

Cherish! Encourage! Affirm! Comal's Rural Heritage...

Hike, cycle or drive across the expanse of Comal County and one notes considerable turning of soil surfaces or drastic clearing for home or commercial development. When the turned or piled topsoil is placed in a mound it is easy to imagine how that soil was previously supportive of crops and pasture. Speak with many newcomers as well as old timers and they'll soon speak of the cherished rural heritage that has characterized much of Comal farms and ranches. Note, too, their excitement in describing the gifts of springs, rivers and a lake. This defines the attraction to become a Comal resident for their family future and home.

My own interest in agricultural production began very early with an in town "victory garden" alongside our family residence in a New Orleans neighborhood. The garden provided produce for our family and some of our neighbors at a time when so much we take for granted in our retail stores was rationed. In a very good week, we sometimes headed to the historic French Market. Though famous for the "fragrant" fish market, in another extension for vendors was an early version of what we know as our farmers' markets. My parents knew a few of the vendors and brought our surplus items to add to their offerings for shoppers. One of the recipients handed out items to those known to be unable to purchase much during those very challenging times. Just down the vending area were mule or horse drawn carts loading to move through the neighborhoods with a hand bell in hand and a forceful voice promoting "fresh, ripe" items.

Later in my life and professional work networking with churches statewide, I received an invitation to join a meeting of some "agricultural interests." (Lots of Texas churches are gathering places for a host of folks in that category.) Among the invitees were Texas Ag Department representatives, Texas Extension specialists and a representative of singer Willie Nelson. The focus was on the rapidly rolling "farm crisis" racing south through the center of our country. Two objectives for action emerged. A Farm Crisis Hotline funded by FARMAID which the churches would coordinate and regional farmers' markets that at first were located in shopping mall or church parking lots. Both activities reminded me of early conversations with those who toiled with the land and climate gifts and challenges. When I was asked "why are we doing this?" I explained that underneath the obvious immediate needs are the commitments to "encourage, affirm and enhance" essential agriculture near where folks live and shop. Among many was a cherishing of the possible and for the future a way of life and commitment to cultivate the gifts of the land in our various Texas regions.

Stroll through our Comal farmers' markets on any given day and in addition to healthy purchases from the vendors when they have a break, ask about their homestead and productivity as well as the challenges. You'll find as I have some fascinating committed folks eager to engage.

Let's broaden and deepen this conversation lest the cherished rural heritage vanish with the dozers once acres are repurposed. Join the efforts to encourage and affirm our rural acres still in production here in Comal County! Indeed, it will take the most cunning planning to provide good space for incoming folks while protecting needed farming and ranching. You're invited to hear from and talk with some area ranchers trying to protect and produce on family acres. Find the May 11th 6pm virtual event at www.comalconservation.org. "See you on screen!"