

by Scott P. Richert

## Consuming Ourselves

When my wife and I were searching for a house in 1996, we had a few basic requirements: We wanted an older home with a decent-sized yard for our children; we wanted to live in an actual neighborhood, not a new, vinyl-sided ranch development; we wanted to be relatively close to *Chronicles'* office; and we wanted to be able to walk to a grocery store.

Whenever I mention that last desire, most people look puzzled. They can understand wanting to be within walking distance of a school (though, because of the Rockford desegregation case, that was never a concern of ours), but of a grocery store? After all, you cannot get “one-stop shopping” and “always low prices” at a small neighborhood grocery, and that is how you should decide where to shop— isn’t it?

The neighborhood grocery is an increasingly rare institution, and many (if not most) Americans view it as a slightly more extensive (though less expensive) version of the convenience store: You can pick up a gallon of milk in a pinch, or maybe even stock up on tomato soup when it is on sale, but *real* grocery shopping requires a Safeway or Kroger or Giant or Meijer or Shoppers’ Food Warehouse or, of course, the nearly ubiquitous 40-acre Super Wal-Mart. Those who think otherwise may even be regarded as somewhat un-American. (Toward the end of the Cold War, it seemed that every visiting Soviet Bloc dignitary had to tour an American supermarket and express awe at the vast quantities of goods.)

Ultimately, we bought a house about six blocks away from a Hilander, a locally owned (at that time) grocery-store chain, and considered ourselves lucky to be so close. But over the past five-and-a-half years, out walking on summer evenings with the children, I have found a half-dozen houses within that six-block radius that clearly began life as grocery stores—square brick or frame buildings with flat roofs, large front windows, and central doors, usually (though not always) located on a corner lot. (Similar buildings with much smaller windows and side or corner doors were neighborhood taverns, and we have a few of them as well—but that is a topic for another column.) In

other parts of the city, a few of these grocers have survived by transforming into specialty stores—an Italian grocer sits kitty-corner to St. Anthony’s Church on the southwest side and opens for a few hours after Sunday Mass, while Pinnon’s Market, on the northwest side, and Longwood Market, on the near east side, are known as two of Rockford’s finest butchers. In my east-central neighborhood, however, the Rural Oaks Hilander was it.

Even though the store is still open, I write in the past tense because, in September 1998, the Castrogiovanni family of Rockford sold the Hilander chain to Kroger, the Cincinnati-based supermarket giant. About six months earlier, one of the two other locally owned grocery chains, Logli, had been purchased by Schnucks of St. Louis. (The third local chain, Dal Pra Pacemaker, is down to one store in Belvidere, east of Rockford, having closed its last Rockford store about a year ago. A fourth chain, Gray’s, is an IGA franchise, although the stores are locally owned.) Both Kroger and Schnucks have retained the local names, and for a while, the stores even looked the way they always had. Gradually, however, the corporate identity has wiped out the local one—which is not surprising, since, at the time of its sale, Hilander had five stores, while Kroger had 2,300 in 31 states, employed 305,000 people, and raked in \$45 billion in sales. Logli had only three stores (although one was the largest supermarket in Illinois), while Schnucks had 89 stores in Missouri, Indiana, and Illinois, with sales in the millions. Store brands have replaced local ones; floor plans have been changed to conform to the latest marketing studies; and the corporate names are becoming more prominent, both in the stores and in their advertising. At Kroger/Hilander, many of the students and retirees who manned the cash registers have been replaced with automated checkout lanes that may be expensive but never call in sick.

“Who cares?” big-market conservatives respond. “You should be grateful that Kroger and Schnucks—and Wal-Mart, too—took an interest in your town. After all, the sheer size of these companies means that they are good for consumers,



because they can cut better deals with suppliers and pass the savings on to shoppers.” This is not the place to argue whether their facts are correct (though I suspect that the lack of local competition is bad for consumers, particularly in smaller towns where Wal-Mart or Kroger acts as a monopoly); the deeper problem is that man is more than a consumer. He is a producer, a provider, a parent, a child, a neighbor, a citizen, and in many (or most, or all) of these roles, he is better served by economic institutions on a human scale. Whatever Wal-Mart and Kroger might represent, they do not represent that.

Once upon a time, the grocery was, like the local school, a focal point of a neighborhood. The shopkeeper acted as an informal source of news; neighbors greeted one another in the aisles. (I do not think I have ever run into anyone I know at the Charles Street or State Street Schnucks/Logli.) The grocery was often, in its own way, a neighborhood bank and charity as well. Today, we have replaced the decentralized credit extended by small proprietors (at little or no interest) with credit cards charging usurious rates, and the humane charity of the shopkeeper (offered through quiet discounts and the writing off of bills) with bondage to the welfare state. “Always low prices” hides a multitude of social costs.

There are alternatives: Here in Rockford, we can buy local produce at the 320 Store; fresh and smoked meats at the Polish Deli and Penguin Foods; cheese and bread at Caravello’s and DiTullio’s Italian markets. Because of competition from the chains, however, none of these can afford to stock everything that we need. And so, reluctantly, we head off to the MegaLoMart, to become part of the problem, not the solution.

## Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

### Mad Cow Madness



One of the hallmarks of our crazy, crazed, and increasingly raucous age is the insidious war that is being waged in most regions of the Western world against silence, virtually blackballed as an undesirable, something to be avoided at almost any cost, lest it induce boredom and reduce one to a piteous state of solitary rumination. It is virtually impossible today to ring up a business office, a travel agency, an airline, or a railway station without, while waiting for your respondent, being force-fed with music—much as the poor geese of Alsace and the Dordogne are stuffed with grain and corn to produce *foie gras*, or as the milk cows in many countries of Western Europe have been encouraged to ingurgitate vast quantities of ultramodern, protein-enriched, technically carnified meal to supplement old-fashioned fodder.

A few years ago, an ingenious scientist whose name I have forgotten decided to subject a “group”—one can no longer use the word “herd” for such captive creatures—of milk cows to this kind of sonic “entertainment.” The carefully stalled cows were alternately lulled or stimulated by generous doses of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert—Beethoven, I believe, was excluded *a priori* as too violent and upsetting—as well as to more modern rhythms, to see if this auricular enchantment might improve the quality of the milk coaxed from bloated udders. The music that most visibly contented the cows was neither the tango, nor the fox-trot, the Charleston, the Lambeth Walk, or any kind of New Orleans “Blues”; it was, quite simply, the Straussian waltz! The experiment, apparently, was not carried any further; but I am willing to wager that if some modern-minded scientist were to repeat the experiment today and treat the captive creatures to a sonic bombardment of “hard rock” or “rap,” the milk produced would quickly curdle in the pail.

I know little about agriculture—even though my mother once ran a fruit farm in Brittany, while an uncle of mine in Ohio used to produce the largest, juiciest, and most delicious tomatoes I have ever eaten—but I am extremely sensitive to sound. And in the more than 40 years that I have been living in France, and more particularly in Paris, I cannot off-hand recall ever having been so deafened—not even during the tumultuous, tear-gas-versus-barricades “Red May and June” of 1968—by such a concentrated mediatic barrage of panic-stricken and panic-striking “news flashes” and headlines as in early November 2000, when the entire French nation (of close to 60 million souls) seemed to have been seized by a new form of collective hysteria, deserving to be called “Mad-Cow Madness.” The trouble started—if a simmering anxiety of this kind can be said to have a specific beginning—on Friday, November 3, when Paris’s third-most-important newspaper, the left-wing *Libération*, announced that French scientists had discovered that the *côte de boeuf* (what Americans call the “T-bone steak”) was dangerous, because of its proximity to the central nervous system, and that, if improperly cut by inexperienced butchers, it could infect beef-eaters with the deadly Jakob-Kreutzfeld virus (more precisely, that mysterious new entity now known as the “prion”). Within a couple of days, panic-stricken beef lovers had cut their orders by 30 percent—at one point it was even 50 percent—to the consternation of meat dealers at the huge wholesale meat, vegetable, and fruit market of Rungis, southeast of Paris. In Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, and many other cities, as in nine of Paris’s 19 districts, school canteens abruptly eliminated all forms of beef from their luncheon menus.

The following Monday, France’s leading daily, *Le Figaro*, headlined: “*Vache folle. Des vérités dérangeantes*” (“Mad Cow. Disturbing truths”). On Tuesday, the prestigious afternoon newspaper, *Le Monde*, drew its readers’ attention to the “great fear of the mad cow,” and by the next morning—the “hang-over Wednesday” of November 8—the visual (press) and audiovisual (TV) storm had reached Gale Force 8 in a howling, decibelic climax. While the rest of the world held its

breath in anxious anticipation, news of the American presidential election was blown off the front pages of Paris newspapers by the hurricane impact of this new “crisis” in an unprecedented exhibition of national *nombrilisme* (navel-watching). “*La vache affole a France*” (“The cow scares France stiff”), proclaimed *France-soir*, which, its title notwithstanding, is a morning paper, while *Libération* shortened the formula to “*La vache affole*” (“The Cow Scares,” or, equally, “Drives Crazy”). The popular tabloid, *Le Parisien*, chose a one-word Hitchcockian shocker: “*Psychose*.” But the prize for lurid coverage was unquestionably snatched by the normally respectable *Figaro*, which spread over its front page a huge color photograph of long rows of strung-up beef, hanging from metal racks in a wholesaling warehouse, under the headline: “*Vache folle: Chirac décrète l’urgence*” (“Mad Cow: Chirac decrees emergency”).

The day before, in an “impromptu” television address delivered from his presidential office in the Elysée Palace, Jacques Chirac had called for the *immediate* banning of all animal fodders for the feeding of cows. This was not the first time he had proposed this drastic measure, easier to recommend than to implement, so dependent have French farmers become on the use of animal fodder to feed and fatten their cattle, particularly during the winter months. But the astutely chosen suddenness of Chirac’s *pronunciamento*, made during the 1:00 P.M. “prime time” television peak when millions of housewives are preparing or have sat down to have lunch, gave the statement an unprecedented impact. Not least of all, it took Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and his government completely by surprise. Wednesday is habitually the day when the entire French cabinet holds a formal meeting at the Elysée Palace, under the chairmanship of the president of the republic. This weekly meeting is normally preceded by an informal get-together between the president and the prime minister, where the agenda is briefly discussed in advance. Logically, and as a matter of simple courtesy, Jacques Chirac should have waited until Wednesday morning and given his Prime Minister advance warning of his televised address. But there is little place