

## **“Meet me in the New St. Louis”**

### **Could urban ag help bring the needed transformation?**

David I Gustafson, Ph.D., St. Louis, MO  
June 25, 2025

Ever since first moving here in August 1985, I have found St. Louis (STL) to be both wonderful and stultifying. The region is blessed by some amazing places. Chief among these is Forest Park (site of the [1904 World's Fair](#)), containing plentiful greenspace as well as popular destinations like the Zoo and the Art Museum, both world-class and both 100% free of any admission fee.

But we're also a city with a very troubled history when it comes to race. The downtown Federal Courthouse was the site of the horrendous [Dred Scott decision](#), later upheld by the US Supreme Court. Missouri entered the Union in 1821 as a slave state as a result of the “[Missouri Compromise](#)” of 1820. Fighting on the side of the north in the Civil War, Missouri largely avoided the turbulent [Reconstruction](#) that Yankees brought to the rebel states of the Deep South. Left to its own devices, St. Louis invented its own solutions to managing relationships between the races.

This included passage of a [1916 referendum](#) (the first of its kind in the US) that prohibited anyone from buying a home in a neighborhood more than 75% occupied by another race. Although soon struck down as unconstitutional, it was then replaced by other more secretive tools (e.g., “[racial covenants](#)”) which resulted in redlining – confining African Americans to particular parts of the city and hampering blacks' access to home ownership, etc. Among the most glaring of these red lines is the [Delmar Divide](#) – to its south, gated, mostly white communities of opulence, and immediately to its north, mostly black communities riddled with poverty and disrepair.

So, when I arrived in 1985 from the West Coast, I felt like had gone backwards in time by a couple of centuries. I was shocked to hear racial epithets commonly spoken behind closed doors and to find physical segregation and multi-generational poverty both firmly entrenched. While not unique among American cities, I eventually learned – directly from black friends who had lived elsewhere – that the racism they experienced in STL was noticeably worse than anywhere else in the US.

Troubled by all of this, as I neared the end of my Monsanto career, I began to approach several local leaders (including a past mayor, a rabbi, a leading academic, and several others) about what could be done about it. This eventually resulted in me forming the [St. Louis Reconciliation Network](#) (STLRN), launched in 2012. It has since experienced considerable growth under the capable leadership of [Pastor Brandon Wilkes](#). He had moved here in June 2014 from Cincinnati to plant a multiethnic church, just two months before the notorious events in [Ferguson](#). The aftermath quickly brought Brandon and I together, and we were surprised to learn we were both environmental scientists, in addition to sharing a common passion for racial reconciliation.

On June 14, STLRN held its 9<sup>th</sup> annual [Race for Reconciliation](#), now held directly on Delmar as the kickoff of the [Juneteenth Unity Week](#) celebrations in that part of STL. We had a record number of participants this year, nearly 500, and I am sensing the strongest sense of regional racial unity during my 40 years here. The awakening (including youth!) is being led by people of faith and is in response to the [May 16 EF3 tornado](#), which seemed to take direct aim at the Delmar Divide – starting in the wealthy neighborhoods just its south and then carving a path of destruction that reached its greatest width and intensity in the STL North City neighborhoods across Delmar – those already suffering from so many decades of neglect.

*Meet Me in the New St. Louis: Could urban ag help bring the needed transformation?*

Shortly after I finished volunteering for the 2025 Race for Reconciliation I drove a few blocks to the northeast to see how the tornado had affected the properties near 5135 Kensington (see below), the real-life childhood home of Sally Benson, whose popular series of short stories in the *New Yorker* magazine eventually became a movie musical blockbuster of the 1940s, [\*Meet Me in St. Louis\*](#), featuring Judy Garland and the Christmas classic: *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*.

Sadly, as with so many homes north of Delmar, Benson's home fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1994. The lot and its westside neighbor sit vacant. As shown below, the tornado hit the home to the east (5133 Kensington) very hard. And of course there are thousands more, many faring much worse.



