

Scott Williams, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

July 6, 2021

Location: Scott William's house, Columbus, Ohio

SW=Scott Williams

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right! This is July 6, 2021, and I am interviewing Scott Williams. Scott, thank you so much for taking the time to interview today. You want to start telling us a little about your background in organic/sustainable agriculture and your connection to that?

SW: Sure. At a very young age [13?] I was compelled to want to travel and visit other cultures. And set myself up saving money, working the day after high school to start traveling overseas. I came back and worked, lived with my parents, traveled more. I also imported hippie clothing, jewelry, things like that to help generate money while I was traveling. That worked pretty well. And I was able to squeeze four, five years of my life in other cultures. At 21 I decided to sink my roots back in my hometown of Columbus, Ohio, a very different person. Also, getting sick from American food. Overprocessed. And working with the alternative community that I had linked to from selling my products. I got a job within a year with the natural food co-op here in Columbus, Ohio. It was growing exponentially, the demand for healthy, safe, bulk, cheap, organic food. It was incredible to experience that era.

I was at the second official meeting of the Federation of Ohio River Cooperatives [FORC] as we founded our warehouse and federation across the five-state region. Mick Luber, who you interviewed earlier, was involved in working on the organic certification [for FORC]. So many people were leaving the big cities and moving out to buy very cheap land to start growing organically. Going back to the land, thanks to *Mother Earth News* and other media. Our media forces, Stewart Brand on the West Coast, with *Coevolution Quarterly*, which had an earlier and later name [*The Whole Earth Catalog*] too. These people then were selling products to FORC. And then we would package them and sell them back to them, or to the urban food co-ops, which were the main volume of FORC. Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Akron, [Columbus]. Certainly Lexington, Kentucky. And places in West Virginia. (3:12)

So I got involved very quickly in that politicized movement that was very much trying to create a new vision of what we should have in America in terms of our food, how we handle energy, how we handle decision-making. And it was all oriented towards an organic ecological worldview. Along with the consumer, the family, the household. Home birth. I mean, it just goes on and on and on. The network that we had, it wasn't just organics. It was part of a much, much larger health movement and whatnot. It was, one of the things that was interesting, I got to—we had communes as well. And there was people buying land cooperatively and putting it into land trust. But there was all of these people were quickly changing and growing and learning about natural foods and how to cook with them, things like that. The Moosewood Cookbook. California was a leader in this movement, along with Boston and New England. But the Midwest, we had our own ways. And we quickly rose up and were recognized nationally, even

by the Canadians in terms of what we were doing here in this region of the country. I could just go on and on.

But I also saw the troubles that we were having, we used collective management, and we had really no knowledge of the food industry. We created our own knowledge. So we were making lots of mistakes. Plus, we had no way to screen new employees coming into our collectives. It was whoever wanted to join us. Gradually I chose to go to college. Already I had learned so much. Rudolf Steiner, I visited the communes dedicated to his theory of agriculture that came out of 1900 forward in Europe. For example, I find myself going to college. And I was going to be a generalist. But I met a woman on a panel that I was on that was a professor in the Home Ec college. And this was really—again, this is really interesting history. Because I know so much of American co-op history, do people know that the consumer co-ops in America fought against white bread when it first started to be marketed? And we had a co-op out in the Midwest, in Illinois I think, called the Natural Foods Cooperative. In the 1930s.

So there are like little blips coming in terms of what was happening in America in terms of the turn of the century 1900 where again a California writer writes a famous book about the food industry and it shocks the world, including America, and there's reforms to try and get purity of foods, the FDA is founded, and we come into the 30s, and there's war troubles again, the white bread issue. You know, the depression era co-ops were trying to fight against. But they had so many fights that this was minor. But it was consumer-controlled, it was family-oriented in terms of what is the interest of families and households and consumers in our society? Not, what is the power of giant corporations to brainwash us to think this new product is going to be better?

So the consumer movement in America, and the home economics movement was backing us up in its own way. Our graduates in the 30s, 40s, 50s became consumer advocates. Ralph Nader gets all the credit, but there were many others that fought for healthy food and keeping it unadulterated. So I got into the home ec movement and the consumer sciences realm. Then I moved into the ag econ department at OSU, thinking I might still be able to find a career in cooperatives. That didn't pan out. So I ended up becoming a grant writer for nonprofits in central Ohio for a good almost 30 years. It was very rewarding and fascinating to work at trying to solve social problems and getting services to low-income people in need. But it also left me pretty cynical in the end. Everything becomes an industry. The whole food pantry world, the food bank world and whatnot, it's tied into the corporations. The food stamp system comes in, and it's all tied into a situation that is not good for our country. Instead of raising the minimum wage, keeping it inflation-adjusted for low-income people, young people in particular to get a job where they can begin to save, that would be, as I said, \$24 an hour today in 2021. Young people would be being paid minimum wage \$24 an hour if it was pro-rated for inflation over time. Instead, what do we have? We have food stamps, we have food pantries to keep people filled with fats, salt, and sugar dumped on it by giant corporate food industry people. It's really sickening to see this happen to our country. That's what's happened. (10:34)

So, let's move on to the next question, please.

