

Recipe for Disaster: Food Desert in The Heartland of America

LAURIE BELL

On July 11, 1954, a new public housing project, "Holton Homes," was dedicated on the west side of Bloomington, IL, in the heart of The Heartland - the "breadbasket of America." It was named in honour of Campbell Holton, a local wholesale grocery owner. At the McLean County Museum of History, a photo of the dedication ceremony captures a gathering of "Midwestern" (i.e. white) folks in their Sunday-best under the shady canopy of a huge old elm tree. They are sitting at picnic tables in the courtyard, looking toward an outdoor wooden stage erected for the occasion. This pastoral tableau epitomizes 20th century Bloomington, IL as a prairie farm town situated between Chicago and St. Louis, along both the transcontinental railway and the classic Route 66.



Figure 1: Historic West Bloomington, IL

As the millennium approached, historic West Bloomington and downtown Main Street had become severely underpopulated and underutilized. In the 1960s an east side parkway had been built to exit the interstate highway directly onto a long strip of malls and plazas, by-passing West Bloomington and gutting the downtown as retailers relocated. The parkway could be any such strip in America. The malls and department stores are now closing as new retail models adapt from brick-and-mortar locations to the online era. Grocery stores and restaurants take their place. Each is lauded, given front page media attention, and receives tax abatements to attract and

support its success. There is a large appetite in this town for the latest offerings in food trends, with a steady stream of new establishments, from fast food and brew-pub chains to a farm-to-table restaurant, from mega-grocery stores to a co-op natural foods store.

State Farm Insurance, founded in Bloomington as a local agriculturally-based company, grew to be a multi-billion dollar multinational corporation that employs thousands of US citizens, immigrants and international visa workers. Its headquarters moved to a sprawling corporate campus off the parkway, at the far southeast end of town. Residents new and old flocked to the surrounding subdivisions of suburban homes springing up as housing developers kicked into gear, overtaking farm and field. Each subdivision was given a name, such as "Fox Hollow Manor," as if they were ancestral English estates, not rural suburban households watching Downton Abbey on Sunday nights.

As the development of all these new houses, neighborhoods, stores and services on the east side accelerated, downtown and West Bloomington paid the price. Bloomington did not so much expand on the east side, it up and moved there. So much of Bloomington's existing and new capital shifted eastward with such velocity that its original core had fewer and fewer offerings and more and more vacancy. Into this void came the African American residents of large housing projects on the south side of Chicago, including the iconic Cabrini-Green and Harold Ickes Homes. They were forced from the homes where their families had lived for generations when these vast tracts of buildings were scheduled for demolition as urban blight. As the demolitions progressed and the gentrification re-development of Southside Chicago commenced, the twin cities of Bloomington-Normal, IL, received federal and state funding to provide small town-sized public housing projects and privately-owned subsidized rental units. Owners of large historic homes that had become uninhabited, or lost any real value on the local real estate market now dominated by suburban neighborhoods, converted their properties into apartments eligible for the rent subsidies. Displaced Southside Chicago tenants were offered immediate access to units in Bloomington. Those who were willing to make their way two hours southwest, through the expanse of industrialized corn and soy fields, could avoid the long waiting list for public housing

and subsidized apartments in Chicago. Another great migration of African Americans hit the road and rails, fleeing one blight for another. In her 1992 Nobel Lecture, as all this suburbanization and globalization was unfolding, Toni Morrison asked, “On the edges of towns that cannot bear our company, will we ever have a home or will we always be set adrift from the only homes we have known?”

These families from Chicago now live in Holton Homes and in the more recent housing projects that did not merit a name or ceremonial opening. However, Holton Grocery and all of the neighbourhood grocery stores on the Westside are long gone. All of the food access in this Heartland community is on the east side of Main Street, leaving the current West Bloomington residents stranded in a food desert forty years in the making. West Bloomington desperately needs a grocery store. And it has been deprived of one for a long time. The newest generations of residents have never experienced their neighbourhood with this basic necessity. Children born and being raised in West Bloomington have never known life with access to food close to home.