The destruction that has come to STL North City has many of us thinking: Now what? On the evening of June 17, STLNRN and several other non-profits came together for a screening and panel discussion around a locally produced and highly innovative movie, [\*Vision\*](#), which cleverly encourages its viewers to capture a new vision for what these neighborhoods could become.

Watching this movie inspired me to realize there is now a wonderful opportunity for STL to emulate what has worked so well in Detroit and several other US cities: pursue urban agriculture. As explained in a [2018 TED Talk by Devita Davison](#), urban agriculture is radically transforming many neighborhoods in Detroit which had been suffering a plight similar to STL North City.

As noted in my [June 3 blog](#) and in the recent [White House report on children's health](#), the US food system is in desperate need of transformation. This is especially true in urban centers like STL North City, where the mostly African American community is plagued by a host of public health concerns, many of which are linked to the poor diets that result from a lack of access to wholesome foods like fresh fruits and vegetables (see detailed [reports](#) from Wash U's Jason Purnell).

But this is exactly where urban ag can be leveraged to radically improve outcomes – by improving diets and creating a wide range of economic opportunities, including farm to fork restaurants and shops that sell value-added food products based on locally-sourced produce. Such success stories are playing out not only in Detroit but in several other US cities (e.g., New York, Chicago, Portland, etc.).

As a student of STL history, I love the fact that practicing urban ag here would help take the city back to its heydays featured in *Meet Me in St. Louis*. (both the movie and the book). The opening

scene of the movie shows chili sauce (based on homegrown ingredients) being tweaked for flavor as it is bottled. The book mentions the home's chicken coop and multiple crops from the yard: apples, cherries, peaches, cucumbers, melons, onions, peppers, strawberries, and tomatoes.

Missouri was a national leader in specialty crop production at that time. While since eclipsed (mostly by California, Florida, and Washington), Missouri still produces a very [wide variety of important specialty crops](#), and the nearby popular orchards operated by the [Eckert's](#) family just across the Mississippi shows that the region can still be highly productive. And some entrepreneurs are trying to [bring such historic operations back to life](#).

[New foods](#) (albeit not all healthy, e.g. ice cream cones, cotton candy, etc.) were featured prominently at the Fair. But many of the new foods were healthy. For instance, a nearby nursery (Stark Bro's, the world's largest at that time, and still in business today, up in Louisiana MO), [introduced its latest apple variety at the Fair: the red delicious!](#)

In addition to the benefits of improved diet and enhanced economic opportunities, urban ag has other positive qualities. As explained here in a recent [blog](#), actively transpiring crops provide significant cooling to our cities. Locally-produced foods also confer food system resilience to shocks, as explained in a recent [detailed report from the UK](#), which highlights such benefits in the face of wartime or other types of economic shocks – all of which is very much of top of mind as we witness wars and rumors of war all around the world.

But how does the challenge to transform North City compare to the challenge that STL faced as it contemplated hosting the entire world in 1904? For the Fair, one of biggest technical hurdles was to provide the clean water that eventually sparkled down the “Cascades” – a series of waterfalls featured at the Fair. As explained by an [amateur historian with the St. Louis Water Works](#), this was not simple. New technology needed to be invented (still largely practiced today!) to convert the Big Muddy into safe, clean drinking water. In Sally Benson's book, she explains how a filter was necessary inside the home so that “some of the mud that came from the river was caught in a fine sieve.”

Are there even bigger challenges today as we contemplate what it would take to bring urban ag at a large scale to STL? Certainly there are many and they are daunting. But I believe that same “spirit of St. Louis” that saw the 1904 Fairgrounds come to life in only 865 days is still alive. Although still very small, there is already a burgeoning ethos of urban ag in STL, including [Urban Harvest STL](#) and others. And there are plenty of other local resources, including large ag and food companies (Bayer, Nestlé, etc.) as well as a [thriving AgTech start-up community](#).

In the coming months, I am hoping to bring creative thought leaders together from STL and elsewhere to brainstorm what is needed to begin pursuing a transformation of North City based on urban ag. If you'd like to join us for the kickoff workshop (tentatively planned for September 2025), please send me a note at [dgustafson@foodsystems.org](mailto:dgustafson@foodsystems.org). We can do this!