

# COUNTING FARMERS MARKETS

ALLISON BROWN

**ABSTRACT.** Farmers markets selling locally grown produce were once vital components of urban food systems. In the modern era an extended wholesale supply system has reduced markets to negligible importance in provisioning. Yet the number of farmers markets in the United States has grown dramatically in the past thirty years. Examination of the literature on American farmers markets in the twentieth century reveals cycles of expansion and decline. Four surges in numbers are reported, with the most rapid rise following the passage of Public Law 94-463, the Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976. Between 1970 and 1986, markets in some states increased tenfold, with the national total rising nearly 500 percent by one estimate. Beginning in the late 1980s, farmers markets entered another growth phase, which continues. Research into farmers markets is hindered by the lack of consistency in classification, by incomplete descriptions of market characteristics, and by lost data. *Keywords:* agriculture direct marketing, farmers markets, food supply, Public Law 94-463, produce marketing, vegetable marketing.

In 1943, pear growers in Marin County, California, defied authorities and drove loaded trucks to open spaces in central San Francisco, where thousands of customers flocked to buy the freshest of fruit at prices up to 65 percent below retail. The organizer of these farmers markets,<sup>1</sup> San Francisco Water Authority officer and farmer John Brucato, saw in them a way to handle produce gluts resulting from World War II labor and transport shortages while smashing the monopoly of regional produce brokers. Brucato started six Bay Area farmers markets in the 1940s, a time when farmers markets were expanding, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) researchers thought that rapid urbanization promised a rosy future for this venerable institution (Brucato 1948).

USDA was wrong. Post-World War II construction of Western irrigation infrastructure and the interstate highway system changed the produce industry beyond recognition and destroyed the market for local, seasonal produce. By 1970 only about 340 farmers markets remained, many populated by resellers, not farmers, and many on the verge of collapse.

It was in this setting, some thirty years ago, that the geographer Jane Pyle published an article in the *Geographical Review* entitled "Farmers' Markets in the United States: Functional Anachronisms?" (1971), which examined the history and situation of farmers markets in the United States at the end of the 1960s. Pyle defined farmers markets as periodic produce markets where some or all of the vendors are farmers. Drawing on earlier studies of markets and fairs, Pyle differentiated farmers markets from other kinds of public markets, estimated the number of farmers markets in the United States in 1880, 1918, and 1946, and traced the history of selected marketplaces through 1969. She presented a quaint picture of farmers markets that,

---

✪ Ms. BROWN is a horticulturist and a visiting scholar at the Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts 01055.