

# NORTH COUNTRY CO-OP:

An Inventory of Its Records at the Minnesota Historical Society

Manuscripts Collection

## OVERVIEW

- Creator:** North Country Co-op (Minneapolis, Minn.).
- Title:** Co-op records.
- Dates:** 1971-2006.
- Abstract:** Financial records, collective log books and meeting minutes, correspondence, flyers, store operations files, histories and reminiscences, and newspaper clippings of the longest running food cooperative in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. Also included are records of several affiliated worker and service cooperatives that the North Country Co-op engendered: North Country Hardware Store, North Country General Store, North Country Bookstore, North Country Co-op Library, and the North Country Development Fund. There is also material pertaining to the co-op wars and the dissolution of the People's Warehouse (Minneapolis, Minn.).
- Quantity:** 17.15 cubic feet (18 boxes).
- Location:** See [Detailed Description](#) section for shelf locations.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

In February of 1970 West Bank (Minneapolis, Minnesota) resident Debbie Shroyer traveled to San Francisco, California to visit David Krall, who was sharing an apartment with fellow West Bankers Susi Shroyer, Keith Ruona, and Eddie Felien. While in San Francisco Shroyer's friends took her to a small, local bulk foods cooperative store. Later that summer Shroyer returned to the West Bank and soon after had the idea of opening a bulk foods cooperative like the one she experienced in San Francisco. What she needed was space at little or no cost. Diane Lynn Szostek and Alvin Odermann volunteered their back porch and basement as a storage and distribution area and the use of their truck to haul goods from suppliers to their home at 616 20th Avenue South, Minneapolis.

The enterprise was dubbed the People's Pantry, using one of the buzz words of the time, and within a few weeks word spread around the neighborhood and it gained popularity. The initial intent was not to operate a food buying club, but rather to maintain a stock and location where people could come and get what they needed at wholesale cost. In addition, the organizers of the pantry wanted to buy "natural food" at prices within their means. They were looking for economic and ideological independence from supermarket chain stores. That summer the

Shroyer sisters (Debbie, Jeanni, Vickie, and Susi) along with Szostek ran the store with the help of a handful of volunteers. As the pantry grew in popularity and volume, Shroyer envisioned stores where the work and effort were shared by many. Moreover, the stores were to be controlled by their workers and would be neighborhood based. Each neighborhood would have its own community store. Shroyer, a strong force behind the beginnings of the co-op movement, was also instrumental in the beginnings of the People's Company Bakery and People's Clothes cooperatives.

By fall 1970, Szostek and Odermann had asked the community to find another location for the People's Pantry and it was decided that the pantry would temporarily move to the newly opened People's Center in what had been a Presbyterian Church. The People's Pantry stayed in the People's Center for only a few months. In winter 1971 an inspector from the Health Department issued a warning to the People's Pantry and told the pantry it would have to stop selling food out of the People's Center. The pantry's organizers did not heed the warning and soon after the pantry was fined \$25 and was ordered to close. The pantry then quickly moved to another temporary location in the back room of Liberty House, the building in which Eddie Felien's underground newspaper *Hundred Flowers* was being published, on the corner of 6th Street and Cedar Avenue.

As the pantry had proven itself a viable part of the community and clearly needed a permanent home Shroyer, Dean Zimmerperson, Ralph and Ginny Wittcoff, and others in the West Bank community developed a plan to create a store that was completely run and owned by workers and volunteers. In searching for a storefront they connected with Thomas Quinn and Roman Iwachiw, who had been negotiating with Augsburg College administrators since March 1970 in an effort to rent a former Fairway storefront at 2129 Riverside Avenue owned by the college. The administration was not interested in renting to a community-run store on the grounds that it was economically infeasible. Unable to secure the Riverside Avenue space, Quinn and Iwachiw's community store, True Grits, opened in the Loring Park neighborhood and operated from June to September 1970. By October 1970 the Augsburg students began to take an interest in the idea of a community store and began to pressure the administration to rent the storefront. The Augsburg administration insisted that there be cash assets, community backing, and legal incorporation of the store before they would consider renting. Pantry organizers, with the help of the Community Union, sold \$2,000 of shares, received a \$1,000 non-interest loan, recruited volunteers, and incorporated as the North Country Co-op. After some resistance because of what they perceived as low cash assets, Augsburg agreed to rent the storefront and North Country Co-op opened in April 1971.

The North Country Co-op and its volunteer base inspired others to open community co-ops. North Country Co-op's business grew and as other co-ops opened, they acted as a warehouse and purchasing agent for start-up co-ops. In the next couple of years cooperatives opened around the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. Among the early cooperatives were: Selby Co-op (Saint Paul), Whole Foods Co-op (Minneapolis), Riverside Cafe (Minneapolis), People's Company Bakery (Minneapolis), and Seward Co-op (Minneapolis). Eventually the wholesale purchasing and storage needs of the local cooperatives outgrew North Country Co-op's resources and the function was split off to become the People's Warehouse. By 1975 there were twenty co-op stores in Minnesota; thirty if one counted co-ops in the area known loosely as the "Northcountry" (Minnesota, western Wisconsin, northern Iowa, eastern North Dakota, and

eastern South Dakota).

