

Scott Chaskey, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

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SC = Scott Chaskey

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is February 6, 2024, and this is Anneliese doing an oral history interview with

SC: Scott Chaskey.

AA: So Scott, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview today.

SC: Thank you! I'm very happy to take part.

AA: So why don't you start and tell me a little about when and where you were born, and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

SC: I was born in Toledo, Ohio. Only lived there for a couple years. My parents then moved the family to Buffalo, New York, and that's mostly where I grew up, into my teenage years, from which point we moved to Seattle, Washington. We were only there for a year and a half, and then back to Ithaca, New York. In none of those places was I involved with agriculture or farming. (00:58)

AA: So then, when and where did you go to college, and what did you study?

SC: We had moved back to the East Coast, lived in Ithaca, New York. My father ran the bookstore at Cornell University. I went to a university, it was called Harpur College at the time but later renamed SUNY-Binghamton, which was only fifty miles away. That's where I did my undergraduate work.

AA: What did you study?

SC: Literature. In the end, after taking some years off after undergraduate, I went to a program through Antioch College, although I wasn't based in Ohio. They had a Center for British Studies, which is why I got involved in that. I went to study in Ireland and England for a couple years and got an MFA, a Master of Fine Arts, in writing. Very useful for an organic farmer. (2:12)

AA: You mentioned that you did some organic gardening in England. Can you tell me more about that?

SC: Yeah. In order to pay my six pounds a week for my "bedsit," my one room in Oxford, I lived in Oxford and went to school in London, I sort of looked around at how I could make some money, and I got a job as a gardener in a magical place called Boar's Hill. It was above Oxford,

looking down on the city. That's where I really first learned some techniques about gardening. Double digging in the vegetable garden on Boar's Hill. For a pound an hour. A year later, after coming back to the States, I met my wife in England. She's American as well. [After coming back to the States,] we decided to go back to England, and we wound up living in the southwest tip of England, in Cornwall, on the Penwith Peninsula. And that's where I really got into gardening, small-scale farming.

AA: And so, how did you hear about organic farming? Were there any specific people or books or anything?

SC: Yeah. First I'm going to mention why I continued to garden there in Cornwall, because I was told that the cliff meadows, which were sloping meadows leading right down to the sea, we looked out over a place called Mount's Bay, on the tip of Cornwall. I was told that this was the earliest ground in Britain. And when I heard that phrase, I thought, "Well, whatever that is, I'd like to be involved in it." What that meant, "the earliest ground in Britain," was that these cliff meadows, which were south facing, was the warmest microclimate in all of England. The first new potatoes, the first flowers to come out of those meadows were sent to London. I met a couple old gardeners who were still at it. Especially my great mentor, Edgar Wallis, who was almost 80 at the time. He sort of initiated me into the cliff gardening. I also joined a longstanding organic gardening and farming organization called the Henry Doubleday Association. And Henry Doubleday was a fellow who brought the idea of using comfrey. It was something he learned in Russia, and a couple people including Henry came up with this organic farming association in England. That's where I learned a lot of my early knowledge about organic. (5:13)

AA: Do you want to say any more about the gardening you did there, the methods you used, what crops you grew?

SC: It's hard to describe it without actually setting foot in these meadows. They were quite magical. They were small, and it was so steep that it was like a terraced garden. Huge granite blocks surrounding each one of these meadows. It was too steep to use any machinery, so it was all done by hand. Shovels and a tool that they called the "chipper." We turned it over and kept taking the soil back up the hills so it wouldn't wash down again. I planted all kinds of vegetables. At that time the seeds, there were some new seed companies that I learned about, and I was ordering seeds from France and growing some things that people in Cornwall were just being introduced to at the time. And then I would sell some vegetables in the nearby Penzance [?] town. At the same time also, my friend Edgar taught me about cutting, we had some pittosporum trees. Pittosporum was a beautiful light green leaf that was used as a backing for flowers, and so I learned how to cut the pittosporum and ship it off to London. (6:50)

AA: How long did you stay there, and why did you decide to come back to the United States?

SC: Well, it was kind of a magical place, and we found a way to make a life there. My wife and I were married there. We had our first child there, had our first home there. After eight years, when it was time for our first child to enter school, it didn't seem to click. So we thought, "Maybe we should come back and see what it's like in this country." So we came back for a while, thinking

we would go back and forth. And then, lo and behold, along came another child, and we decided, okay, we're staying put on this side of the ocean. (7:42)

AA: You mentioned that you did some work with a land trust. Can you tell me more about that and how you found out about that?

