

John Myer, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

November 17, 2022

JM = John Myer

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is November 16 [actually 17], 2022, and this is Anneliese Abbott doing an oral history interview with

JM: John Myer.

AA: And we are doing this interview over the phone. So John, thank you so much for taking the time to do this today. Why don't we just start out and have you tell us a little about when and where you born, and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

JM: Sure. I was born in 1954 in Ovid, New York, which is in the middle of the Finger Lakes region, in upstate, towards western New York State. And my father had a small dairy farm, milked 28 cows. Worked 200 acres of land, maybe. A lot of that was in pasture when I was younger. But he grew corn, oats, and hay, mainly. So yeah, I definitely grew up working around cows, feeding calves, driving tractors as I got older.

AA: Did you always want to be a farmer when you grew up?

JM: Well, when I was younger I did, but when I went to college I was kind of tired of it, and I was interested in things like wildlife biology and environmental science. So when I went to college I had no intention of returning to the farm.

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

JM: Well, I went to Cornell University, which is just over 20 miles from the home I grew up in. And I nearly majored in botany, I guess that was as close as you could come to a standard major. I studied botany, ecology, some agriculture courses toward the end. And I ended up getting a degree in what they called "General Studies in Agriculture." So I took quite a wide variety of courses.

AA: So what years were that, that you were in college?

JM: Started in '72 and took two semesters off, so I graduated in 1977. (2:35)

AA: Now you mentioned in our earlier conversation that you had taken a class at Cornell with David Pimentel. Is there anything you want to say about that?

JM: Yeah, that was a great class. He was an ecology professor, and this course was called Agriculture, Society, and the Environment. Studied different forms of agriculture all over the world, basically. Added some facts on society and the environment. It was a pretty small classroom, and we broke into, on the second day of the week, we would get into smaller groups for discussions with the grad students that were basically running the course. So the nickname for it was “Eco-Ag,” or some people even called it “hippie ag.” There were a lot of non-farmers in that course. (3:41)

AA: So then, what got you interested in organic farming? Was it that course, or something else?

JM: I guess there were a lot of things. That course was a big one, I guess. There were, I read *Silent Spring* when I was in high school. I found it on my mom’s bookshelf. And I asked her how she happened to have it, after I read it. And she said, “Well, Dad was spraying the oats, the oat field right next to the yard one spring, and the 2,4-D drifted over, killed all my flowers.” So that was the first thing that made me think of farming without chemicals. I read, she also had a Louis Bromfield book on her shelf, *Malabar Farm* I believe it was. And I did a lot of other readings, thanks to piquing my interest with the David Pimentel course. Running by, Wendell Berry, Sir Albert Howard, the *One Straw Revolution* was an impactful book to me. *Acres U.S.A.* I discovered through a friend at the Alternatives Library at Cornell. And that was a very interesting publication. I subscribed to it while I was still at college and continued it up until, I guess it lapsed last year. But I still look it up online. So there were a lot of inputs in my interest in organic farming. Initially it was ecological farming, or environmentally sound farming, or sustainable farming. But eventually we got to organic. (6:12)

AA: So you mentioned when we talked earlier that you did some vegetable farming while you were in college. Do you want to say more about that?

JM: Sure. It was just a matter of renting an old farmhouse out in the country with some tillable land on it, and somehow managed to get an acre plowed up and worked down. And we were going to grow some food for our own use, but there was lots of room there, so I just kept planting and planting. Planting’s easy; when it comes to weed control, it’s quite a bit of work. We did a lot of mulching. Green beans, tomatoes, peppers, squash, of course. It was a good, rainy summer, so we had good crops. We would take them into Ithaca, and I parked my truck on the street in Collegetown and sold vegetables there. (7:35)

AA: And what methods did you use at that time? Was that organic?

JM: Yeah, we didn’t use any chemicals. There was an old barn on the farm with ancient chicken manure in it that we used for fertilizer. It was just about our only fertilizer. And spreading ashes on plants for bug control. But yeah, no chemicals used then. That was in 1976, I believe.

