

Ed Snavely, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

July 6, 2021

Location: Columbus, Ohio, at Scott Williams's house

ES=Ed Snavely

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right. This is July 6, 2021, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing—

ES: Ed Snavely.

AA: So Ed, thank you very much for taking the time to interview today! Do you want to start with giving a little background about your involvement with organic or sustainable agriculture and your specific connection to the movement?

ES: Sure. Well, I grew up on a farm, and growing up on the home farm with my parents, I had no desire in wanting to farm. But after I graduated from high school I went to college for one semester, and that wasn't for me. I came home, and my dad had a stroke, so I ended up having to take the crops off that particular fall. And so it got in my blood then. So my dad and I, we farmed together conventionally until he passed away in 1983. And just prior to that, we had been introduced to sustainable/organic farming by a neighbor through a company in Iowa that sold a product that was a bacteria product. Anyways, they done their presentations through, basically it was like you went to a restaurant thing. You got a dinner and they did their presentation. We went. I was very interested in it but couldn't get my dad interested. He was worried about the weeds and, like I said, he passed away in '83. And then I kept watching the neighbor that introduced it, because he was farming this way. And also Rex Spray, which is a pioneer in it in Ohio here, went to their farm tours. And then in 1986 my wife and I made the decision to quit using chemicals and started transitioning our farm into organics. (2:22)

AA: All right. Do you want to say a little more about Rex and Glen Spray?

ES: Rex and Glen were the first ones in Ohio, actually, their farm is Terry's 101 certification, which is the first certified organic farm in Ohio. They held many farm tours on their farm, and with advocates of promoting it, and willing to show what they did, what they did right, what they did wrong. I would dare say that of the early grain farmers that went organic, Rex and Glen probably played a big important part in that transitioning into organics. And also, in getting the information out and helping guys, helping farmers with what to do.

AA: So you started farming organically, you said, in 1986?

ES: Correct.

AA: All right. So do you want to say a little bit about your farm and maybe how it's changed over the years since then?

ES: In 1986 we quit using chemicals. At that time the farm that we live on, which is 114 acres—there's 93 acres tillable. I was also farming my parents' farm at that time also for my mom. That was a 63-acre farm, which had 43 acres tillable. And I also rented another 80-acre farm. So we had 93 and 43 and there was 80 acres tillable on this other farm that was all certified organic. Which we farmed, I farmed those until, I guess the first farm I lost was my mother's farm. She sold it. I could have bought it, but I didn't want to put myself in the financial risk of taking too much debt on, because I already had debt. And that was, like I said, in the '80s when a lot of farm crises was going on. The risk was high. And then the 80-acre farm, the lady sold it, and so I lost it. So at that point I just had my own place. And the following year there was a farm that came up for rent, which was another 40. So anyways, at that time I was farming about 130 acres organically. Which, this other farm was 8 miles from the farm, and I finally decided that it was just too far. The logistics of it was just not working, so we give it up. We just had the farm, our home place.

Of course, some of the changes that I've seen, that we've done since we started in '86, at that time I had a commercial farrow-to-finish, confinement hog operation. I was feeding them the organic crops that we was raising and selling them on the conventional market. In the late '80s when the hog crash came, we was selling hogs at six cents a pound, and that was not penciling out, feeding them with \$5 organic corn at that time. So we decided to get out of the hog business then and was in the process of doing that when an OEFFA member approached me or had called and had heard that we was raising organic chickens, which we was raising chickens, of course feeding them organic feed, I guess you could call them organic at that time. That was prior to USDA. But I said, "No, we don't have any extra," but I did have a few hogs that we still had. And so actually we never did get clear out of the hog business.

But we started raising pigs sustainably. We did away with the farrowing house and with the farrowing pens, and to this time now we have six sows farrow to finish and we basically sell 90 percent of that meat through farmers' markets and the other 10 percent goes through halves and wholes through the winter months. As far as the farm itself goes, we started out in '86 when we first started converting on a three-year rotation, which at that time, it worked somewhat. It probably wasn't the best. We eventually followed the Spray brothers, which had a four-year rotation, which was corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay. And we basically did the same thing. Over the years from then to now we kept playing with different rotations to the point now where we're on a seven-year rotation. (8:01)

AA: Do you want to give any details about your farming methods, how you chose or developed those, and which people and publications influenced those methods?