SC: Yeah. So what happened at that point was that, right when we had moved back there, this was the beginning of something called CSA, Community Supported Agriculture. There was a biodynamic fruit grower in a place called Bridgehampton, which is the next village over from Sag Harbor where I'm speaking to you from. And he had heard about this thing called CSA. My father-in-law and mother-in-law, both artists who lived here, were part of the first ten families that joined that CSA farm. This was in 1988. And the first CSA farms in the country were basically all people involved with biodynamic farming. My father-in-law invited me to a meeting about this thing called CSA. And I had no idea, I had never heard of it. I was immediately attracted to the idea of working with this fledgling group. That led on to 30 years of CSA farming.

AA: What year was that, that you first got involved?

SC: 1988 was when the CSA started. The first year of us actually farming in Amagansett was 1990, the summer of 1990. But back up a little bit to 1989, which was when the discussions were going on. And that was right when we had moved back from England. That's how I got involved. And I left out a key point when you mentioned the land trusts, is that after this young CSA had existed for two years on privately owned land, somebody took the idea to a fellow named John Halsey, who started the Peconic Land Trust in 1983. John thought, "Well, this is a brilliant idea, this thing called CSA." And he was open to trying it out on some land that the land trust had just been donated. There had to be some sort of stewardship taking place on that land. And he took a chance on a young group of new CSA enthusiasts. So that was 1990. (10:33)

AA: So can you tell me more about the Quail Hill CSA?

SC: That first year there were ten families in Bridgehampton. The next year there were about 25. When we started spreading the word and finding more people, that first year in 1990 in Amagansett we had about 70 families. The unique thing about what we were doing was that the members harvested all their own food. That had begun in the first year, and that was the idea that everybody really liked about being actively involved. So, after one year successfully there in Amagansett doing four acres with a hand-push rototiller, we found more people. And after three or four years, we were up to 100 families and up to 150 families, and eventually up to 250 families, which is somewhere between 600 and 700 people, all going out in the field harvesting their own vegetables.

AA: Did that work well, having them harvest them themselves?

SC: Yeah. It was interesting in those early years, when we would get together with other CSA farmers. Most farmers would say, "How in the world did that work? How did you make that work?" And I would think there are many farmers who wouldn't put up with lots of people

traipsing around in their fields. The community aspect was marvelous. We just kept that up. It was all an experiment, of course, and we had to figure out how to make it work and figure out the signage, orientations for people new to it, newsletters, talking to people in the field. It was a lot of work. But it was incredibly rewarding. (12:52)

AA: So what were your main influences on deciding to do the CSA model?

SC: You know, that's a good question. When it started with the ten families, I think it was really because there was only one farmer, and he was interested in the idea, but he couldn't do it on his own. So he said, "You families have to help me." So they organized it themselves. And we just kept it going. We thought, "Okay, this is a good beginning, let's keep going with it." It would have been impossible if we had gone from ten families to 200 all in one go, but that wasn't the way it happened. It was more of an organic process as we were growing. We were learning.

AA: How much back-and-forth and contact did you have with other CSAs that were starting up at the time?

SC: It was very important, I'm glad you asked that question. I think after that first year, in 1990, the BD Association, the Biodynamic Association—which at the time was really only about two people—realized that there were a number of people practicing CSAs here and there, and let's get this together. So they had these meetings, which went on for a number of years, in a Waldorf School in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. That first year there were maybe 25 or 30 farmers from all over the place. I remember someone, Jared Lawson [?], coming from California, and someone from Wisconsin, and of course a number of people from the New England area, which is where the CSA movement began. And then the next year there were 50 people and then the next year there were 100 people. So it kept growing, in the same way that our individual CSA was growing, the CSA grouping of people that was sponsored by the BD Association was growing as well. Those were very important, those early meetings. (15:21)

AA: So were you aware at all of Booker T. Whatley's *How to Make \$100,000 Farming 25 Acres*? Did that influence you at all? Because I know he also did a U-Pick model. Sort of similar.

SC: You know, I never learned about that. I'm sort of embarrassed to say I never learned about that until one of my apprentices, we would send our apprentices every year to a NOFA summer conference up in Massachusetts. One of my apprentices came back and told me the story of Whatley, and I thought, "Why have I never heard of that?" I don't know. I have no answer to that. Now it's public knowledge. And I wish it was earlier. I would have liked to have known more about it.

AA: So can you tell me more about the apprenticeship program you did?

