

**Sarah Yoder, narrator**

**Anneliese Abbott, interviewer**

**July 13, 2023**

**SY** = Sarah Yoder

**AA** = Anneliese Abbott

**AA:** This is July 13, 2023, and this is Anneliese Abbott doing an oral history interview with

**SY:** Sarah Yoder

**AA:** And we're doing this interview over the phone. So Sarah, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview today.

**SY:** You're welcome.

**AA:** So why don't we start, tell us a little about when and where you were born.

**SY:** I was born June 10, 1956 at Evangelical Hospital in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. I was the first of my family to be born in a hospital. My mother had my brothers at home, but the doctor couldn't come there anymore. It just wasn't the thing to do. Interesting, my own children, the first ones were born in the hospital, and the last ones were born at home [with the aid of a midwife]. It was more the thing to do at that point. I was four or five when my mother started baking bread for Walnut Acres.

**AA:** So what are your earliest memories of Walnut Acres?

**SY:** I would go along with her to deliver the bread. And at that time the store and Paul's office were in the bottom of the barn. Of course it was renovated and nice and clean. There was one aisle down the center with bins that had green and white bags of whatever he was selling. And then there were several employees that were filling mail orders. That was, I think, probably the biggest part of their business at that point. And there was, they were making peanut butter, they did that pretty much from the start. And when they would see me, they would give me a paper cup of peanuts, and I would eat them on the way home. They roasted and ground the peanuts there. They left the red skins on them. There's some nutrition in that, I understand. But I would carefully take them off before I ate them. I remember my mother talking about them marketing it as 100 percent peanut butter. And the FDA, I guess, gave them a little bit of a hard time because theirs was more pure. It didn't quite fit the pure 100 percent peanut butter that was being marketed other places. Theirs was more pure, but it wasn't exactly the same. So that was interesting. I don't know how they worked that out. That's my very earliest memories. The ladies that worked there were always very kind to a little girl. (2:41)

**AA:** You mentioned that your mother baked bread for Walnut Acres. Can you tell me more about that?

**SY:** Yes. When I was four or five, she bought some ovens from a woman who at that time was baking for Walnut Acres and started baking in the basement of our stone house. It was a small house. We look at that room where she did her baking, and we're amazed today that she did what she did there. Walnut Acres provided a mixer that would make dough for around twenty loaves at a time. And the first day that she baked a hundred loaves was a milestone. Later on she baked up to three hundred or three hundred and fifty loaves in a day, and up to a thousand loaves in a week, in our home. The large days and large week orders were always in the winter, because it did not have any preservatives, and it was being shipped out. So in the summer, by the time it would get to where it was going, it would be moldy. So in the summer her orders were small, just for the store in Penns Creek. ]My brothers and I wrapped the bread when we got home from school. At first we would put a label inside each plastic bag, but later the bags were printed.]

**AA:** So what ingredients did she use?

**SY:** She used flour that was ground at Walnut Acres. They had their own mill. And I can recall being in the upstairs of the barn and seeing the bags of grain that were being milled there. She used whole milk from a local farm. She was responsible to get that. And she needed to scald it before she could put it in the bread. And that was always an added stress because—did you ever scald milk? All of a sudden it scalded and was coming up over the pan. So we had to clean the stoves many times. She used raw honey also, and we were responsible to get that. We would find someone local who had bees and would get honey. And she added a kelp powder. I remember not liking the smell of that. But it added nutrition, I'm sure. She made several different kinds of bread. One was a soy base with carob in it, a soy carob bread, that folks with wheat allergies could tolerate. Also she made rye, with and without caraway seeds. The whole wheat and the raisin breads were probably the most popular, but we really liked the soy carob. It was a lighter bread than the heavy whole wheat. The loaves that she baked were a pound and a quarter, and she just weighed them on a scale. She weighed the dough on the one side, with the weights on the other. And I still have that scale. She could slice a piece off of a large twenty-loaf batch of dough and get it almost a pound and a quarter, because she had done it so many times. She would add a little piece here or there, take away or add. She also baked cookies and crackers for a while, but that was really time-consuming and not as profitable.

