

Malabar Farm: Louis Bromfield, Friends of the Land, and the Rise of Sustainable Agriculture

Anneliese Abbott

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Anneliese Abbott's *Malabar Farm* chronicles the significant history of what was once a small private farm, and is now a state park, recreation area, working farm, and living history site.

In the uncertain period before World War II, bestselling novelist and Hollywood screenwriter Louis Bromfield bought several adjoining farms in Ohio to create a self-sufficient haven for his family and staff. Malabar Farm morphed into something ever grander as Bromfield's interests in soil health and sustainable agriculture eclipsed writing as his central passion. Still, Abbott shows that Bromfield and other soil conservation advocates started out on the fringe of conventional best practices in agriculture and erosion control.

While the postwar industrial boom increased farmers' reliance on machinery, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers, these were used sparingly at Malabar Farm. Instead, Bromfield experimented with numerous alternative tilling and composting methods, innovative farm buildings, and cover crops to restore his worn-out farmland to enviable health and productivity, with grass-based dairy farming at its heart.

This is an excellent narrative of twentieth-century American agriculture and Ohio history, but it also expands upon broader changes in social attitudes and government policy regarding land use and environmental protection. Its many historical photographs depict Malabar Farm's metamorphosis from a family farm to its midcentury zenith as a renowned agricultural and ecology education center and tourist destination. Images of indefatigable, elegant (even on a tractor!) Bromfield show him sharing his soil conservation doctrine at numerous annual speaking engagements, conferences, and farm tours.

While Malabar Farm has endured many fiscal, political, and leadership challenges during its lifetime, Bromfield's visionary emphasis on the careful use of natural resources endures. This considered, rich history elevates Bromfield and his beloved farm to their rightful places as influential agricultural and environmental icons.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2022)

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