and with chef skills gained at Minneapolis Technical College, Spoering answered a classified ad and showed up in a suit. “It was hard to find a baking job. The small bakers had given up and bagels were taking over. The skill had been taken out of most commercial baking by that time,” making it “more like a fast-food job.” PCB’s offerings intrigued him.

As production manager, Spoering’s professionalism was a boon. The products had been tasty for years; Spoering both made sure they stayed that way and experimented with alternatives.

We didn’t have a steam oven, so we couldn’t do the crusty European loaves, but we tried a lot of interesting new things: focaccia, brioche, asiago bread. We tried a veggie bread . . . . We were on the cutting edge with spelt bread; there was a new demand for this gluten-free loaf. But we were trying to take on the giants, and we used expensive ingredients, like the honey and straight-up butter.

Others at PCB innovated, too, at the weekly experimental shift. Bruce Yarwood developed a salt-free bread that gained physician support.

Some changes were less positive. By the 1990s, PCB’s location worked against it. When the company first moved there, people joked that the neighborhood was “a suburb of the West Bank,” but now crime affected Bloomington and Lake. Retail neighbors included taverns, a boarded-up gun shop, a “sauna,” and a blood-donation center. Across the street was the Pizza Shack, the popular hang-out for Minneapolis police where officer Jerry Haaf was murdered by gang members in 1992. “It was pretty rough,” Mark Suchy said of that era. “We grew it a lot, but . . . we couldn’t make it profitable.” A bad year, circa 1996 or 1997, “put us in a hole.”

By 1998, encouraged by community leaders, PCB had solid plans to convert the former gun shop into a neighborhood café. Gang activity had decreased, and new Lake Street businesses were drawing immigrant shoppers from Latin America and Africa. Yet funding for the café proj-
ect could not be guaranteed, and wholesaling was becoming ever more difficult. Suchy explained that it was “hard to make a profit, with things like the unsold bread buy-back,” a new policy affecting all bread wholesalers. Instead of accepting day-old loaves returned from grocers, producers had to pay a half-price charge. In 1999, Suchy said, bakery sales were “higher than ever. The margins, though, had just shrunk away.”

I remember at one point, when “profit” was a bad word and “growth” was a bad word. And that was a lack of understanding. . . . The goal is not profit in and of itself unless you’re a standard type of business that is making decisions that benefit the stockholders and do not benefit the customers. We have no incentive to make decisions that work to the disadvantage of our members.38

McKell credited Suchy with taking the bakery through some challenging times, pointing out, however, that it did not begin as a commercial operation and “never effectively made that transition.” Yet PCB survived longer than many other co-op businesses that provided books, bicycles, hardware, day care, housing, clothing, and various repair and banking services. Some of the pressures affecting these businesses were internal and unique, such as the switch from collective to centralized management or the eventual embrace of advertising and marketing. But there were more widespread pressures as well: “We were having to learn new economies of scale,” Suchy explained. “We had to purchase more equipment to bring down labor costs. And as we were supplying the supermarkets, uniformity became more important. Bar codes, unit pricing, calorie counts in an individual serving—all of these were new and more elaborate processes for all retailers.”

With few employees left, People’s Company Bakery filed for bankruptcy in 2002, the day before Paul Wellstone’s plane crashed. “Most of the people there were big Wellstone supporters,” recalled Suchy, “so we didn’t know which part of it we were grieving the most. And that was a hard week.”39 Nevertheless, longer-term memories are positive. Whether measured in terms of politics or eco-

Ultimately, larger national enterprises (such as Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods) as well as ambitious local supermarkets expanded the “foodie” interests that PCB and its ilk pioneered. Surviving co-ops now match for-profit employers in terms of benefits as well as inventory. Scott McKell sees alternative food retailing from a wide perspective, based on years of experience in not-for-profit work both before and after his 1992–95 stint at the bakery.
nomics, in flavors of bread or primacy with granola, the bakery’s 30-year experiment had a lasting impact. Virtually no veterans continued in baking, though many moved into other kinds of co-op work. Others entered professions such as social work, law, medicine, teaching, or government.