AA: All right, so the next question's about farming methods, so probably that one's not as applicable to you because you weren't actually involved in the production side of it?

SW: Right, it is not. But what is fascinating is that because I traveled the world, and I had a certificate, I got not only a degree in consumer sciences and semi-graduate studies in ag econ, I did a lot of work in that era for the co-ops. I also got a degree in East Asian Studies with a

Chinese language focus. And I hosted visiting scholars from China for 25 years. Including Man Anwa [?] coming over to learn different trades and see what we were doing. That's what's so cool about this interview, is that Mr. King went to China around 1900 and studied their agriculture, and he came back and wrote a book called *Farmers of Forty Centuries*. And he documented how the Chinese were able to keep growing healthy, good food for themselves for forty centuries and not letting the earth run off and poisoning their soils. And so that's part of the Wisconsin Historical Society library now, the original collection, so to speak. And what we learn from studying all these other cultures, especially before chemical agriculture convinced us to do otherwise, was everybody knew how to do this. There's knowledge everywhere about thinking about our environment and how we use our soil to plant trees for your grandchildren, not you, not your children, but your grandchildren, things like that, that are embedded deep in some of the folklore and whatnot of cultures all over the planet in terms of food.

I do want to just pay honor to, then there's all these, like Rudolf Steiner. One of the things I think has happened was Rudolf Steiner's philosophy was holistic. He had one for agriculture. And he was very much into health, too. And this somehow, with the European sensibility that goes back millennia for going to the hot baths for curing, having a health restoration, going on certain diets and things like that—that all comes out of Europe and is adopted by Hollywood. And so what's happening in the 70s is there's this little fringe group of radical health professionals and Hollywood actresses and actors who know that they've got to keep healthy and looking good. And they tie into this movement that maybe we could give Rudolf Steiner credit for in terms of that influence.

There were these little health food stores with some negative aspects to them because supplements, selling a supplement for this or that, has really not been tested by science correctly. We've always had people hawking health cures that often, that used to have a lot of alcohol in them back in the day. And that was even going on when I was growing up as a kid, with a liver cure that had a lot of alcohol in it that was advertised in all the early television shows. Very funny. But nonetheless, there was a force there that was happening too that gelled with the hippies who were just rejecting all things material. And it just took off, it exploded with the cancer scares and young families wanting to raise children that were healthy and not being damaged by all of these artificial chemicals and minerals—minerals can't be artificial, I know—the coal industry, you know the coal industry provided the coloring, the tar dyes that were in our foods. That was all a very cool experience.

And again, the Rodale and the philosophies of these growers were then available for *Mother Earth News* to replicate, to mail their magazine to the young hippie couple living off the land in somewhere Midwest America. I've talked too long. (16:27)

So we did get into the philosophies a little bit there. Religious and spiritual views. Yes, I want to talk about that just for a second. You know, we mentioned Charlie Frye, the president of OEFFA [and a United Methodist Minister]. At that time [mid- to early 1990s] I was on the board, too. I served twice on OEFFA's board doing lots of volunteer work in certain areas [marketing, conference, workshop development, grant writing, and fundraising]. I was also in the academic world, deep. And Charlie was going to do a workshop on the spiritual philosophy of organics. And I said, "I'd like to join you in that." He was a minister who couldn't stop talking, basically. And we [all] loved him and everything, but oh I was mad as hell at him [afterward]. We agreed and everything, and I did all my interesting—I put together a handout, 20 pages or more, of some of the best philosophical thinking about the environment that was being produced by the mid-80s [and early 1990s]. I gathered just some incredible material looking at the planet

as a whole. And Charlie just kept on talking and talking, and like ten minutes before, I said, “Charlie, can I have a moment?” Well, he had to wrap up, so it took him another five minutes.