ES: Well, I would say the biggest influence was probably Rex and Glen Spray, as I mentioned earlier. They were the pioneers in Ohio as far as they were the first, and they were actually doing it even before OEFFA come into existence. I know Glen's son Howard, which still farms the farm organically. He has a certificate from certification that is from another state. It was a certificate of some sort of thing that their farm was chemical-free and so forth with that. So I mean, Rex and Glen played a big part in the influence. Another person—and actually the person who helped me, actually got me to start even though I went to this dinner meeting that I spoke

about earlier, of the company out in Iowa that was selling the bacterial product prior—was Stan Greg, which he was an earlier pioneer and a neighbor. He had an influence, too. Of course, I followed the *New Farm* magazine. There was also OEFFA, OEFFA was in existence, I started attending some of their meetings. So I guess that was kind of the influence that influenced me. (10:10)

AA: Great! Do you want to share anything about your philosophies of organic farming, kind of how you developed those and how they changed over time?

ES: Well, I think, one of the big reasons what convinced me to change was, even though I had said I was interested before my father passed away in '83. He was convinced, I think, that it would work, but it was control of the weeds. Because actually even before that, when we was farming, we basically ran a three-year rotation. We didn't need the hay crop, but we would run a year of corn, a year of beans, a year of wheat, underseeded the wheat with clover, which is basically what my three-year program was and a lot of guys on three-year programs in organic was, was a year of corn, a year of beans, a year of wheat, with a clover underseeding. And we cultivate. I mean, as a kid growing up, that was my summer. I spent a lot of time on the tractor cultivating. And it wasn't until later years that my father started using some sprays for weed control and so forth. You couldn't get him convinced to go back. Even though we still cultivated, it wasn't near to the extent that he cultivated before he started using the herbicides. So that was one.

But the big thing after he passed away, when I would spray, and working with the chemicals, I could tell it in the way I felt, the way my health—not that I was having problems, but just the way you felt. And plus, it seemed like every year you had to use different chemicals. What you used last year wasn't working as good. It was just an involvement, and of course I'm so removed from it today, the sprays and stuff, I would have no idea what. But it was just, I could tell it was affecting the way that I felt. And I thought, we need to do something different. We had a young child, our son, at that point, and I'm like, I don't like him growing up in this type of an environment. And so in 1986 we took the plunge. And I know a lot of people, when they transitioned, they'd do it slowly, but we took the plunge. And we just went about everything. And I don't regret it to this day that we did it that way.

And I think a lot of guys lots of times, they see the organic movement—and I'm speaking from the grain side of it, I don't know nothin about raising vegetables and that—but from the grain side of it, a lot of guys, back especially in the early years, some of them jumped into it because conventional grain prices, they bottomed out, they tanked, and they seen this. I never looked at it, but going into it because of the financial reason. And I think a lot of guys have failed farming this way because they went into it thinking with the mindset of conventional agriculture, thinking that they can buy a product, they can buy something off the farm, bring it in, and that's going to work. And I'm not going to say that it doesn't help and that it won't work, but my personal feeling is that if you're going into it for the money reason only, for a higher price, you're already setting yourself up for failure.

And I didn't do that. I looked at it more as it's a system. Not the same system will work on every farm. And that was one thing I liked about the company that we worked with out in Iowa, that they'd come in, and they didn't have one plan fits all. They came in, we sat down with them, I told them what my goals was—anyways, we set up a system, we set up a plan that would work. And of course, like I said, I went from three-year rotation in the beginning in 1986 to

today we have a 7-year rotation. Which that plan has changed over the years. But it's still, it's not because of the money. It's because of the philosophy, the mind thing. Mindset is, what can I do to leave this soil in a better condition today that what it was yesterday so that it will produce a crop? (15:27)

AA: Thank you! Is there anything you want to share about your personal perspectives and views on the connection of organic/sustainable agriculture to the broader historical and cultural context, including maybe connections with other movements?