AA: And so then did you do this by yourself, or were there other people helping you with this?

JM: One other person was helping, one of the roommates. I was the one that picked and drove them into town.

AA: What inspired you to start growing vegetables?

JM: Growing up on a farm with eight kids in the family, we always had a very large garden. So I grew up gardening, growing vegetables. And it's an easy way to get into farming. If you don't have any equipment, you can usually find someone to plow up a patch of ground for you and work it over. So the inputs are low. It's a low-cost way to get started in farming. (9:13)

AA: So when you were a student at Cornell, were you around many other like-minded students who were also interested in organic or sustainable agriculture and environmental things?

JM: Yes. Meeting someone like Brian Caldwell, who is a fruit and nut tree grower, as well as vegetables, over the years. Met him in a soil science class. And also the Agriculture, Society, and the Environment course. And other people. But not that many, really, now that I think back on it. Brian Lou Ward, another tree agriculture guy. As far as organic grain farmers, no.

AA: So then why don't you explain, after you graduated from Cornell, what did you do then? Did you go right back into farming, was there anything in the middle?

JM: I worked a landscaping job part time. I worked for my dad on the farm part time. And eventually was able to get some land in 1979. And grew vegetables there, a couple acres, selling at the Ithaca Farmers Market. But I also planted corn and soybeans. So that was my start, using my dad's equipment in exchange for milking cows, I guess. I liked the idea of growing grain because you can store it. With vegetables, if you don't sell them, for a lot of them, if you don't sell them in the first week or so, then they go bad and you have to throw them away. So marketing was always an issue for selling vegetables. When green beans were ready to pick, everybody had green beans. When tomatoes were ripe, everybody had tomatoes. I started growing grain that year, and the next year I rented a farm next door to the home farm, my father's dairy farm. Forty acres. The owner retired. And I grew organic soybeans there, my first organic soybean crop, as well as oats and some hay. (12:57)

AA: So then you transitioned mostly to just grain, or did you continue to grow vegetables as well?

JM: I grew vegetables for a few more years. I grew potatoes, or onions, vegetables that would store longer. And crops like snow peas. I had some early ground, so my peas were usually ready before anyone else's. So I could sell those. But eventually I transitioned to just grain growing in the mid-'80s, I'd say.

AA: Do you want to give a brief summary of your grain growing operation, like how it grew?

JM: Yeah. Well, I ended up buying the dairy farm from my father in 1980. And I was a dairy farmer for one year. But both silo unloaders broke, the bulk tank compressor quit, gutter cleaner broke down all the time. It was just a lot of old equipment there. And you looked at the numbers, a 28-cow dairy in 1980 was pretty tiny. And all the experts were saying you needed 400 cows, or maybe it was only 200 back then. But I didn't have the money to invest in that. I did enjoy growing crops, and I enjoyed growing them organically. So I thought that would be a better path

for me to take. It was good soil there. Eighty acres tillable on the home farm. So that was a good start, plus the rented land next door. As I started growing grain, I had to figure it out. You needed a market. A small flour mill opened not too far down the road from me, so I grew some wheat and some soybeans for them as well as rye and corn. But the amounts they went through were pretty small. They had a really good wheat crop in the early '80s, certified organic, it was my first year certified, I think. And I had two thousand bushels of wheat in a bin. And he bought two hundred. So the rest of the wheat sat in the bin for two years, and I finally sold it on the commercial market. So it was fits and starts growing organic grain. But we kept at it. The biggest market seemed to be for soybeans, so we tried to grow as much of those as we could. And hay. I could grow hay organically. The price difference wasn't much, but I still had a market for horse hay. Or dairy hay. I had quite a bit of acreage in alfalfa or clover and timothy. (17:33)

AA: Did you always grow your grain organically, or did you start out using some chemicals?

JM: I started out with some fields using chemicals. I always had at least one field that I grew organically. Expanding that. The best way to get into an organic rotation is after alfalfa, where you can get by without using any weed control sprays or commercial fertilizers. Then you have your three years without chemicals taken care of. And you have good soil condition. So gradually transitioned everything over to organic. I think maybe by 1985 everything was organic.