1975-1976 brought the turmoil of the "co-op wars" to North Country Co-op. The Co-op Organization (CO), a radical political group begun by individuals within the co-op movement, began pushing a pro-communist, pro-revolutionary agenda. The CO touted that "middle class hippies" were not able to understand or address the "working class plight" and that co-op organizers were "social elitists." The CO felt that the co-op community must turn toward a sustained anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist struggle led by the working class, not by the hippie counter-culture. They also claimed that the co-op community was too disorganized to be effective in pursuing this social-political struggle. The CO's membership was strongest at the Beanery Co-op (Minneapolis) and People's Warehouse (Minneapolis) but it had members in many co-ops around the metropolitan area and through these members tried to push their political agenda on the management of the co-ops. The CO not only tried to undermine the food policies of the co-ops, but the cooperative element as well, since they felt the members should not have to volunteer at the storefront. Moreover, the CO wanted co-ops to discard their cooperative, democratic management systems and replace them with democratic centralism under the CO's direction. By 1975 the CO had seen moderate success in increasing its following, but was hungry for control. The CO physically took over the People's Warehouse and tried to occupy several storefronts. At North Country Co-op, six out of nine members of the leadership collective were part of the CO. These six railroaded a vote to lift the boycott of People's Warehouse. Their vote was overruled by a crowd of angry community residents and co-op members who stormed the store, installed a new cash register, and demanded that CO members leave the store.

The "co-op wars" had a shattering effect on many co-ops, including North Country Co-op. The violence, controversy, and intensity of the political rhetoric scared away casual shoppers and divided the co-op movement between those who felt that a co-op's purpose was to provide wholesome, natural food and those who felt that co-ops should provide products that appeal to the "working class" at prices cheaper than conventional supermarkets and at the same time deliver a message of revolution. People who stayed within the movement became suspicious of radical politics, preferring to keep the focus on food. At the same time, others had been forced to reexamine what they were trying to do with the co-op, how the co-op was organized, and who they wanted the co-op to serve. As North Country Co-op pulled itself together after 1976 it reorganized its bookkeeping practices and revised its food policy to include canned goods, white bread, and for a short time, refined white sugar. The co-op maintained its collective management practices; decisions were still to be made by consensus of store coordinators, volunteers, and involved community members.

North Country Co-op weathered the crisis and remained a very key player in the co-op movement. It was a core member of the newly founded All Co-op Assembly (ACA) which was formed in 1975 as an alliance of co-ops who paid membership dues to belong. The agency never acted as a policy setting body for the storefronts; instead the ACA provided a forum for co-op people to talk with and learn from each other. North Country Co-op was one of the first co-ops to boycott the CO-controlled People's Warehouse and advocate for the creation of the Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives (DANCe) warehouse to compete with the People's Warehouse. North Country Co-op also founded an affiliated cooperative hardware store,

department store, and book store.

The recession of the early 1980s again caused North Country Co-op to reevaluate itself. Again the question became "were we selling whole foods or a new economic system? and how viable is that economic system?" Reevaluation led to further examination of how decisions were made in the co-op. The worker collective at North Country Co-op enrolled in a management class at Minneapolis Technical College. The class proved helpful and led the co-op's leadership to understand that good management practices did not necessarily eliminate the cooperative philosophy. North Country Co-op began experimenting with advertising, reconsidered its product mix, and took a hard look at its own management. As the consensus method had proven itself cumbersome, especially in situations that needed quick action, the collective rearranged its workload, dividing its members into teams with particular areas of responsibility. Controversial or expensive matters were still to be brought to the full collective and to the board of directors for consideration. In 1981 North Country Co-op's food policy and mission underwent intense scrutiny by the collective, the board, and the membership. Stuart Rosen proposed what became the co-op's mission statement and its food policy. North Country had decided that its main product and goal was the active promotion of economic democracy. As a food store they would favor natural foods and products that contributed to sustaining the environment and local economy.

In 1982 DANCe leadership approved a plan to give discounts to member co-ops based on the volume of their purchases; the larger the purchase the larger the discount. The intention was to give co-ops added incentive to buy products from DANCe rather than from mainstream distributors. North Country Co-op's collective did not approve of this plan because it effectively subsidized larger co-ops at the expense of smaller ones. They had a dilemma; if they lowered the price on products purchased from DANCe, they would undercut smaller co-ops. Yet if they maintained its prices their customers would be paying more than they needed and the store would be undermining its own mission. Their solution proved beneficial to the co-op movement as a whole. The store would continue to sell DANCe products at the standard prices and the income gained from the volume discount would be set aside in a special fund for training or assistance to failing co-ops. From this the Training and Technical Assistance Project was born and briefly run by collective member Jeff Nygaard. Soon the project was administered by the ACA, and later by the North Country Development Fund.

North Country Co-op continued to be collectively managed through the 1980s. However, general membership meetings were not well attended and the agendas did not often address significant issues on the operation of the store. The membership's main avenue for input was through the collective, not the board. The board, in turn, relied very heavily on the collective for its information about the co-op's status. The issue of living up to its democratic ideals remained at the front of the leadership's attention. The collective was restructured again in 1991-1992, placing greater emphasis on the teams and reporting procedures. In 1992 the co-op's mission statement was rewritten to emphasize the participatory nature of their democratic ideals.

In the early 1990s the idea of co-op consolidation surfaced. The basic idea was to consolidate the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area food cooperatives into one large corporate body with many neighborhood components. All co-ops would be centrally managed and purchasing and warehousing would be shared. Members of one co-op would be members of all the co-ops. North

Country Co-op opposed the consolidation proposal from the beginning. Its leaders, membership, and shoppers were committed to decentralized, neighborhood based co-ops. Only the Wedge Co-op (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Lakewinds Natural Foods (Minnetonka, Minnesota), Mississippi Market (Saint Paul, Minnesota), and Valley Co-op (Stillwater, Minnesota) entertained the consolidation proposal seriously enough to bring it to a membership vote in 1993.

North Country Co-op continued to operate as a collectively-managed food co-op with a worker-member base at 1929 S. Fifth Street, Minneapolis, until it closed on November 4, 2007 following decreased sales due inner-city expansion by Lund's and competition from discount grocer Aldi's.