ES: Well, I mean, I can see where they can interconnect. People—and I'm speaking now not of farmers, but on the consumer end of it—I think that over time, and especially in the last year, the pandemic has forced people to look at their food that they're eating, where it comes from, where it's grown. So from that aspect, and I don't get asked quite as often, but I still have people come up to my booth at the farmers' market and ask if I am organic. So I think that people want to know. And from previous years, the people at the market, I mean, I've had people on both sides at different times, people that are raising vegetables. And that was a question I hear quite often, "Do you spray? Do you use chemicals? Are you organic?" In that aspect, I think the two can tie together. The consumer's going to drive what the organic farmer does. Maybe not so much on the grain side, but I would think, someone raising vegetables, I would think that would play a big perspective into it. That's just my, I mean, since I don't grow vegetables, but I think that would drive vegetable growers a lot. (17:37)

AA: So do you want to tell us something about your involvement in the organic organizations? Like, I know you've been involved with OEFFA, so anything you want to say about that, and any other organizations you're involved with.

ES: So basically how my involvement got started was like I said, we quit using chemicals in '86. I'm not really sure what year it was. My first OEFFA conference, it was here in Columbus, it was at a community center, and I'm going to guess at that conference there might have been 200, 250 people. The neighbor that got me started, him and I come down, I can't remember if it was a two-day meeting, or maybe it was just a one-day meeting. Anyways, we came down to it. So that was my first experience of a conference. And of course, starting then, and then up through today I've attended many of the conferences. I've missed a few. But of course we were feeding some of the grain to the conventional hog herd that we had. Any extra we was selling once again through Rex Spray, and it was going to a chicken farm up in Massachusetts. Anyways, that grain was certified and being sold that way.

At that time in Ohio there was guys that were raising organic soybeans that were going to be exported. I don't know what the year was, but it would have been in them early years. And so there was a group of them that joined with OCIA, which is the Organic Crop Improvement Association, which at one point their headquarters was in Bellefontaine, Ohio. It got moved out to Lincoln, Nebraska. But anyways, they joined that, they were dually certified with OEFFA and OCIA in order to sell, in order to export their beans, because most of the overseas buyers would not recognize OEFFA as a certifier. And I don't know what OCIA had done, but they were recognized. So at that time the guys were certified OEFFA, so that certification worked dually together, and OEFFA facilitated that dual certification.

But in 1995 there was a group that decided they weren't happy with OEFFA. So there was a decision made, there was a meeting, a couple meetings held, a couple different certifiers come in and explain their certification to the chapter. And in '95 a decision was made that the OCIA chapter may have split. Anyways, a second chapter was formed of OCIA, and that group of growers went and became OCIA chapter 2. There was a group that decided that they did not want to go, and they stayed on as OCIA chapter 1 and affiliated with OEFFA, and OEFFA administrated that dual certification with OCIA. There was a comingled agreement made that that would work. So in '95 the chapter split. There again, Rex Spray was highly instrumental in that. Another man was Jim Krogen, and he actually was serving on the OEFFA board at that time because someone from the chapter was on the board as a chapter rep on that board. So we formed, those two guys got a core group of guys together to become the offices of the chapter. Jim stayed on as the rep of the OEFFA board in '95 and in '96.

And in '97 they elected myself to the president of the OCIA chapter. And at that time Jim dropped off and I took the responsibility of being the board rep on the OEFFA board. And I served on that board from 1997 until 2017, it was 20 years I served on that board. And that was actually when I got involved with OEFFA and was actually more than just a participant. I was involved as a board member, I served on the OCIA side, I went to those meetings as the representative of OCIA chapter 1 as the voting member to go to those meetings, they held an annual meeting once a year. I think after two years I actually got on the promotions committee of OCIA International. I served on that committee for several years. The gal, the lady that was the chair of that committee, she got on to actually the OCIA International board, so when she got on that board they moved me up to the chair of that board, and I served on that board for several years as chair.