AA: Is there anything you want to say about your organic production methods, your crop rotations?

JM: Sure. Starting with hay, alfalfa or clover. I grow a fair amount of winter grains—wheat, rye, triticale. Some barley occasionally. And I underseed all of that with medium red clover seed. So the following year typically I will harvest just a quarter of that for hay or haylage and then bushhog the rest for green manure. I did that a lot early on in organic growing. Back then you couldn't buy a tractor trailer load of chicken manure for fertility, or a lot of these other products that are easily available now. So I mostly grew my own nitrogen, and the clover freed up phosphorus in the soil. We get much better yields now with purchased inputs such as organic potash and chicken manure. But I still do the clover rotation and green manure on some of my acres every year. (20:22)

AA: What kind of tillage practices do you use?

JM: Various. For sod we have to use a moldboard plow to get it turned under. And there's quite a bit of sod on the farm each year. After soybeans, if I plant spring wheat, typically I can go in in the spring and just work it up with a field cultivator before planting. Skipping that primary tillage phase. And chisel plow. Early on I bought a chisel plow because moldboard plowing is a scourge, of course. So I use that quite a bit, too. We try not to till more than we have to. Save trips over the field.

AA: Have you had any issues with pests, or not?

JM: No pest issues, really. Actually, the biggest pests are the wildlife. Woodchucks around the field edges. Which actually is not so bad now that we have coyotes in the area for the last fifteen

years. They seem to really control the woodchucks. And deer. If I have a field that is surrounded by woods, woods and hedgerows, the deer, especially in a dry year, can really take the cornfield hard, as well as the soybeans. But insect pests, not really. Once in a while we get a wave of aphids. We've only had one bad aphid year for soybeans. Leafhoppers on alfalfa, a couple years ago we had to mow the second cutting because it was stunted by leafhoppers. But the third and fourth cutting came back great. (22:55)

AA: So you mentioned when we talked earlier that you attended the organizational meeting for NOFA-New York. Can you tell me more about that?

JM: Yeah. It was in a fairly large church in downtown Syracuse, I forget which one. But I think there were probably seventy, eighty people there maybe. People from all walks of life, really. There was David Yarrow, got up and did a lot of speaking. He would be, I guess, he's concerned with social justice more than agriculture, though he was very familiar with agriculture. Some other people got up and spoke; I couldn't tell you who. But there was a bakery owner from Syracuse who got up and spoke. The idea, there was a chapter of NOFA in Vermont, started years earlier. And the idea was to get like-minded people together, people concerned about food, the food system. So I don't know how many of those people joined NOFA that were at the meeting, but I drove up there with a neighboring farmer friend of mine. And we both signed up. It turned out to be a good organization. Other people got involved, people like Elizabeth Henderson. Again, from the social justice side of things, but she also owns a farm. Cornell actually helped us a little bit early on. We had an annual meeting in one of their buildings. There was a Judy Green, who was involved with NOFA for years, who was hired by Cornell for a small farms project that they were doing. Dealing with, looking at issues that very small farms were facing.

So it's been really a great organization, I think. Now its membership is in the thousands, from people all over the state. It's consumers as well as farmers. And just getting those people together with a common interest. I think the consumers push the organic farming part as much as the farmers. We were interested in farming ecologically, but the consumers wanted a guarantee that this food was farmed without chemicals. Having an organization like NOFA was able to pull that all together. And they started their own organic certification process. So NOFA started in 1981. In 1984 we had an organic standards board where five of us got together and met and went over what it meant to be organic. Did a lot of research on it, on existing programs. In 1985 NOFA had their first organic inspections and certified eight farms in New York State. I just somehow kept some old information, and that's how I know it was 1985, I was one of the eight farms that got inspected that year. So going from inspecting eight farms in 1985 to hundreds today. (28:06)

AA: So what would you say were some of the most important ways in which NOFA-New York helped connect farmers?

