

Vermont Folklife Center Audio Log

Project: Archie Green Project

Interviewer: Andy Kolovos

Interviewee: Hank Bissell

Interviewee Contact:

Location: Lewis Creek Farm, Starksboro, VT

Date: 9 March 2015

Length: 01:05:25

Recording Format: Digital

Accession: au2015-1004

Collection: vfc2014-0005

Indexer: Shannon Esrich

Time	Content	Keyword 1
START-00:00:25	Introductions.	Introduction
00:00:25-00:01:48	Born in NYC, went to school there through 8 th grade. In summers came to Putney, VT and stayed in house at Putney School which had dairy farm as part of school. Hung out there to learn, watch, help. Years later, farm manager said Hank didn't ask too many questions. Went to Putney school, worked on farm while there, helped start vegetable garden there, managed that for several years post-grad. 1981 bought Lewis Creek Farm.	Childhood, New York City, Putney School
00:01:48-00:18:30	Lewis Creek grows organic vegetables, not certified but use lots of organic practices. Makes more affordable food generally. Mid-sized for VT vegetable farms, about 12 larger than them. Uses IPM, looking to see if pests are there before you spray for them. Large scale US ag sprays preventatively, not what they do. Motivated to use IPM because in organic direction, but not whole-hog organic because thinks there is a place for sprays. Everything in moderation and carefully used, just like medicine for humans. More thoughtful managing crops this way than routine spraying, need to be able to identify and anticipate problems. Try to use least toxic sprays, many times	Organic, IPM, green manure, organic waste, institution, Cornel

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
	<p>organic approved spray. If not, look at toxicity levels to manage carefully. Example, conventional farms focus on cash return on crops. Hank looks at environmental impact. With potatoes as example, losing crop not worth risk of carefully picked spray, would rather not be organic then. Conventional farms spray strongest material to get best kill rates of pest, looking strictly at cash bottom line. Hank tries to balance environmental and cash bottom lines. Aside about insect pests responding to sprays. Sprays that kill all insects not good, kill beneficial insects too. Hank tries to selectively choose sprays as needed. Visually monitor crops for pests. Hybrid approach. Organic has broad concepts of soil health/fertility, non-toxic sprays, healthy plants. 1970s USDA report on organic agriculture reported organic waste and total crop acreage throughout country. Not enough organic waste in country to make all acreage organic, organic won't solve bigger problems. Hank has worked with green manure crops (instead of scavenging organic waste), but don't work as well. Organic ag. Takes organic waste out of larger system so organic appears to be working, but in larger system universal organic is not possible from fertility point of view. Lewis Creek uses chemical fertilizers, a lot of green manures for 35 years and counting. Cover crops protect fields, green manures meant to be plowed under. Rotation, cover cropping, and green manures help immensely. In ag school at Cornell in 1974, they taught this, but people in world weren't doing this yet. Recent focus on Lake Champlain, saw flyer from Addison County of farmers trying to stop lake pollution, called their practices innovative but these go back to Roman times. Very frustrated with basic concepts getting left out of real practice. Sometimes cash crops sacrificed for green manure crops.</p>	
00:18:30-00:21:52	<p>Veg. crops have high per acre value, but lots of labor in to get that high value. Dairy farmers growing corn with little labor, get small per acre cash value. With smaller net profit, adding cover crop would be money out of their pocket, and with low grossing product would make a difference in</p>	Land value, crop value

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
	income. Real return on cover cropping is within decades and centuries, not instant. Hard to show return to farmers with small income.	
00:21:52-00:30:00	Lewis Creek is 145 acres, croplable land is 50 acres, 10 acres pasture, rent 25 acres from a neighbor. Grow over 50 different crops. Biggest are carrots and potatoes. Have beautiful soil, no rocks, well drained, good to grow crops that grow below ground. Started farm with plan, but has changed so many times depending on what worked well on farm. Trying to match production with market demand, but that changes and fads come and go. Aside about kale fad in 1980-90s. Need to be flexible. Changing demand is part of job, trying to stay ahead of trends, Hank not very good at that. Others into high-end cuisine magazines, watch trends. Dairy farmers have given away marketing, sell all wholesale, price takers. Much profit in vegetable farming is in the marketing, changing price depending on sale outlet. Dairy farmers can't do that, must make money on growing crop. Hence no cover cropping, too expensive. Hank able to sell large crops across many markets, small crops to high-end markets. Adjustments all the time to match market demand. Kale is back, now for eating, before as bedding for salad bars. Slow evolution of figuring out what grows and sells well. Potatoes and carrots both great on their farm. Distributor for wholesale years ago told him iceberg lettuce and potatoes are highest selling crops, didn't believe him but now growing lots of potatoes	Farm size, carrots, potatoes, business plan, market demand, flexibility, trend, retail outlet
00:30:00-00:31:52	Wasn't interested in marketing in beginning, but knows he is good at talking with people. Feels uncomfortable in social situations, so on phone felt good. Selling wholesale, connections are largely on phone whereas retail is face to face. Hires other people to work the farm stand to talk to people. "I have people who work the farm stand here, and there's other people who work in the fields, and sometimes the farm stand person works in the field as well. And I have to make it clear to them that there's a big difference. When you're at the farm stand, talking is so important; when you're in the field, I	Marketing, talking to customers, labor, employees, consumer retail outlet