Then I—it would have been in 1994 I think, I was asked to run for the board of OCIA International. So I filled the paperwork out, got the signatures that I needed, and the February meeting of '94 I was elected to the international board of OCIA. I served on that board for three years. So I went off, 2017 my term was up. I'm wrong on that, my dates are mixed up. Anyways, I did serve on the international board. The dates I've got mixed up there, because I actually went off of that before 2017. But I stayed on as board rep to the OEFFA board until 2017, at which time I stepped down from there. And I still go to conferences, I still help wherever I can. (25:38)

AA: Is there anything you want to say about being involved in OEFFA for so long, for 20 years, like how it's changed over the years?

ES: Well, when I first got on the OEFFA board, it was mainly volunteers. We had, I guess there was actually two staff people. There would have been the newsletter reporter, which the first one was Holly Fakler. There was two staff people, the news reporter that wrote the newsletter, which Holly Fakler was when I first came on the board. When she resigned, Anna Beauford come along, and then she was for several years. So it was them, and then Sean McGovern. Sean McGovern, which he kind of, I guess you would say run the day-to-day operations. He was really the executive director, other than he didn't like to have that position title in front of him. But in the early days it was all volunteer. So it's changed from that. And then when Sean resigned, it went back to, we had the person, Ann, that was doing the newsletter, she was actually the only paid staff I think at that point. And it was being run by the board. And we was trying to hire an executive director at that point, and it was kind of in a mess there for a while. And then we finally was able, I think it was either one or two years we went without, basically the board

was running everything, that we hired Carol Golan as an executive director. And we was working at that point, the office was in, it had moved to two or three different locations over that time. To the point now where OEFFA owns their own building. And I don't know what the staff is, that's a good-sized staff now which operates, they have the certification staff, which takes care of certification. And of course the education side, which does the education. They line up farm tours, they line up different meetings, they put a conference on. (28:44)

AA: Is there anything you want to share about your involvement with international?

ES: So not only was I, when we was involved with OCIA, OCIA stands for, like I said earlier, the Organic Crop Improvement Association. At that time, I don't know about today, I'm not involved with them anymore—but at that time that was an international organization. So there was—and it was formed up by chapters. So like here in Ohio we had two chapters eventually, it was chapter 1, chapter 2. So I know there was chapters in Michigan. So there was chapters all over the states. There was chapters in Canada throughout the provinces of Canada. Different ones had chapters. Saskatchewan, they had several chapters. There was chapters in Mexico. There was chapters in Guatemala. There was a chapter in Costa Rica. There was a chapter in Peru.

But anyways, it was an international organization. And of course, we had to, by the bylaws of the organization, there had to be an annual meeting every year. And so usually how the annual meeting chapter would present, an idea of them wanting to host the annual meeting in their particular area. And of course they would turn in a request for explaining what they would do, what they would provide and all that. In the years that I was involved with it, I got to travel to, I went to Saskatchewan in February, which was just absolutely lovely, cold, snowy. But it was an experience. I got to go to Mexico twice, once to Guahaca and once to Gualtucu for the meeting. And then also went to San Jose, Costa Rica one year. So got to do some travel in that way.

Another organization I was involved with for a while was the Slow Food movement. I was actually able to be a delegate to the first Terra Madre that was held in Italy. I got to go for it. And that conference is held every two years. I was nominated for the second conference and got to go also for the second one. So I've been to Italy twice for the Slow Food movement. (31:59)

AA: That's really cool. Is there anything you want to share about your perspective on organic certification, how that's changed over the years, and how you feel about the national standards as opposed to the private certifiers before that?

ES: So, having been first certified in '86, at that point there was no USDA certification. I got certified through OEFFA. So from '86 to '95, I was certified with just OEFFA only. I was feeding part of the grain; the rest of it wasn't anything I was able to sell under the OEFFA certification. In '95 we started raising the tofu-type beans, and they were being exported to Japan. So that's when I got the OCIA. So those set of regulations, they were all, OEFFA set their standards, OCIA set their own standards. And of course, that was one of the big things at the annual meeting at OCIA, that was one of the things you looked at. You looked at bylaws, and you looked at standards. And people could submit, anybody could submit anything they wanted to, it would go to the committees, they could hash it out in the committees. So you seen standards, especially at OCIA, because that happened at the annual meeting, those standards

would be talked, they would be argued and then they would be argued on. So you'd see those standards changing.