**AA:** And so the flour you got from Walnut Acres was 100 percent whole wheat?

**SY:** Yes. And I'm not sure if they did the soy flour for us, or the rye. I suppose that they did. But I know for sure the whole wheat was by them.

**AA:** You also mentioned that you picked strawberries and apples to sell to Walnut Acres. Can you tell me more about that?

**SY:** I was thinking this morning, I believe that we picked wild strawberries maybe before she started making bread. That may have been how we were connected with Walnut Acres. But we would pick wild strawberries, and she would strain them for juice and make jelly. We made a lot of apple butter. We picked apples from an orchard that was not being sprayed, and then we would boil it down in a large copper kettle on the fire outside. My oldest brother remembers taking the

apples to a cider press, because we started out with cider and cooked that down and added applesauce that we made from the rest of the apples. The end product was delicious. I would love to have some right now. [I haven't seen wild strawberries for years. They aren't around. We're assuming that it was the chemicals that did them in.] (7:45)

**AA:** You also mentioned something about peeling tomatoes?

**SY:** Yes, that was my first job at Walnut Acres—actually, my first job that I needed my social security number to be on a payroll. It was peeling tomatoes in the Walnut Acres cannery. And it was just a group of community women sitting in a circle, each with our dishpan and a paring knife. And they would steam the tomatoes first, and we would take out the cores and remove the peels. Then they would take it over to where there was a circle of cans, and someone would be putting the tomatoes down in the cans, and then they would go to the cannery. So yeah, it was a very pleasant job.

**AA:** So when was that?

**SY:** Probably around 1970. I was born in 1956, that would make me fourteen. No, probably when I was fifteen or sixteen. So '72, maybe.

**AA:** What were the dates when your mother was baking bread?

**SY:** From 1960 until 1980. She baked bread at her home. We lived in several different places. We always had to make sure that we had a room for her bakery when we moved. She baked for twenty years at home, and then Walnut Acres put a bakery in at the facility there and someone else took over the baking at that point.

**AA:** So was your mom the only one baking bread for Walnut Acres, or did they have other people also?

**SY:** She did all the bread.

**AA:** Okay. So until about 1980, all of the Walnut Acres bread was baked by your mom?

**SY:** Yes.

**AA:** So how often did you visit Walnut Acres?

**SY:** Well, she baked the bread weekly, so when I was home and not at school yet, I would ride with her all the time. As a child I went weekly or biweekly. Later I would have, like when we were first married in 1977, I would purchase some things in the store there. But I didn't get to Walnut Acres that often as an adult.

**AA:** How long did you work there peeling tomatoes?

**SY:** Just one summer. Just when the tomatoes were in season. (10:33)

**AA:** How did Walnut Acres change over the years?

**SY:** I've given my first memories there, of the bottom of the barn. But rooms and buildings were added, like the mill. They renovated the upstairs, and Betty had her desk up there. And other women that did—possibly they were secretaries, they did the mail order. Then there were women, one of our friends, who folded price lists by hand. And that was done in that big room, too. And then they built a store in the upper part of the barn, at the one end. And that had an all-glass front. And it was a major improvement over the little aisle in the basement. They at that point added a few nonfood items that they displayed in the store. The peanut butter making was moved to a much larger area. In 1971 my father took a job as a custodian and worked at Walnut Acres at night. So he would bring home the sweepings of the peanut area and we would feed the birds with that. The grosbeaks really liked the peanuts.

Then in the mid-1970s, they built a much larger store and a warehouse. It was just, I don't know how many times larger than the beginning. It was no longer just a barn. It was a huge building. And that store had more nonfood items. As Paul got older, his son-in-law, Bob Anderson, had more authority at Walnut Acres. And he hired a chef to do with the cannery and things. And I remember my mother talking of it, it changed things a lot. He didn't quite have the same vision as Paul did of doing his own work in the community. So he ordered things that were organic, but they came in barrels from other states and then were made into soups and things that had the Walnut Acres tag on them. But it wasn't the same as the early years. He actually, that chef would make meals, and occasionally if you went to the store there would be a meal ready and you could buy a buffet and go through. And those were very interesting foods. At that point, as a teenager, I was like, "I'm not sure if I want to eat this or not." But I would love to be at one of those spreads today.