Figure 2: Grocery aisles in East and West Bloomington

Yet, it is not only the absence of basic food offerings in West Bloomington that is the problem. The increasing food disparity between East and West Bloomington is the additional ingredient that makes the existence of the food desert a recipe for disaster. Food offerings are becoming more and more unequal as the super-sized grocery stores on the east side keep multiplying and increasing in square footage, offering every imaginable food product from budget bulk items to gourmet organic tastes. On the west side, those with a car can go to the new, huge Walmart on

the furthest outskirts of town, beside the farm supply store. There, food stamps and the wages of the working poor go directly into the coffers of one of the richest families in the world, redistributing public funds and personal income into private wealth. Or you can drive east to the Kroger grocery store location on north Main Street. It's been there forever and is a fraction of the size of the east side locations. It is commonly known as "Ghetto Kroger." It is actually a perfect example of the contribution a local grocery makes to community life. It is the friendliest store in town. It's hard to go without running into someone you know. Lots of conversations take place in the aisles and at the cashiers. Mary Coleman, who teaches at Illinois Wesleyan University, which is across the road from Kroger, and lives in the adjacent campus neighborhood to the east of Main Street, refers to it as "The People's Kroger."

A small version of this community resource for shopping and gathering, located in the heart of West Bloomington, would be a godsend, especially for people with mobility impairments or without vehicles, including young people, seniors, and parents. For everyone, it would be another community hub, like the convenience store, the few restaurants, the Tool Library, places of worship, and Washington Crossing, an historic area right beside the railroad tracks being rejuvenated by Retrofit Culture, at the former home of Westside Clothing, and J' Soul Bar-B-Q.

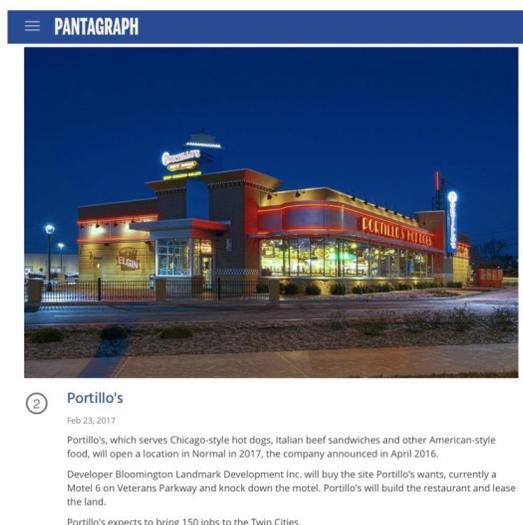


Figure 3: Bloomington has a large appetite for the latest in food trends

Just as the relationship between supply and demand drives the psychosocial development of the individual psyche, beginning with the powerful dynamic between our hunger-of-origin and its gratification - between the baby and the breast - so too our collective psychosocial progress relies on the relationship between the material needs and desires of communities and our relational capacities to satisfy them. Food deserts are created when public and private resources are directed overwhelmingly toward low-cost housing and high-cost law enforcement, while neglecting the very premise of human relations: the primal transaction of the offering and receiving of food.

The food desert in West Bloomington is well-known and was thoroughly documented in a July, 2014 report by the Bloomington Social Planning Council. Action on matters of equality and justice in Bloomington is often spearheaded by the group Not In Our Town. Racism? Not in our town. Homophobia? Not in our town. Religious persecution? Not in our town. To say, "Food desert? Not in our town," is to put the inequality in its place - as racial segregation. If there were two drinking fountains side by side in town and one was designated for African Americans and one for Whites Only, even if they were separate but equal, even identical, water fountains, it would not be allowed to stand. It would be a civil rights issue, worthy of outrage, activism and organizing. But to have two entirely different worlds of food existing side by side, separate and dramatically unequal, one on the east and one on the west side of town, is made tolerable only by a resistance to explicitly identify it as racial segregation.