Of course, when USDA come in, we, the different groups submitted to USDA what they would like to see. But USDA set those standards. And personally I think USDA standards have been watered down, they're not near as strict as what they were when certifiers set their own. And even though of course now we're all under the same set of standards, back prior to USDA most certifiers probably pretty much were the same, but they had their little differences. And I think that's what brought on the USDA, because nobody could come to agreement with all those little differences. Probably today if you ask a lot of people, that probably was a mistake, we should have worked harder to get it. So I do think the standards have been, they've been watered down to allow things in that shouldn't be there. Especially I think a lot of it is in the livestock side of it. There's loopholes that livestock is certified that personally I don't think should have been. But that's my own opinion. (35:34)

AA: Thank you very much. Is there anything you want to, and I don't know if you had much involvement with this, but anything you want to comment about the relationship between the agricultural universities, especially the land grants, and the organic/sustainable agriculture, and how that's changed over the years?

ES: Well, of course OEFFA, they was the pioneers here in Ohio. And there was a group from OEFFA, there again Rex Spray was one of them. Harv Raeling was another one. I'm sure there was other ones that felt that especially with OSU that we weren't getting the support from them to the organic community that should be. And there was a group that went to OSU and said, hey, we're an evolving part of agriculture, you need to put some focus to it and put some research into it. Through that work, there started to build a relationship between OEFFA and OSU and organic agriculture. And a lot of that went on over at Wooster and OARDC. And probably the two prime proponents that really worked really hard with that was Ben and Deb Stinner. And Ben and Deb worked with different farmers, on-farm research. I know they did a lot of work with Rex Spray again. Later on, it was after Ben was gone, Deb did a lot of work on my place on some different projects that we worked on. And after Deb stepped down, there was Brian McspadMcgardner, he kind of took over the program. He did quite a bit of work. But it seems like some of those, when they left OSU, some of that had dropped off. And it was fading away, that relationship. I know that some of the guys from our chapter, the OEFFA chapter, the wheat and grain growers chapter, have been in contact with them, and I know OEFFA had. It's starting to come back. (38:11)

AA: Is there anything you want to share about your perspective on past and current trends in organic/sustainable agriculture? Including, I don't want to get too much into the current controversies and stuff, but maybe like why there are these controversies that are still going on, and maybe what the most important aspects of the history are to preserve and to teach to younger generations.

ES: Well, one thing I'd like the younger generation, it needs to be able, I know for someone young to get into it now, especially into grain farming, it's difficult. Because of the cost of land, the cost of equipment and everything. So that's a big issue there. But the thing that I would like for people that want to get into it, don't do it for the money. It's a philosophy, it's a system, and

if you don't have that mindset and you're only doing it for the money, you're going to fail. Because it's a lot of hard work. And it's a system. You've got to get things into play. You want to build things, you want to build that soil up. And there's things that you can do as an organic farmer that destroys soil. And it's that whole philosophy of regeneration, not only in the soil, but in your mind, in your health. I don't know if that answers what you're wondering about.

AA: Yeah, that's great. So is there anything else you want to share, any particular stories you want to tell, or anything else you want to add for this recording?

ES: Well, I just, I think it's great that we're trying to preserve some of that early history of where organic/sustainable agriculture started. It goes way beyond where we think it starts. In modern agriculture I think it's good that we're trying to preserve that, that we're talking to people that were involved with it in the early years, what their perspective was, where agriculture was then. And then trying to preserve the land. I mean, if we don't preserve it, I can see it just, in the conventional farms around me, I can walk over to my neighbor's conventional farm, and you don't see the soil life that I have in my farm, which has been no chemicals in it for over thirty years now. It's altogether different. And that's a fear that I have, is what's going to happen to my farm when I can no longer do it? Because I have no one to turn it over to. Because the work that I've done in thirty years, if it ends up in the hands of a conventional farmer, the work of what I did over thirty years will be gone in one day. It's not going to revert back that quick, but that will be the start of it, in one day as soon as they put chemical herbicides, pesticides, salt-based fertilizers, which all destroy soil.

AA: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share all that! I really appreciate it.

ES: No problem. (42:55)