

local

Brazos Valley Food Co-op offers students alternative to high prices

By JANA SIMS
City Reporter

On Tuesday and Saturday afternoon, vegetarians, "whole-wheat thinkers," and sometimes even a junk food lover can be seen traipsing across the yard of the home at 308 Ash St.

Their destination is a small backyard shed, complete with prices on a chalkboard, a tackle box to hold money and buckets and bottles of food. The reason? The former parakeet house is now the home of the Brazos Valley Food Co-op.

The cooperative (a store owned collectively by members who share in its benefits) has a vague history. It was started in the fall of 1974 when vegetarian and former Texas A&M University student Dwight Tomkins and a handful of friends began storing food and holding meetings.

Dwight's father, David Tomkins, said the group's purpose was to establish an organization that had enough volume and demand to deal directly with food growers. The food would then be distributed non-profitably by co-op members.

Besides being inexpensive, the food is organic (grown with only animal or vegetable fertilizers and no pesticides). But when Dwight graduated in 1976, the organization struggled to keep going.

"It kind of died down," said Gari Strawn, who lives at 308 Ash St. "Now we're trying to build it up again because it could be a good service. Lord knows college students aren't always rich."

"A lot of people who are into this are vegetarians, but you don't have to be a vegetarian to like to get your food a little cheaper."

And, indeed, when comparing co-op and local grocery prices on grains, flour, beans, nuts, seeds, dried fruit, spices, honey, juices, oils, cheese, tea and whatever else happens to be under the co-op's roof, the co-op is almost always cheaper.

The average price of popcorn, a popular student snack, at three local groceries is 43 cents a pound. At the co-op it's 23 cents a pound — almost half the cost.

Sweet potatoes, which sell for 37 cents a pound in stores, cost 18 cents for the same amount at the co-op.

Yellow onions that sell for 16 cents a pound at the co-op are 28 cents a pound in the stores.

All co-op spices, such as cayenne, curry powder and mustard seed, average two-thirds less than the prices found in groceries.

In addition, when compared with a local health food store that advertises the same "organic-ness" of their products that is found in co-op food, co-op prices are sometimes drastically cheaper. An example: Co-op organic

pinto beans sell for 36 cents a pound, compared to 49 cents a pound in local groceries and \$1.15 a pound in the health food store.

On Saturdays the co-op has cheese and fresh produce. The cheese is purchased wholesale from a local meat market and it's the only product that co-op members cannot claim is organic. Sometimes inorganic produce was purchased from a vegetable market but the members found it difficult to keep the prices low. So in the future, co-op will rely on local organic gardeners for fresh produce. Mary Alice Pisani said more produce will be provided as people's organic gardens get going.

The rest of the food comes from the Yellow Rose Cooperative Warehouse and Sweetheart Herbs in Austin. The organic food is ordered by John and Julie Ambler and is picked up by any co-op member making a trip to Austin. Strawn said the co-op then has a work day when everyone puts the food into jars, buckets (which are obtained from the Memorial Student Center by a co-op member) and jugs.

The food, which Mr. Ambler prefers to refer to as "whole" food (nothing has been removed from it by processing), is marked up by 20 percent so the co-op can have some working capital. Anyone who "regularly puts energy into the co-op" receives a 10 percent discount.

Shoppers are advised to bring their own sacks and jars and to be prepared to weigh their own purchases.

The Amblers rely on their experience with a large co-op in Oregon in determining what to order. Ambler said it just takes a combination of common sense and knowing what people like to buy.

Most everyone has uses for the basic food items such as beans. But for those who don't know whether to brew, boil or bury such things as yerba mate, the co-op workers can provide cooking hints and sometimes recipes.

Ambler said the co-op in Oregon did between \$1,000 to \$2,000 worth of business every day. The Brazos Valley Co-op turns about \$100 worth of business per week, with a lot depending on the weather.

Ambler said he wants to see the co-op become a "thriving little business" and his present goal is for the co-op to do a minimum of \$300 to \$500 business per week. With this amount, he said the co-op could move into a heated and air-conditioned building and order food every one or two weeks. Ordering once a month, he said, makes it hard to plan.

Aven Witthaus said she'd like to see the co-op "big enough to where

it's fresh all the time." With more workers and more business, the turnover is faster, thus causing food to be brought more often.

The original co-op purpose has broadened into three: To provide natural and organically grown foods to the Brazos Valley at low cost, to help people interested in natural foods meet other, and to provide nutritional education and information on uses of natural foods.

The co-op's only formal meetings are held every Tuesday evening in

the form of potluck dinners for anyone interested. People attending are asked to bring a dish or \$1 and eating utensils.

Most of the people involved in the co-op are Texas A&M students. Strawn said she wishes the co-op also had more of a community interest.

"Every four years we have a complete turnover," Strawn said, "and that's the problem. We don't have any really permanent workers. There might be one really strong student who gets 'gung-ho' and, in spite

of his studies, he stays over here and works and works and works. When he graduates, everything crumbles."

As additional people get interested and volunteer their time, the co-op can be open more hours.

Ambler said the co-op can be a good community service. It's helpful to low-income people and provides foods that aren't normally available except in health food stores, he said.

Now that the co-op is being revived, he said he's sure it will grow into his goal of a small business. The only question now is when.

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So, anyway, I found this guy I know who works there and I asked him just what they're tryin' to pull on me now.

Sheesh, I couldn't shut him up. He jawed for half an hour and I don't understand half what he says anyway.

But one thing kinda stuck with me. They ain't had a raise since 1976. That's four years!

Well, I don't know who looks after phone companies but someone'd better start. Next time I see that fella, maybe I'll listen a little closer. Four years...hey, they might even be able to tell me how to stretch a buck.

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