The legacy of food deprivation and starvation that colonized the Heartland, land that is indigenous to the Kickapoo Nation, resounds as a tragic repetition of withholding food as a form of dominance, genocide, and segregation. The recent arrival to this Heartland community of the African American descendants of those who toiled in the fields without compensation or liberty, who created the wealth of the nation by producing with its unpaid labour the surplus capital required to attain independence and global economic prominence, is a process of integration being manifest in ways both progressive and understandably difficult in Bloomington. There is a

well-established critical mass of good folks in Bloomington who work hard to advance equality and belonging for all its citizens. Care has been taken to provide food banks and distribution of farmer's market donations of produce to West Bloomington. Charity and generosity are hallmarks of this community. Still beyond reach is the priority to have residents engage in the economic transaction of buying and selling food. Why not a local grocer? Why this stubborn refusal to treat the existence of a food desert as a crisis with a simple solution? What is the impediment to offering food to West Bloomington residents at a small grocery store in walking distance of their homes?

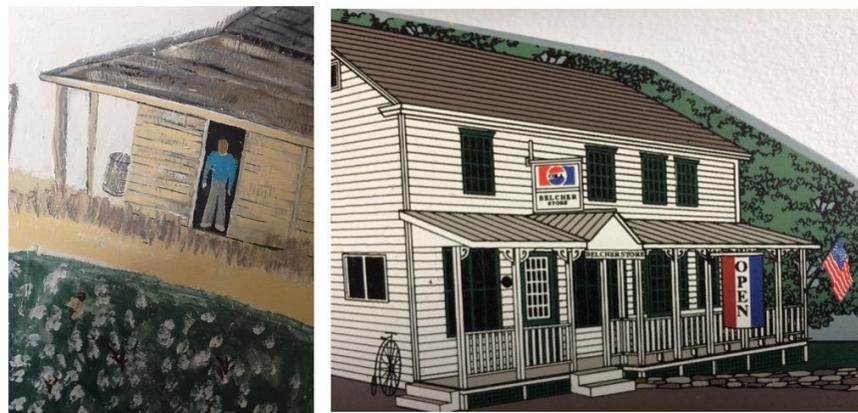


Figure 4: (Left) From a wall mural at Feed The Need, depicting slavery at a cotton plantation. (Right) Plaque of traditional country store

Pre-existing conditions of economic inequality that began with the racialized practice of slavery, continued through Jim Crow, and festered in Southside Chicago, persist as barriers to fully appreciating the ideas, talents, skills, and consumer power these new residents possess. But, in order for this force of capacities to be unleashed, it must start from a place other than how the residents of the West Bloomington food desert need help. To a degree seemingly still too great to overcome, the integration of African American residents – migrating mostly from Southside Chicago, but even from as far away as Oakland, California – is being undertaken without yet being able to imagine all the possibilities for greater reciprocity in this relatively new relationship. The African Americans who reside in the food desert of West Bloomington, segregated from the people living with such growing abundance of food resources on the east side, are at-risk of being confined to the position of “being in need” rather than becoming “just what this town needs.”

Common Ground Natural Foods was established in Downtown Bloomington long before organic foods were popular in town. It has stood its ground and kept its doors open through even the worst of times. Epiphany Farms is a more recent farm-to-table initiative employing people at the organic farm just outside of town and at the restaurant in the converted old firehall. Green Top Grocery is a group of hundreds of people that has raised millions of dollars to build a member-owned food co-op. Construction of a brand new building is underway at a location east of Main Street that will also benefit from food access. The Farmer's Market in the town square is a beloved tradition on Saturday mornings. Upfront Jazz is the place to be any night of the week. These are all community-centered food and culture oases in Bloomington that have the potential to bring people and resources together from across the spectrum of race, class, and location to make common cause with the residents of West Bloomington who would welcome and patronize a family-friendly grocery store.

What if community-minded businesses joined forces with the organizing leadership of Not In Our Town and the West Bloomington Revitalization Project, widening the frame to view the people who dwell in the food desert as being not simply those who were hungry and we gave them to eat, but as fellow-foodies eager for a long overdue shot at creating something necessary and nourishing in their own community? Who will venture to capitalize on that potential?

Ending the long refusal to provide food to West Bloomington, and beginning the effort to work through the obstacles to a neighborhood grocery store, will invariably contend with the institutional advantages that continue to flow eastward. The first challenge is to confront the urgency of the racial segregation that a food desert embodies, especially one located in the Heartland of America.



Figure 5: Abe Lincoln sits in the Town Square, Bloomington, IL, outside the Old County Courthouse, now McLean County Museum of History (Sculpture by Rick Harney)