JM: Well, number one, just by having all these farmers join from all over the state, down there in New York City, and western New York, central New York. Just by having an annual meeting every year, or I think they used to have two meetings a year. You get these farmers together, and they start talking about issues, things we're facing. We had our own organic farm chat and made some good friends over the years. So bringing people together. Not just farmers, like I said, but

consumers, too. And the interested consumers are not just individuals, but restaurants, people from restaurants, and food co-ops, other things like that. Just getting people together with common goals.

And as an offshoot of that, when I was still growing vegetables, we started a group of us that met through NOFA and started Finger Lakes Organic Co-op. Going back to what I said before, when your green beans are ready, everybody's are. We joined together to help market our products outside the area, coordinate marketing. If we had a big market, we could group all our green beans. We bought a truck so we could deliver to places like Buffalo, Rochester, eventually New York City, I believe. But it really did help. It was at the end of my vegetable growing years there, but I was growing kidney beans and black beans, and we thought those could be marketed through there, too. (31:01)

AA: So was that successful? Did that help with the marketing problems that the growers were facing?

JM: Yes, it did. It was—well, for several years, anyways. It eventually wound down, I'm not sure why. But because I wasn't growing vegetables, I wasn't actively involved after it got started. The marketing manager maybe wasn't quite doing the job. We had investments, like the delivery truck, and the warehouse space that we rented. So we had a warehouse manager, too. I think the investment overall was maybe too large for the marketing advantage that we got from it. (32:12)

AA: So you mentioned that your farm was one of the first certified organic farms in upstate New York. Can you tell me more about that?

JM: Sure. I was selling grain to Community Mill in Dean, as well as a few other farmers in the area. And they subscribed to a certification program that would guarantee that the grain they were buying was organic. It was started by Michael Marcola in Connecticut. His company was Mercantile Development, Inc., I believe. So actually the first year Michael came out with Fred Kirschenmann to introduce a certification thing to us area farmers. And we all met at my place where they explained the process and procedures, the reasoning behind it. And we filled out the paperwork for my place right there that day. So the first year it was MDI Assured, or something like that. And they changed the name to Farm Verified Organic the following year or a couple years later, in 1985. Also in 1985, that was the first year of NOFA's certification. So I got certified by NOFA because FVO certification was owned by the grain buyer, not the farmer. We couldn't take, we had no paperwork proving we were organic, because it belonged to the grain buyer. Which we didn't think was fair. So we had to get dual certified.

And then eventually NOFA would certify only for use in the United States, and there was interest in exporting soybeans to Japan specifically by a few growers in the area. So the FVO was still, at that point, I believe—I don't think it was buyer-owned. Anyway, in 1993 we started an OCIA chapter here in upstate New York just so we could export crops to Europe or Japan. In order to do that, you're supposed to form a local chapter, which we did. And I don't think anyone in this area is still certified by OCIA, I don't even know if they still exist. But our chapter still exists, and it's going strong. It's been an educational meeting place. We used to meet every month during the winter. Now it's every other month. We get speakers in from Cornell, other businesses, other organic interests across the country. Klaas and Mary-Howell Martens were

very influential in getting that chapter going and keeping it going all these years. Cornell's been very helpful; we've had several professors come out and talk about their programs. They have a person for their small farms project again who now facilitates the meetings, helps set up the agendas. And all these certification organizations have been getting farmers together, which is a good thing. Our local New York Certified Organic chapter has had over a hundred people at a meeting before. It's gotten a lot of interest over the years. (37:39)

AA: And so you said the name of that chapter was the New York Certified Organic?

JM: That's the name we came up with, yup. Just formed for the purposes of OCIA certification, initially.

AA: You also mentioned that you worked at least for a few years as an inspector for Farm Verified Organic. Could you tell me more about that?

