“KING CORN” by Aaron Woolf, Curt Ellis, and Ian Cheney

Have you been wondering why Americans are so overweight? Or why certain foods are so cheap? Have you heard our average life expectancy is headed down, not up? Two college friends set out with director Aaron Woolf in search of answers to these questions and were surprised by what they discovered. You will be too as this film follows a crop of corn from seed to your dinner plate.

Letter from the Filmmaker:

KING CORN began with a simple idea—we wanted to find out where our food came from. The initial surprise of course was that so much of our food came from corn. From a storytelling standpoint, I was particularly engaged with this idea. The story of corn is one that is deeply written into our national mythology. From earliest childhood we are raised with stories of Native Americans greeting pilgrims on Massachusetts shores with armfuls of corn. Hollywood reinforces our affection for the crop by depicting the heartland in countless films as an endless landscape of gentle rolling hills, planted in neat rows of tall green cornstalks.

I first found corn when, like the plant itself, I moved from where I was living in Mexico to Iowa 18 years ago, to study film. I loved the Iowa landscape and would ride my motorcycle through the fields, implausibly comforted by the notion that if I crashed, I would somehow be safe in those green rows. During those long rides, though, it never occurred to me that those plants would someday be the focus of a film that I would make, or that there was trouble growing in that rich soil.

It was through my younger cousin Curtis and his best friend Ian that I first began to hear about the tie between our agriculture and our troubled food system. They had studied the food economy and rural life in college, and we were all alarmed to discover that the American diet now threatened to make theirs into the first generation in our nation’s history with a diminished life expectancy.

But none of us understood the connection well. It was the fact that corn had quietly become the base ingredient for so many of our processed, packaged and least nutritional foods that lead us to the initial question in KING CORN: what would happen if we went back to the source of those foods, then tried to trace the course corn traveled into our meals. The revelation that Ian and Curt shared a family history in Iowa set in motion the entire project and offered a level of access to the farming community that we were privileged to have.

We found solidarity in Greene, Iowa, with distant cousins and new friends who often had as many concerns as we did about the present system of food production. Our year spent growing and following corn became a shared project between us and our Iowa hosts, and among the most resonant revelations we took away was that the health of our food is profoundly connected to the health of our rural communities.

In this same spirit, I feel that the seeds of an improved food economy and food culture will come from forging reconnections everywhere—between farmers and consumers at produce markets and in CSA subscription farms; between constituents and legislators collaborating on an agricultural policy that makes us healthy; between eaters and the food we eat. I hope KING CORN can be a small part of helping these conversations and connections grow.

-- Aaron Woolf
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

U.S. Agriculture Policy

History
The first Farm Bills were passed under the New Deal, and were intended to bring agricultural supply and demand into balance by taking excess farmland out of production. These policies kept family farmers on the land, without flooding the market with cheap crops. In the 1970s, under the leadership of Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, the logic of Farm Bills shifted and began rewarding farmers for all-out production, encouraging “fencerow-to-fencerow” planting. The result was a series of record corn harvests and a market awash in cheap grain... often available below the cost of production.

Present
Every five to seven years, the U.S. Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill. The complex legislation affects the nation’s food system in a variety of ways: environmentally, commercially, agriculturally, economically. What legislators rarely pay attention to, though, is the way the Farm Bill affects our food. In addition to determining which crops entitle farmers to subsidies and for what amounts, the Farm Bill deals with things like rural development, the school lunch program and biofuel development.

Recent results of U.S. agricultural policy include:
- U.S. taxpayers have provided more than $50 billion in subsidies to corn farmers over the past decade.
- Between 2003 and 2005, 66% of crop subsidies went to 10% of farmers.
- Between 1997 and 2005, the industrial broiler chicken industry saved $11.25 billion and the industrial hog industry saved $8.5 billion—lion from farm bill policies that kept corn and soybean prices below the cost of production.
- Over the past three decades, consumption of high fructose corn syrup has increased 1,000%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, the number of acres planted in corn in the U.S. increased by 39%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, Iowa’s average yield of corn increased 109%, rising from 86 to 180 bushels per acre.
- In 2007, 92.9 million acres of farmland were devoted to growing corn. In contrast, 2 million acres were planted in vegetables.

Figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture “Milestones in U.S. Farming Policy”

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Viewing and Reflection Guide: Thinking More Deeply

General
• If you could ask Curt or Ian a question, what would you ask and why?

• Did anything in this film surprise you? Disturb you? Inspire you?

• Do you think you will change anything about the way you eat?

Farming
• What role does the family farm play in America’s perception of itself? What does it mean for the U.S. that the family farm is giving way to industrial or factory farming? What could reverse that trend?