And as I’m handing this out trying to explain this incredible information, Charlie, he was based on the Bible, you know, in all his arguments for the workshop. I was bringing out all this scientific spiritual religious aspects of what we’re looking at. You know, we’re talking about the human mind, how we think, how sociology works among people, environmental feedback loops. Just these fabulous thinkers of the era that I have documented who produced this stuff. Harv Roehling [another president of OEFFA], he’s like afterwards, “This is incredible, Scott!” People were already wanting to ask questions as the workshop ended and we all had to leave. So that’s my two cents worth of religious and spiritual views, which I put into print. The material that I assembled I still have. I don’t know. Maybe someday it will get to Wisconsin. (19:40)

AA: Thank you, that stuff is really interesting. Were there some people then, you were saying there were some people who were Christians and some who were hippies, and they were able to get along pretty well, or sometimes there were disagreements?

SW: No, I would say not. It was just mostly male egos fighting over potential wealth happening inside OEFFA. Splitting off to start their own groups and things like that. When we came together in these conferences those male egos, they would try to have their say now and then in our membership meetings. Everybody just fused. It was this wonderful cultural fusion going on where people would sit with one another different from themselves. That’s the way it’s always been. Very positive stuff.

AA: That’s really good to know. So is there anything you want to share about the connection—and you already did share a lot, but anything else about the connection between organic/sustainable agriculture to the broader historical and cultural context?

SW: Well, again, this really troubles me, but it seems like in human populations you take a sample of them, there’s only like five percent that have any common sense. And it’s really hard in our culture with the media controlled by giant corporations that have a financial interest behind their thing, including the scientific research being done and everything to advance their bottom lines to have this independent ability as did the Spray brothers’ families. I’m quoting them. They saw the new-fangled chemical agriculture come on, and they decided to pull back and just wait and continue to farm the way they were farming. Because they were still making money, it still worked. That’s the problem. There’s not too many people that have that kind of open-mindedness anywhere, it seems, to see a pig for a poke and know that maybe this isn’t such a good idea. This new-fangled stuff that they want us to spray.

So that’s perhaps my answer to that question. We’re working good, we’ve got ten minutes left till 5 p.m.! (22:48)

AA: So you were involved, you were talking about FORC and your involvement in that, and then I know you were also involved in OEFFA. Do you want to share anything else about your involvement in organic organizations?

SW: Well, I laughed at my first involvement in OEFFA. I was so involved with the natural food co-op movement that I didn’t want [to get involved], I wanted to help a little bit with OEFFA

and nothing more. And so I did not even remember until I saw my name on the [attendee] list that I had attended that Spring '79 meeting. I didn't attend the final organizational meeting in the fall of '79. But I attended that first meeting because I was ordered by FORC to be there. And I had to give a workshop on world food and hunger. One of the really innovative things that FORC did was we taxed imported Third World foods from dictatorships and we sent that money back to those countries to help the unions, the whatever that farmers fight against the United Banana Company, whatever. And we used the rest of that money to educate our own public about how bad it is for these growers and farmers in these Third World countries under these dictatorships. And Frankie Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet*, she fell in love with FORC. She wrote us up all over the place. I saw her recently, and she was like, "Oh, my god. FORC was one of the best things I ever ran into." In terms of people rising up and doing good things with their money, as well as trying to build equitable food system in our society. So that's kind of one aspect.

So I ended up having to do something, one person attended my workshop—I didn't even want to attend it, I wanted to go hear other people at the first OEFFA conference. Then I got on the board, and I helped with the suppliers' director. I was very marketing-oriented. So I did some of the earliest marketing flyers. After Rural Resources did some. Trying to get it into the consumers, our food co-op systems and whatnot, cross membership. Join OEFFA, it's cheap. So I did that supplier directory, organic supplier directory. And that was a big disappointment for me in many ways. Partly because, I tried to learn what Mick already knew and others already knew. And I created a thesaurus of generic organic terms. And I thought the organic industry would love that. But they never, there's so much chaos in our lives going on all the time. Things never happen.

That was a financial disappointment, too, for OEFFA. We were going to try to make some money with it. I distinguished between standard, generic product and service terms with brand names, and then even specific species names for life forms, for bugs that we were buying to use. So I did that then, and then I got off the board. And then I was brought back on again. I was already doing grants and fundraising. I'd done that back in the '70s for co-ops. That was my role. So that was really fun. I had an easy job kind of to do, and I could sit on the board and listen to everybody and try to help raise money. Which I did. Then recently since 2015 I've been involved with the history, because I'm an archivist. I've always been an archivist, so I tried to collect everything that was being handed out each year and save all the movement literature. That's how you got to know me.