JM: Yeah. That was very interesting, because I got to travel around. New York State, and down into Pennsylvania. And look at different farms. There weren't a whole lot of organic farms at that time. And most people were very new to the process. Even though they were given their materials ahead of time to fill out, a number of the farmers, a couple were oldtimers who had never used chemicals and this was something new to them, keeping records and stuff like that. You had to be patient and show them how to fill it out, which today is a big no-no, I'm sure, but at least the first year to get it done, kind of help them through the process. But it was uplifting to be able to go around and see these other organic farms and people doing what I was doing or was trying to do. We went out, looked at the farm and the equipment, the storage space, their records. It was typical; it's done the same way today, basically. Then I ran up the report, sent in my findings. The inspector doesn't decide who's organic and who isn't; that was established right from the get-go. And send my report in. The nice part about this was going to North Dakota for inspector training. A couple trips out there in January. And meeting other organic farmers from all over the upper Midwest, basically, at that time. Yeah, it was a good experience. (40:43)

AA: Did you ever run into any farmers that were not following organic practices in the inspections?

JM: Yes. There was one farm that applied for certification, and we had a scheduled meet time. And I went out to this place, and he wasn't around. So I saw a tractor off in the distance, so I drove down the farm lane. Well, actually, first, there was a flatbed wagon with bags of fertilizer on it in his driveway, barnyard. But he's out planting corn. He's like, "Oh, I'm planting my neighbor's corn back here. This isn't part of it." But there are ways to tell. There was overspray in his grass laneway where he had sprayed some herbicide, and you could see the circle of where he turned the sprayer around and dripped some spray, killed the grass in his laneway. Things like that. I just reported what I saw, and it went from there.

AA: But that was fairly rare? You didn't run into that very often?

JM: That was just a one-time deal, yeah. Everyone else was straight up organic. As far as I could tell. And the inspectors they have now are pretty good, too. So I definitely have faith in the system. Even though there are some bad clogs out there. (42:47)

AA: So while we're on the topic, what are your views on the current USDA certification standards?

JM: Well, the livestock part of it is what really bugs me. They're not sticking to what is really considered organic with a thousand cows on a feedlot instead of a pasture, and chickens without nearly enough square footage outdoors. That really flies in the face of organic farming. Those are the main things, I guess. Well, soilless hydroponic growing. Not good. Not good.

AA: So how do you feel about the Real Organic and regenerative suggestions of alternative certification? Do you think that's a good way to go, or is it better to reform the actual USDA standards?

JM: Well, I do both. I'm certified by the NOP, National Organic Program, and the last couple years by the alternative organic program, I guess you want to call it. I think it's a good program especially for small farms because it costs so much to get certified organic. I think for people selling at a roadside stand, that's their parttime farm market, and they're doing it organically, and they really believe in the organic method, but they don't want to pay a thousand dollars to get inspected when their annual sales are two thousand dollars, there's nothing wrong with them having an alternative. The Real Organic Project I think has a place. It has a place in the marketplace. (45:29)

AA: So I'm curious, while you were at Cornell University as a student, did you encounter any anti-organic attitudes in any of the agricultural programs?

JM: Yeah, pretty much all of them. If you asked a question about organic farmers, the professor would scoff, I guess is the word. It was so new, they knew nothing about it, didn't want to talk about it. Didn't see a place for it. That's in the strictly ag-related classes, even the soil science were kind of anti-organic. But boy, that changed. That changed. I think Pimentel had a lot to do with that. Besides his interest in ecology, it was also the Agriculture, Society, and the Environment. Crossing over of disciplines. And understanding that you do something in one direction, if you run an experiment to show that this does that while you're farming, and you don't look outside the field, then you're not really looking at the whole picture. Cornell fairly rapidly changed their beliefs and started looking at a more holistic approach to things. It's been good. I had, shortly after graduating, I had grad students who wanted to do research on organic farming who, I gave them a little space on my farm. Different ones over the years. And I think if you've got a doctoral candidate doing research on organic farming, this professor's got to take notice of that, or had to back them in the first place. So gradually it was pretty pervasive in agriculture at Cornell. Within twenty years, anyway, most of the ag professors had nothing really bad to say about organic. In fact, one of their crop science guys, their top crop science guy, had his own research plot on an organic farm, and he thought he'd try it. And was amazed by the results that he got. There's lots of stories out there about how they've come around. They got a new dean at the ag school in the early '90s, maybe, and she put together a tour of small farms in

the area. It included my farm, an organic grain farm, and an organic vegetable farm as part of the tour, as well as two other relatively small farms. So we're really glad for that. Like I said, they've been participating in the New York Certified Organic group meetings. They've been doing a lot of research on organic farming. (49:52)

AA: So I don't know how familiar you are with other states, other land grant universities, but would you say that Cornell is fairly typical, or that it's now more open toward organics than others, or maybe less?