• The film traces the consolidation of small family farms into large farming operations, with single farms planting a thousand or more acres. Who benefits from, or is hurt by, this consolidation of farms?

• Prior to viewing KING CORN, what image(s) came to mind when someone mentioned farms or farming? Did what you saw confirm or challenge that image? What did you learn from the film about current farming practices?

• Ian points out that in his great grandfather’s day, 40-bushel-an-acre harvests were considered excellent. Today that same acre produces 180 bushels. The film suggests that this modern efficiency might be contributing to “overproduction” of food. Do you agree? Is it possible to produce too much?
Agriculture Policy

• KING CORN presents two philosophies behind farm subsidies. In the 1930s, subsidies helped control the amount of corn produced each year, ensuring that overproduction would not drive down prices. Starting in the 1970s, subsidies encouraged farmers to produce as much as possible. According to the film, what are the pros and cons of each approach? Which approach makes the most sense to you and why?

• In 1973 Nixon’s agricultural secretary, Earl L. Butz reoriented the U.S. farm program by not restricting what a farm can produce. Butz states in an interview with the film makers that under the old farm program, “We paid farmers not to produce, one of the stupidest things we ever did, I think.” According to Butz, the increased agricultural production in this country has driven food prices down now so that we only pay about 17% of our incomes on food. Previous generations paid twice that amount. Butz acknowledged that this has led to large scale farming where smaller farms can’t compete, and while he was Secretary of Agriculture he routinely told farmers “get big or get out.” Did Butz make the right decision and why or why not?

• Corn yield has increased by selecting types of corn plants that grow closer to each other so there are more corn plants per acre. This has increased the yield from 40 bushels per acre in the past to 200 bushels of corn per acre now. The trade off is that it has more starch and less protein. Is the trade off worth it?

• Most farmers use genetically modified seeds to make crops like corn resistant to the herbicide weed killers (e.g., Liberty-ready, Roundup-ready). The result is that an entire field can efficiently be sprayed with herbicides without killing the crops. This keeps the yield per acre high and thus lowers the cost we pay for food. What, if anything, is bad about this?

• The corn that Ian and Curtis grew was essentially inedible in its unprocessed form. As one person in the film said, “It’s a raw material like feed stock for all these other processes” -- specifically, ethanol for fuel, feed for animals, and high fructose corn syrup for food. Is anything particularly bad about this?
• Are you comfortable having your tax dollars support the farming practices and resulting food culture depicted in the film? Why or why not?

• Americans now spend a smaller percentage of their income on food than ever before—less than 10% of their disposable income. What are the benefits and drawbacks of having cheap food available? Would you be willing to pay more for food that was grown or raised in more healthy ways for people and/or for the environment? Why or why not? Do you currently purchase foods that are locally produced or organic, even though they are more expensive than food produced using commercial farming methods? Why or why not?

• Curt and Ian discover that without government subsidies, the typical acre of corn in Iowa would lose money. In your view, should free market forces be applied to farming (i.e., eliminating government subsidies and letting farmers choose crops and methods that give them the best chance at making a profit)? Why or why not?

Health Issues
• Imagine that you are part of a public health task force. How would you respond to the following facts from the film:
  - 70% of the antibiotics used in the U.S. are consumed by livestock.
  - An average steak from a feedlot-raised cow contains as much as nine grams of saturated fat. A comparable steak from grass-fed cow might have 1.3 grams of saturated fat.

What recommendations would you make to preserve or improve public health? How do these facts relate to the driving force of economics in a market system?
• The filmmakers suggest that current farm practices and policies are not producing healthy food for American consumers. Ian and Curtis state that we are the first generation of people that will likely have a shorter life span than our parents, largely because of the food we eat. A scientist then states that a disproportionally large amount of the carbon in our bodies comes from corn. If that is the case, who is responsible to change the system? Consider the responsibility of the following: consumers, farmers, policy makers or legislators, food companies, food retailers and health professionals. What might individuals in each of these groups do to ensure a healthy, adequate and dependable food supply?

• The corn sweetener industry emerged as an outlet for the excess corn that was produced after farming was deregulated. About 70% of high fructose corn syrup goes into beverage sweeteners. One problem this creates is obesity: one expert stated that drinking calories doesn’t produce the digestive “stop signals” that eating calories does. Another problem with sweet beverages is that it contributes to type 2 diabetes. Can we really blame corn sweetener or Earl Butz for this? Explain.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION
Brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual to combat any of the issues presented in the documentary that might be of particular interest to you. What would you do? List your ideas below.