“Co-ops are inherently value-driven businesses,” McKell observed, citing the Buddhist maxim of Right Livelihood to explain “what working in food means to me.” Comparably, Suchy claimed the People’s Company Bakery was a kind of community organizing: “Our ideal was the Mondragon Community in Spain, which is almost entirely worker- and consumer-owned co-ops.” The slow, awkward operational shift to full-time positions, a smaller board, and majority voting (instead of consensus) kept the bakery going through the 1990s with minimal compromise.40

Several PCB veterans feel that the bakery’s legacy includes another important nonfood innovation: more thoughtful management. Bruce Yarwood’s first, short-lived job after People’s Company Bakery was at a commercial bakery. “They thought that because I was a Vietnam veteran I could be a drill sergeant—really put my foot down. And I was anything but that!”41 Contemplating his business studies and how America’s workplaces have changed, Mark Suchy said that co-ops and collectives were among the first places to practice “Silicon Valley management.” Although decision-making by consensus was later replaced, “managers had to have a much more collaborative style. . . . Even though they had to make the final decision, it was in their interest to make sure that people were involved in the process.” Other post-PCB workers also discovered in new jobs that collaborative management got better results.42

Dave Wood, later a communications director for a nonprofit organization and graduate student in counseling, concluded, “We didn’t know how to do anything, but we knew we could do everything.” Jean Kreyche, eventually a teacher, answered her own rhetorical question: “Did we feel we were successful? It was just a royal high—so exhilarating, and hopeful.” Jean Gorman, retired rheumatologist, added, “It was part of a larger community that was learning all these new things, and realizing that they were safer, healthier—and that’s what we really wanted.”

Notes
2. The unrelated commercial/wholesale Peoples Baking Corporation (no apostrophe) operated ca. 1921–68 on Minneapolis’s North Side. In 1936 the short-lived Bunnie Ice Cream Parlor was at 1534 East Lake.

4. Eldon G. Burdick, “Lake Street, Past, Present and Future,” Lake Street Guide/Veterans of Foreign Wars Roster, 1926; Minneapolis Tribune, Nov. 23, 1919, D12; Minneapolis City Directory, 1900–93; telephone directories to 2000. The panaderia has moved to a larger corner location one block away.

5. Calvin F. Schmid, Social Sopa of Two Cities (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, 1937), 138. The author consulted every twentieth-century Minneapolis city directory or phone book and compiled a list of all retail bakeries on or south of Franklin Avenue; a few of them were merely sales counters at commercial bakery plants. This article sets Franklin Avenue as the northern boundary of South Minneapolis, with the Mississippi River and neighboring suburbs’ borders as the other boundaries.


11. Mike Jurmus, interview with author, Mar. 19, 2013. Notes from all interviews cited herein are in author’s possession.

12. For detailed accounts of Twin Cities’ co-ops’ beginnings and struggles, see Craig Cox, Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00074.xml. Dave Wood and Susan Hoch, emails to author, both July 24, 2013:


15. Here and below, Judy Postuma, interview with author, May 2, 2013; Bernie Postuma, interview with author, Apr. 30, 2013. All Postuma quotes are from these interviews. The Postumas left Lake Street in 1986, opening Valley Pastries in Golden Valley.

16. Smith interview.

17. Suchy interview, Apr. 4, 2013; Susan Hoch, group interview with author, Mar. 9, 2013 (group included Jean Gorman, Jim Haefemeyer, Jean Kreyche, Don Olson, and Dave Wood). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes of these people are from this interview.


30. Phill Baker, “A View of the People’s Company,” The Scoop, Dec. 1980, 15–16. The other purposes (paraphrased) were: contribute to personal and professional development of members/employees; serve customers and community as a successful cooperative; provide members opportunity to participate in management, share profits, and influence policy; and support suppliers that operate as cooperatives.

31. Suchy interview, Apr. 4, 2013; Minnesota Daily, June 2, 1976, 3. See also Curl, For All the People; Cox, Storefront Revolution; www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00074.xml.

32. Hoch email; Yarwood interview.


36. Yarwood interview.

37. Here and below, Suchy interview, Apr. 4, 2013; St. Paul Pioneer Press, July 30, 1998, 1A, 3A.


40. McKell interview; Suchy interview, May 23, 2013.

41. Yarwood interview.

42. Suchy interview, Feb. 21, 2013.

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