Now this is, I'll just say, so I'm gathering together all the food co-op movement stuff. This is a 1977 Massachusetts flyer, they had 12 of these, *Talking Food* pamphlets. I had one of the best bookstores of any food co-op in the country maybe, here in Columbus. We had cookbooks, the latest natural foods cookbooks, all the literature. And I loved these little flyers. There were like a dozen of these on different topics, like miso, fruit juices, all natural organic stuff. Here's their lead one, "Natural Foods Are the Best Buy." Arguing about why we want to pay a little bit more to support organic farmers building their soil. With the lingo of the era. Very funny to look at. (29:05)

AA: So I'm curious. I know that you were, at least for a while there, involved in the Ag Econ department at OSU. So I'm really curious about your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities and organic and sustainable agriculture and how that's changed over time.

SW: Yes, I can go quick to the source here. I'm in the ag econ department, and rural sociology. And there are probably 20 professors in the department, no less. Twenty. And of course none of them are doing any work that would help organic farmers. Because they can't. But there was strong consensus in that department among all the professors that they supported sustainable organic agriculture and that should be being done. I remember one conversation, one professor blurted out, you know, they had veered off the topic, and they're talking about global warming—this is 1985. And one professor said, "Well, maybe we can throw iron filings into the South Pacific to help absorb the acidity that's going to build up and lower the temperature somehow of the ocean." They were way ahead sympathetically, but because Dean Kottman was totally in the hands of the ag industry, they couldn't say anything, really. They were very sympathetic but they couldn't say anything unless they were a full professor, maybe, they might talk a little about that. There's no ability to research farms in Ohio to do statistical comparative advantage or something like that, we just didn't have enough farms going.

So that was kind of the gist of the story. Of course you've heard Deb Stinner, Ben, they came along. And that was like manna from heaven, that we actually had some people in the ag system that were taking us seriously and doing research. They wrote a beautiful article for the OEFFA newsletter on sustainable communities. It's now at Wisconsin. One of the titles on my spreadsheet, I created a title to each newsletter. They're in that. That's that. (32:10)

AA: So from your perspective, the social scientists, the ag economists and the rural sociologists, were more favorably disposed toward organic farming than the plant scientists and the soil scientists?

SW: Right. We had a dairy guy come in that was pro-organics that really helped a lot with rotation, the New Zealand rotation system for dairy grazing that was developed in New Zealand. He brought that to Ohio. And some of our big members down in southeast Ohio, the name of the dairy.

AA: Was it Zartman? David Zartman?

SW: Yes, yes. He was supportive of more sustainable and environmental practices. So it was coming in. They couldn't avoid it in some ways. Then Kottman retired, so there was a little bit more freedom to crank it up even more. With Clive Edwards not being in the ag college at all. He was in the College of Arts and Sciences. So he could get away with holding an international conference without Dean Kottman vetoing it.

AA: Right. But he was an entomologist, right?

SW: Right. Science. Bug science, I guess, was separated from agriculture long ago maybe. Who knows.

AA: Did you notice any difference between the Wooster campus and the Columbus campus?

SW: I can't say.

AA: Because I was just wondering because I think a lot of them were more at OARDC than on the Columbus campus, and I was just curious if there was any kind of split there.

SW: No, that was, I remember attending an OEFFA event out at OARDC's headquarters where we—and this was in the 80s—we brought in one of the first soil scientists to actually speak to the academic scientists as well as us in terms of the state of the art of their research knowledge. And I just loved it. I was stunned by the lack of knowledge that we had. It was all, “Hey, chemicals work. And this works.” It's industrial agriculture model. So that was for me the first rumblings that hey, things are really changing in the research world. The next year or two, then Ben Stinner came on strong.

Now Deb Stinner said something interesting that should be recorded. This is much, much later, 2015. We're talking 1985 versus 2015. Deb Stinner is managing our national research task force for organic research in the country. She's on the committee. I think she's the head of the committee. She said, off the record probably, how she could not use European research, organic research, in America. We had to re-research all the organic research the Europeans had pioneered to tell us what's working and what isn't. We had to do it over again using our own people. The sociology, politics of American academic institutions. We're number one, we can't trust European research. That really threw me for a zinger, really depressing to hear.(36:33)

AA: All right, great. Do you want to share if you have any perspectives on organic certification? Again, I know you weren't personally involved with much of that.

SW: No, I've already said how I tried to create a thesaurus of organic terminology, but never got that involved with the certification people. We were just overwhelmed sometimes in our lives. You hope that they, you take the horse to the water but it doesn't drink, you know. That's the case of that pitiful effort on my part.