JM: Like I said, I'm not that familiar, but I would say at least as open to organic farming as other land grant colleges.

AA: So tell me a little bit about your philosophy of organic farming, if you were to just summarize that.

JM: It's hard to call it a philosophy. But I believe in our environment, our natural world, natural processes. I went to college to study environmental science and ecology. So that's basically where it comes from, being able to grow good crops without chemicals. And not a closed system, because you're shipping grain out, but trying to make things work together. I mean, ideally I think a small organic dairy farm would be the peak of organic farming, where the animals eat a lot of forages. You can process milk into cheese and get the maximum return for shipping the least amount of product off the farm. Just taking care of the land. (52:07)

AA: So would you say that your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about farming, or not?

JM: I was raised in a very religious family, and was not big on going to church. I would tell my mom, "Well, the woods is where my church is." So spiritual? Yeah.

AA: Is there any person or publication that has strongly influenced your philosophies about organic farming?

JM: I would say *Acres U.S.A.* It has such a wide variety of input and testimonials from people, basically. It makes me think, over the years it's made me think more than, say, reading Wendell Berry years ago, if you know what I mean.

AA: So do you think there was any connection between organic farming and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s and '70s?

JM: Totally, yeah. It wasn't just the hippies, but they were part of, let's say, a food co-op started in Ithaca in the early '70s. And there was definitely a lot of hippie types associated with that. But I joined because it was cheap food, bulk food. The whole back-to-the-land movement, the environmental movement, was definitely anti-big farm, anti-big corporation, anti-chemical. So yeah, definitely it was an impact.

AA: Would you consider yourself a hippie, or not?

JM: Nah. I was that age, when I went to college in '72. I was actually too young to be a hippie. Hippies were in the '60s up to '70, '71 apparently. We used to have discussions, my friends and I. But I'm sure some of my neighbors, when I started farming organically, would say I was a hippie, but I never considered myself that. (55:59)

AA: Would you say there was any connection with the environmental movement at the time?

JM: Yeah. Clean water. Clean air. Any living thing. Yeah, the environmental movement, it was pretty big back then. And getting back to the land was really important to a lot of people. So many people wanted to live out in the country and have a big garden.

AA: What would you say were some of the main motivations for wanting to go back to the land?

JM: That's a good question. The world was getting too crazy. Vietnam War news. People just wanting to get away from the mainstream of what the country was going through then. Just check out and have their own place out in the wilderness. And I personally didn't get involved in any big social or political movements. I was just doing my thing. Once I decided that yes, I was going to be a farmer, but I'm going to do it this way. That was my thing. (58:12)

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

JM: I think the way organic farming developed out of ecological farming or sustainable farming, whatever. I can include those, I guess, as part of that organic farming history. And I think the thing to think about is how David Yarrow, a social justice worker, and a bakery owner, and farmers and union organizers could all get together and start something like NOFA-New York. People with such diverse interests had vaguely a common goal, which was a fair system of good food for people. And even though as individuals we were very different people, we learned how to work together and solve the problems we faced for the common good. I think it's a lesson in working together, that's what it was.

AA: Is there anything else you would like to share, any other stories you would like to tell, before we end the interview?

JM: I mentioned some names of people that were big in the history of organic farming in New York State. I didn't mention David Stern, who was another social guy who turned to farming. And he was our first chairman of the organic standards board for NOFA. He was an early NOFA member. He was part of the Finger Lakes Organic Co-op. He worked hard to see that organic farming and certification would succeed in upstate New York back in the early days. And there's a bunch of other people. I'm just glad we've met them over the years. That's it.

AA: All right, well thank you so much!

JM: All right, Anneliese! (1:01:54)