People came from a distance. And at that point they offered wagon rides to see the barn. And in the '60s and '70s there were a lot of the hippie movement that would come. The natural foods were attractive to them. Sometimes they would camp out in the parking lot. We would see a lot of those. And my father would sometimes bring someone along home who didn't have a place to spend the night.

**AA:** How did you feel about some of the changes that took place?

**SY:** I guess I was on my own, living my own life, and it didn't affect me as much as it did my folks. But it was like all business, they either need to get big or close up. It couldn't stay the same, I guess, which was too bad.

**AA:** What was your mother's name?

**SY:** Edith Groff. My maiden name was Groff. And my father was Norman. (15:01)

**AA:** Did you know Paul and Betty Keene?

**SY:** My parents knew them better. They would have known them personally. Because I was so much younger, I think they knew my name and I knew theirs, but that was the extent of me

knowing them. I knew their daughter and son-in-law somewhat, a little closer. But we were never close friends, no.

**AA:** How did Walnut Acres impact the local community?

**SY:** Well, it was the largest employer, as long as it was around. When they got started initially, people were looking at Paul like, “What’s he up to?” But once he started and they understood, he hired a lot of people at his farm. The farming in the area here—I think that’s coming in the next question about the farming—they were the largest employer. And actually, Penns Creek got its name because it had been called Centerville. But there was another Centerville in the state, and they wanted to have a post office so that Walnut Acres could get their orders out. So they had to rename the village there, and they named it Penns Creek instead of Centerville. And the post office was largely there because of Walnut Acres.

**AA:** Did you know any local farmers who sold produce to Walnut Acres?

**SY:** I can’t think of anyone in particular. I talked to someone this morning who said that what Paul would do was rent the farms in the area. And then he had a man named John Zimmerman who would do the farming for him. And that way he was assured that it was done the way he wanted it to be done.

**AA:** So then, how did it impact the community and farmers when Walnut Acres closed?

**SY:** Well, at first it was disbelief. It was such a solid organization we just thought it would always be there. But Paul was older, and the vision changed. And I don’t know how it all took place. But it was disbelief, I would say, for us. And disappointment. The loss of jobs was the main thing. But also, not being able to buy the things that we used to buy. They were all of a sudden not available. People lost their job and their retirement benefits. It was pretty major for the community.

**AA:** How did you feel about it personally?

**SY:** I was at a distance at that point, so I just felt sad.

**AA:** The changes at Walnut Acres, did those also affect the local farmers?

**SY:** Probably. As far as the produce, I think there may have been people like my family, when we did the apple butter and the jelly, that they did produce that Walnut Acres bought. It was just a very extended community effort. For our family, it was just a livelihood, a way to make a consistent income.

**AA:** How did it impact your family when Walnut Acres started making their own bread in 1980? Was that your main source of income, or not?

**SY:** My father was a painter, and so his income was not regular. He would do a job and then be paid maybe part of it. It varied how much he would get weekly. But the bread was a steady

source of income. That was a very good thing for our family. [The family was already raised when Walnut Acres started making their own bread, and my dad had a steady job, so that didn't really impact our income.]

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

**SY:** The man I talked to this morning said that Paul's motto was, "A special product for special people at a special price." He was the founder of organic farming. He realized when chemicals came to be an accepted thing that they may not be good, and so he found the alternative.

**AA:** Is there anything else you want to share about Walnut Acres?

**SY:** Not necessarily about Walnut Acres, but I was just thinking about the natural food and the organic thing, that Paul cared about the creation. And I think that's very important, although I think we don't want that to be our focus. We must remember that there's a Creator who gave us the Bible as our guide to living. And it's important that we take care of our bodies, but it's more important that we take care of our spiritual life.

**AA:** Well thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview!

**SY:** You're welcome. (21:04)