AA: And I'm curious to hear your perspective on past and current trends in organic/sustainable agriculture. Is there anything you want to comment on some of the controversies and maybe why those have come about?

SW: Well, I'm going to take a consumer perspective on this. The consumer got overwhelmed with labels, certification labels, at one point I think, at least. That's one thing that's going on. Again, when you study consumer sciences, we learned things, along with propaganda, the art and science of propaganda. If you repeat a lie often enough people will believe you. If you create so many variables for when a consumer wants to buy a product, you confuse them, so they never know what they really want to buy because it would take too long to study the whole situation. This has been proven. And all industries that know this are using it. You have so many attributes of the product and so many variable options you could choose for the acquisition of that product that you're left choosing something that sounds good but it's actually, you're paying more than you should for what you really need criteria-wise for that product. Something like that. So there's greed involved with these labels. And we've talked about that earlier. I find that fascinating.

And I love trying to find new organic certification labels that I haven't seen before. I see products being sold at Kroger, certified organic, but there's nothing on it that shows the certifying agency, which is illegal. Talking about Ohio and Kroger, locally, Kroger tells

everybody they're buying local and whatnot. And our Amish organic growers in OEFFA that were producing the kale chips—wonderful product—along with other Ohio products, on a moveable island in the Kroger store. It used to be there when you came in to the produce area. Well, where did it go? I just noticed that they had removed it at one point. And then I found they put it way back in the dog food area. Promoting Ohio agriculture. And they were *not*, believe it or not they were not even monitoring the end dates on the products! And that poor Amish company, we named it earlier, the kale chips were moldy. And this is what, they were ten months past due date, and Kroger was still trying to sell them with mold on the chips on this island. This is how bad it can be for the organic movement, the local organic, which is even more important. Enough said. (40:51)

AA: So what would you say are the most important aspects of this history to preserve and then teach to the younger generations?

SW: Most important, I think that's maybe the wrong question. And this gets back into my comments on the food pantry system in this country. It's sort of like, we're just sort of, we accept things because we don't know how different and better they can be. The information about organics is out there. It's a question of whether we are going to own the politicians and force them to change the system and deal with the corporations that are doing what they're doing. Until we have a democracy that's able to do that, I don't see much change going into the future other than our gradual growth as more and more people convert over to that. We had that exponential growth, and we know that it continues, I just saw the grocery data just recently. It's still growing at a great clip. But it's far behind what we need. You know, we saw what the corporations did when they came in and tried to take over parts of the organic label just so they could make money selling an organic chicken that says organic. But we know that it happens at the grassroots level, too, with people just trying to cheat and make money.

I'm worried because of the power of the truly giant corporations. It's so significant, I think we have so many obstacles until we deal with certain aspects of our democracy, the gerrymandering, you name it. One of the things that comes to this, you hear about, we need a new constitution. Yes, we do, blah blah blah. But when we were founding OEFFA, we were founding a bioregion. This is part of the scaling of democracy, having local systems that are democratic on top of others that can help fix all the problems we've been ignoring for decades and decades. Usually it takes a crisis, but the crises I've seen coming into our society have been quickly forgotten, and we go back to the old ways more and more of the same. So I don't know. I don't know what can be done in that sense. Certainly one-on-one mentoring is wonderful.

I know that we heard the others talk about this in terms of the USDA, marketing, and these other, the problem of grain farmers, and trying to solve that problem. I think that's way beyond where politicians in our society today are, specifically the gerrymandering, because if you think about it, the Democrats, who were the ones that supported the organic originally, many, many Democrats, elected Democrats in our US House of Representatives, are coming from gerrymandered districts by the Republicans. A gerrymandered Democratic district that that person can always win. And so they have no incentive to get rid of the other gerrymandered districts that are supported by the corporations. Of course, the Democrats are very much supported by the giant corporations, too.

To change society it usually takes a big crisis. But the last few that we've seen didn't seem to do much. So I don't know. It's looking dangerous in my future with the aspect of severe

hits by global warming perhaps as soon as the 2040s or 2050s. Was there one or two more questions?

AA: That was all the main questions. If there's anything else that you want to add to the recording.

SW: I found joy in collecting the organic food movement material, the print culture of the movement. And that's why a lot of my stuff is going to Wisconsin. We fought hard, but we had a lot of fun. And we had sort of a spiritual, ethical position that these people that came together in FORC and OEFFA had that was different than the kinds of other nonprofit organizations being created. Oftentimes one mission, and I want to get rich, I want to be an executive director. No. That was not part of our culture. That made it so rich. And enriched my life greatly.

AA: Well, thank you so much, Scott! (47:43)