

# the real dirt on farmer john

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**



This unprecedented story captures the rise and fall of the Peterson family farm and its resurrection through John's courage to build a new form of community. Against all odds, eccentric Peterson abandons conventional chemical farming and fights local hysteria to build a thriving organic farm and a progressive farm community.





## FROM THE FILMMAKER

*Taggart Siegel*

When I decided to make *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*, I wanted to pay tribute to the small family farmer and to Farmer John. He is a testimony of endurance, resilience and passion in fighting for a new form of community. I was inspired to tell a story of a person that was dismissed and dismayed and still found a way to re-emerge stronger. I saw it as an epic journey, grappling with failure but finding a creative way out of his turmoil. I have documented Farmer John and his family for 25 years, witnessing the drama of his farm and his life. I have been able to re-examine my past through my own personal journey with *The Real Dirt On Farmer John*. My first film, *Affliction* was shot on John's farm in 1980. I witnessed a crucial moment in American farm history when farm culture was beginning to unravel and disintegrate. I will never forget when I found an arrowhead on John's land and soon after I was riding on his tractor as he confessed to me that he was going to lose his farm. Saddened and dismayed at seeing my friend's life fall apart, I decided to capture the collapse of his family farm on film. It was my first documentary, *Bitter Harvest* (1983) that charted the end of an idealistic era of "Art and Agriculture," as the farm debt crisis forced John to sell most of his land and brought about the end of John's farming operation. When John lost his way of life, I saw his spirit break and watched as he became ostracized in his community for not fitting into the

rural straightjacket and traditional farm community mores. I always had a camera around so I documented our lives that ultimately ended up in *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*. The biggest turning point in John's life was in the late 80's when his community had scapegoated him as a devil worshipper/drug dealer and he still found the strength to start up farming again. Farmer John is a testimony of endurance, resilience and passion in fighting for a new form of community. My goal is to challenge preconceived notions about farms and farmers; to inspire audiences by a tale of tenacity; and to challenge viewers to examine more closely their prejudices and judgments about others. Also, through John's personal struggles and powerful connection to the earth, viewers will discover an appreciation for where our food comes from and the vital link to community. *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* is a culmination of 55 years of John's life as a farmer, writer and activist, seen through family home movies, photographs, film and video. By filming the emotional events unfolding in John's life, I've portrayed the fate of an American farmer and the impact it has on all of us.



## THE FILM

*THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN* is a character study of John Peterson, an unusual Midwestern farmer and artist. Photographs and home movies spanning 70 years are juxtaposed with recent interviews to document the transformation of a family farm in northern Illinois from a stereotypical Midwestern homestead into a revolutionary farming community.

In the 1980s, as the conventional farming economy collapsed, Peterson lost much of the land that his family had farmed for more than 100 years. Through his unique, reflective approach as an artist and writer as well as his passionate devotion to the land, Peterson realized that, ironically, in order to preserve tradition he must change.

## People Who Appear in *THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN*

### THE PETERSON FAMILY

John Peterson  
 Anna, John's mother  
 Lester, John's father  
 Mary Jane, John's sister  
 Harold, John's uncle  
 Arlene Larson, John's aunt

His community, however, was not as open to new ways as he was. As he brought people to the farm who didn't look, think or act like the locals, Peterson was met with suspicion. Fears about the unfamiliar and an uncertain future turned into extreme scapegoating, with neighbors accusing Peterson of dealing drugs, running a satanic cult and even committing murder.

In the face of this resistance, and through a range of personal challenges and emotions, Peterson persevered. Today the Peterson family farm has become Angelic Organics, one of the largest community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms in the United States and a beacon of hope for the survival of family farming in the face of the enormous power of agribusiness.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Definition

Biodynamic farming (used by Angelic Organics) is based on a series of lectures given by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924. Steiner's method seeks to actively work with the health-giving forces of nature. It is the oldest known non-chemical agricultural movement, predating the organic agriculture movement by some 20 years, and has now spread worldwide. (Source: Adapted from localharvest.org)

Community-supported agriculture, or CSA, is based on teikei, which was first developed in Japan in 1965 by a group of women concerned with the use of pesticides and the replacement of fresh foods with processed and imported foods. The literal translation of teikei is "partnership" or "cooperation," but the more philosophical translation is "food with the farmer's face on it."