SC: So again, this is how we started. I think the idea came from the first CSA practitioners, and the idea of course was not just to hire laborers, but to educate young farmers. It really became an essential part of the whole Community Supported Agriculture worldview. We started off with a couple apprentices, and then a couple more as the farm grew. Then we realized, if this is an educational program, we have to offer more than just hand somebody a hoe and tell them to go

out in the field. So we developed a set of guidelines, which gradually led to a curriculum. That took many years. Then we would send our apprentices every year to the summer conference so that they could make contact with the other apprentices and also other farmers. Then we learned about a network, it was called the CRAFT program, that was being practiced in the Hudson Valley, where apprentices from different farms would travel to a different farm every week or every two weeks or something like that and learn how things worked on that particular farm. We gradually developed our own CRAFT network with the other farms that were growing up in this area. That became a major learning experience for the apprentices. Then—I'm trying to condense 30 years into this answer—we realized that every year we were getting new apprentices, oftentimes someone would stay for a year or two, or even four years, and move into a different position, like the farm manager position or something. But we realized that this was happening all over, and there wasn't the next step in discovery or learning. So we created an advanced apprenticeship. By then we were getting known, and we had more applicants than we could house. So we started looking for people with a fair amount of experience so that they could move to a different level in an advanced apprenticeship. We spent a long time working on that whole concept. (19:15)

AA: What was some of the feedback that you got from people who went through the apprenticeship program? What did they say about it?

SC: Well, most of them wanted to stay in farming. In those early years, what I was talking about is they would move from our farm to another one, so we had sort of sister and brother farms. There was a circle of apprentices going here and there. I can't remember what year it was, we applied for a grant, and the grant that we got requested that we do some research into this apprenticeship program and how it was working, etc. So we did that, and we found as many of the apprentices who had gone through the program at Quail Hill, and we found out that, at least in the later years, say for ten years, not in the very early years, but in the last ten years of the farm, 80 percent of the apprentices were either working on farms, running their own farms, or working in food-related issues. So that's a pretty good return. I thought that was fantastic. (20:42)

AA: Do you want to say more about your involvement with the Land Trust Alliance and the national movement for land trusts?

SC: The LTA would, every year, have a national rally, they called it. This was a conference of people who were involved in land trust work all over the country. I think the first rally that I attended, which was in New Hampshire, because we were the only land trust doing this, the only land trust that was running a CSA, this was very early in the '90s, I was part of a panel. And I remember, it was sort of curious to me that the panel had to do with business interests for land trusts. Of course that was part of what we were doing, but I never thought of it as being mainly business. I thought of it as being mainly conservation and community building. So that led to me, a couple years later I think, presenting a workshop on CSAs specifically, because by then people were beginning to learn about it, and we were getting calls from all over the country, from other land trusts, saying, "What is this? How does it work? Who owns the land? How do you pay the workers?" All that sort of thing. Because we were the only ones doing it. And after about 15 years or so, we were hoping to sort of spread this, because we thought this was really a great

model. And then, the last thing I'll mention about the Land Trust Alliance, is that after I published a book called *This Common Ground*, which was really about my experience in farming in the early years of CSA, I was asked to give a blessing at the first [organic] meal that was served at the annual conference. It was the first organic meal served to these land trust people from all over the country, which I thought was kind of astonishing. It was a great moment, to be up there blessing the food, with 2000 people celebrating organics and community agriculture. (23:26)

AA: Can you tell me more about your involvement with NOFA-New York?

SC: Yeah. So early on, if people are not aware of this, each of the New England states has a NOFA chapter. There's NOFA-New York, NOFA-New Jersey, NOFA-Connecticut, etc. And we got involved in NOFA-New York right away because there were chapters within the chapters, other people practicing organic agriculture out here in the East End. There was only one other organic farm here when we started, the Green Thumb, a wonderful family farm that had been farming on the same land for a couple hundred years. The younger generation convinced the older generation to turn it into an organic farm. They helped get us going, and then we in turn helped other organic farmers get going. Then we all met as sort of part of the larger picture that was being orchestrated by NOFA-New York. And then that led to going to winter conferences. Every year there was a winter conference upstate somewhere. Then I got involved with other people who were on the board and was asked to serve on the board, and I entered into that. After a few years, someone stepped down as president, so I took on that role and was president for six years, something like that, on the board for twelve years. Late '90s, early 2000s, something like that. Everything that we did on our farm was sort of done in tandem with the work that NOFA was doing and coordinating for the whole state. (25:35)

AA: You said something about how you helped save the organization. Can you tell me more about that?