CSA farms are financed by payment from members (or "shareholders" or "partners") who, in return for their financial commitment up front, receive a weekly share of the harvest during the local growing season. The arrangement guarantees the farmer financial support and enables many small- to moderate-scale organic family farms to remain in business. CSA farms also supply members with in-season foods harvested at their peak, ensuring maximum vitamin and mineral content. In addition, local distribution benefits the environment by reducing the amount of fossil fuels needed to get food from the farm to the consumer. (Source: csacenter.org)

Organic farming grows food free from exposure to harmful chemicals and in ways that improve soil fertility and create healthy, sustainable ecosystems. Recently, agribusiness has been pushing the government to weaken official organic certification standards; therefore, the official government definition of the term may differ from the use of the term among farmers like John Peterson. (Source: Adapted from localharvest.org)

Sustainable agriculture:

- Provides farmers with direct outlets for farm products and ensures fair compensation.
- Encourages proper land stewardship by supporting farmers in transition toward low- or no-chemical inputs.
- Strengthens local economies by keeping food dollars in local communities.
- Directly links producers with consumers, allowing people to have a personal connection with their food and the land on which it is produced.
- Makes nutritious, affordable, wholesome foods accessible and widely available to community members. (Source: csacenter.org)



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### General

- What is the significance of the film's title? In your view, to what does the phrase "real dirt" refer?
- If you could ask John Peterson a question, what would you ask? Why? If you could ask Peterson's neighbors a question, what would you ask? Why?

### Farming

- What role does the family farm play in America's perception of itself? What does it mean for the United States that the family farm is disappearing?
- In your view, what role should organic and community-supported agriculture play in the future of farming in the United States? Should the government or communities push for more CSA farms? Why or why not? What are the benefits of small farms like John Peterson's? What are the drawbacks?
- What was your impression of the barn-raising scene at the end of the film? In what ways is the Peterson farm a return to traditional rural values? In what ways is it a radical departure from the farm on which Peterson was raised?
- How do you think Peterson was influenced by his mother's optimistic approach to life? How is her spirit reflected in his choices about how to run his farm?



### Diversity

- Before viewing, think about the picture that comes into your head when someone says the word "farmer." After viewing, consider in what ways John Peterson does and does not fit that picture. In addition to the specific impact on Peterson and his farm, what are the broader consequences of our stereotypical views of farmers?
- Why do you think Peterson's neighbors scapegoated him? If you asked them, how might they have described the threat they perceived? What specifically might have frightened them?
- What strategies might Peterson have used to improve relations with his neighbors? If you had been in his situation, what do you think you would have done?
- Describe your reaction to seeing Peterson riding a tractor in costume. What conclusions did you draw?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as individuals and as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Investigate how current government policies, including agricultural subsidies and definitions of terms like "organic," affect small farms such as Angelic Organics. Talk with your elected representatives to make sure that the practices of government agencies reflect what you see as the best approach to support and regulate a healthy and affordable food supply.
- Investigate the locations of CSA farms near you. In addition to becoming a shareholder, you might find out what those farms need, then work with your local civic or religious group to help purchase equipment or to arrange for families or youth groups to provide labor.
- Coordinate with a local CSA farm to provide farming opportunities for recent immigrants or refugees who were farmers in their country of origin or to help newcomers create their own CSA farms.
- Invite organic and/or CSA farmers to your local school to help students learn about sustainable agriculture techniques.
- Meet with your local grocer(s) to find out where their produce comes from. Work with them to help provide the community with organic and/or locally grown produce.
- Find venues for additional screenings of *THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN*.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org), the website of Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

### To Start

[www.therealdirt.net](http://www.therealdirt.net) – The film's website provides background information on the farm, the Peterson family and the making of the film as well as DVD purchase information.

[www.angelicorganics.com](http://www.angelicorganics.com) – The farm's website includes information on its philosophy and operations as well as some of Farmer John's writings.

### Community-Supported Agriculture/Sustainable Agriculture/Organic Farming

[www.csacenter.org](http://www.csacenter.org) – Run by the Center for Sustainable Living at Wilson College, this website provides information for and about organic and community-supported agriculture, including links to related organizations in the United States and around the world.

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/> – The website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center offers a wide range of information about community-supported agriculture as well as a state-by-state database of CSA farms.

[www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org) – The website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program includes how-to information for farmers, educators, researchers and consumers.

### Anti-Bias Education

[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org) – The Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Center provides basic information and ideas for anti-bias education strategies.

THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2006 AT 10:00 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

*THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN is produced by Collective Eye, Inc., for the Independent Television Service [ITVS]. The Emmy award-winning series Independent Lens is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.*

*ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of Emmy Award-winning PBS series Independent Lens to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.itvs.org/outreach](http://www.itvs.org/outreach).*