SC: [Laughs] I'm not sure I saved it, but we were going through a rocky patch. A lot of it had to do with funding and leadership, etc. We sort of had to put that all together, like any organization does going through something like that. I hung in there as the president. There were actually three separate executive directors in the time that I was there. In that case it's sort of the board that has to keep the river flowing, and that was the role that I played at that time. We had to find a way to bring in more funding, etc. And we did all that. (26:42)

AA: You also mentioned that you worked with Just Food. Can you tell me more about that?

SC: Yeah. There's a wonderful woman, Cathy Lawrence, who started this organization called Just Food. They would coordinate farms outside of the city with a group of residents, wherever it was, in that part of the city. It was a different way of CSAs taking off. A lot of those farms were already delivering to the city anyhow, so it really took an organization to make the consumers or citizens interested in a particular farm. That's the role that Just Food took on. Cathy was really great, an inspired administrator. She got some grant money, some seed money, which was very important in those early years of CSAs because that allowed Just Food to bring people together, first in the city and then in these conferences, which were in a few places around the country. In

the first year of that there were maybe 150 farmers, practitioners. Then the next year there were 400, then 600, and whatever. That meant a lot. That was in the late '90s, and Just Food was really the coordinator for all of them. (28:29)

AA: Is there anything you want to say about how you've seen the CSA model change over the years, and your perspective on CSAs today as opposed to when you started?

SC: Yeah, that's a good question. Well, it's changed radically a lot, of course. I guess you would call it accumulatively, because there are so many more. I've heard the figure 8000 CSAs in the country. Who knows, something like that. So there's bound to be so many different models. The one thing that sort of sticks out in my mind is that we were sort of surprised when there was a meeting in California that we went to, and the California CSAs were sort of being turned into subscription farms, which is very different from the ideal of community building that was part of the first CSAs. I'm not sure how that's played out in California now, but I still think it's a robust movement. It's going to go through changes wherever it's practiced, and I don't think there's any one model. You just have to go visit farms and see how this is working. We know it's working, because there are 8000 CSAs around. But since those early years, the marketplace has changed, and there's more competition. It's a different picture. (30:17)

AA: Do you think there was a connection between organic farming and the environmental movement, the back-to-the-land movement, or any other social or political movements?

SC: Yeah. A big yes to that. I grew up in the suburbs, going back to your original question, and I learned early on that many of the other CSA farmers also grew up in the suburbs and were looking for something that provided a purpose. That probably goes back to the early days of Helen and Scott Nearing and people trying to live off the land. I think there's something very real about that, because every year the apprentices, who would come with great enthusiasm to learn about farming, were still part of that idealism, to find something that was counter to the kind of culture that's so dominant in the country. It definitely was strongly linked, the idea of building. And you take the word COMMUNITY and spell it very large in capital letters, because that's what people were looking for in that particular period. And still. (31:57)

AA: Were you involved with any social and political movements that overlapped with your organic farming interests?

SC: That's a good question. You know, farming is a very demanding occupation, and so much of my energy was put into that and into the social organizations around it, which had to do with NOFA-New York but also with working here locally. [I did serve on the founding board for two progressive organizations: The Center for Whole Communities, in Vermont, and Sylvester Manor Educational Farm, nearby on Shelter Island, NY.] I also have kept up my writing life through all these years of farming. My energies went into that, into teaching at the schools, etc. Other than being a lifelong Democrat and active in some local politics, that's probably the only other involvement I can think of. (33:03)

AA: Is there anything you want to say about the connection between biodynamics and the CSA movement?

SC: Well, as I said, in those early years it was the Biodynamic Association which sponsored those first meetings. I just think it went hand-in-hand with the principle of caring for the earth and what's now called regenerative farming. I also am now remembering that my good friend Jean-Paul Courtens, who started Roxbury Farm and was actually the first CSA to be active in New York City, he became the president of the Biodynamic Association and was on that board at the time that I was president of NOFA-New York. We started mixing in whatever way we could. I've now been out of touch with him for a few years, so I'm not sure how that stands, but by all means, at that time, we would have meetings at a biodynamic farm, for instance, for NOFA-New York. We would attend each other's conferences, serve on panels together, and all that sort of thing. Very much hand-in-hand. (34:44)

AA: What is your perspective on the relationship between the land grant universities and organic agriculture?

SC: That's a big question. Early on, when I was just getting into it after being away from this country for years and coming back, I really didn't know much about the relationship. Through my board work on NOFA-New York, I often heard a lot of grumbling from people about not getting the support of the land grant universities, our local one being Cornell, of course. Which had tremendous presence, and most of the land grant universities do within their particular state. But not giving much support to the organic and small farmers who are farming organically. And, in fact, not a single person from our local Cornell extension office had been to our farm for the first decade. However, that changed, and we began having meetings together. Our local Extension Service set up a trial round for organics. That was something new. They established a yearly ag meeting with a sustainable agriculture workshop, etc. And we began to have some trials with different crops on-farm, with Extension. So it changed a lot. I know at Cornell itself, in Ithaca, the home farm developed a very robust organic trial farm. I've seen these changes take place very, very slowly. However, you still have to look to places like Rodale, who have been doing the organic experiments for so many years. That kind of work should have been done by the land grants for decades. They were sort of late getting into it, and let's just keep hoping that it changes for the better. (37:26)

AA: If you were to summarize your philosophy of organic farming, what would that be?

SC: It's so hard to find just a few words. To me, personally, it's always had to do with taking care of the earth. I've been writing about it, I would sort of have to read to you an entire book to give you my philosophy. It really has to do with encouraging a respect for the wheel of life, the cycle that makes farming possible. And, interestingly enough, it's only relatively recently that people are becoming aware and talking about health in relation to food. Of course, that's the basis of our life cycle. That's what's been motivating me.

AA: Would you say that your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connections to your philosophies?

SC: Well, I have the greatest respect for Native American teachers, like Oren Lyons, I'm thinking of, who talks about the essence of life, talks about the spirit of life being, he calls it the

powerful law of regeneration, the law of the seed. However you term that spiritual, that's what's always motivated my work. My newest book is called *Soil and Spirit*. If someone asks me, are they linked, of course, that's why I wrote this book. Soil and spirit are one and the same. So my answer is yes to your question. (40:27)

AA: Is there any particular person or publication that has strongly influenced your philosophies?

SC: I've really been thankful for the farming magazines, like *Acres*. I've been reading that for many years. *The Natural Farmer* is a really great one. I've been really thankful for learning something about the practice of farming through publications like that. And also I've been greatly influenced, as other people have, by the writings of Wendell Berry or Wes Jackson, going back to Sir Albert Howard, the earlier people at the beginning of the century who were writing about organic agriculture. So many books have influenced my thinking and farming. Actually, at the close of each one of my books, I have a long list of sources so that hopefully people who are interested in what I've been writing about can go back to all the sources. Lots of influences. (41:58)

AA: What are your views on the current USDA organic certification standards?

SC: When I was serving on the board of NOFA-New York, that's when the standards were first made public. I don't know if you remember in those first few years, it took quite a few years for the NOP to come into being, and it was pretty rocky. We had to decide as a board whether we were going to continue to certify, because we had certified as NOFA-New York before the NOP program came into being. Sort of half of the board went along with it and half didn't and thought that the new standards were going to be too washed out. In a way, that is what happened in those first years. But we did continue to certify as an individual farm. Then we decided that, because we were a CSA, we didn't need to do that. I looked for an alternative, and at NOFA we created an alternative, and we went with that because we weren't selling on a great scale on the open market. It's a much bigger question for people who are making their living that way. For the last few years, I have been a little out of touch, so I don't think I can comment on exactly where it stands right now. But there's always been a fair amount of tension, and I do hope that tension is somehow lessening.

AA: What do you think about the Real Organic and the regenerative critiques of the USDA certification?

SC: You know, I don't think I can comment on that. I don't know enough about that to comment on that. But I'll do some homework. (44:15)

AA: What do you think are the most important aspects of organic farming history to preserve and pass on to future generations?

SC: Oh, boy. Well, go back to the words: sustainability, regeneration, the word organic itself. What we want to pass on is, we want to have something to pass on. The industrialized form of agriculture has been going in a different direction for many years, and what we really need is a reawakening or revival. Not going back, but going forward and keeping in mind the seven

generations, as the Native Americans have done in their philosophies. At the same time, I learned from visiting Holland how small farms, for instance, could still practice a truly regenerative type of farming using new tools that are constantly being invented. I would side with that. I would side with continuing to impress upon people that this style of farming actually can be more than practical, but also serve as a kind of food, spiritual food. (46:23)

AA: Is there anything else you would like to share before we end the recording?

SC: Yeah. It's a wonderful thing, that actually working with the earth and the soil can feed the soul and feed the body as well, and if done carefully, can have an incredible influence. Right now, we're in need of a new story. As the theologian Thomas Berry said, "The old story doesn't work anymore, and we're sort of in between. We need to make a new story." My strong feeling is that the practice of the kind of agriculture that recognizes the whole wheel of life that we're part of, recognizes other creatures, other species that we are actually sharing this earth with, that kind of way of seeing will develop a new story, and we need that right now.

AA: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview!

SC: Thank you! Thank you for doing these interviews.