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
	<p>want to see as they say, ‘asses and elbows’. It’s just head down, working hard. And once in a while, you find someone who can do both of those things – and it’s not me. When I talk, I’ve got to wave my hands around...and I don’t get any work done. But once in a while you find someone who can talk a blue streak and get a lot of work done, and they’re fun to have around.”</p>	
00:31:52-00:39:23	<p>Mid to late 1980 Lewis Creek got logo, first printed carrot bag had name on it but wasn’t visual center point, just said Vermont Carrots. 20 years later redesigned with logo as centerpiece, a slow evolution. If wanted to sell carrots, had to sell in bags. Co-ops will sell loose carrots, but everyone else in bags. Had to design bag, buy enough to get good price, had to get 5-year supply of each type of bag. Working with market demand/limitations, turned it into branding which has been real value of it. Sell large quantities of potatoes in bag partly because of bag, the branding. Younger farmers more aware of farm branding, more crept up on Hank. Feel sometimes young people have too much vanity, but also recognizes it’s important to their business. Finds irony in wasteful plastic bags, advertising, branding, like it’s part of corporate business, but it is what helps farms stay in business. Certain brands of things in wholesale market have reputations that get them higher wholesale prices, similar to retail markets. Brand is known for consistency, and at wholesale level a given producer will pack under two different labels for two different quality foods, but all same food and same producer. Wholesale markets can take different products than retail markets, there’s always a place (market) for every crop.</p>	Branding, logo, bags, wholesale, retail outlet
00:39:23-00:42:13	<p>Lewis Creek sells 10-15% to distributors, 25-30% retail, rest to stores and restaurants through self-distribution. The closer to the end consumer the higher the price given to the producer. Distributor also has to make money. Perceived higher value of direct from producer that allows for price premium on foods delivers direct to stores and restaurants. This was trend</p>	Retail outlets, distributor, direct markets, self-distribution, consumer, Buy Local

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
00:42:13-00:45:30	<p>before buy local movement, maybe was the leading edge of the movement.</p> <p>Are we in middle of fad with local food, or systematic change? Frozen foods were a fad, now looked on as low-end product. "Inevitably, everything's a fad. Things change. What will be the thing that makes – it would be easy – to make local product undesirable? It's more expensive. That would be easy. That's a very easily motivating factor, and I'm a little surprised that during the Great Recession that that didn't happen. But I think Buy Local was on the upswing and it couldn't be beat back by the higher price in a poor economy." When starting farm making decision to be certified organic or not, made decision to not be because people care more that it's local than whether it's organic. Others prioritize organic, but mostly people care more about local. This was all back in 1980s, before local food fad.</p>	<p>Fad, Buy Local, price, consumer demand, values, organic</p>
00:45:30-00:56:00	<p>Early partners in getting Burlington Farmers Market started, was president of market for several years. Farm still participates. Hank goes weekly. Thinks farmers markets are important, but that they remain with farmers so people can see farms. Doesn't want majority craft or food fair undertones. BFM struggling with that now, often perceived as food fair. Aside about father's work developing Faneuil Hall Marketplace and other marketplaces in historic parts of country. Vendors found better sales with prepared foods, turned into food fest. This happens all the times with farmers markets, result of lure of consumer demand. BFM has high percentage of prepared food vendors that are the farmers making their own products. Considered agricultural vendors even though they look like prepared food vendors. BFM gives good sales. Marketing there not sure, the people you see there are mostly Burlington people. It's about the sales, not about creating brand there. "A good package goes much further towards creating a brand and marketing than I feel that our presence at the farmers market does." But market still worth doing from financial perspective. Also do South Burlington Market, smaller, still growing, Sunday market. People</p>	<p>Retail outlet, Burlington Farmers Market, prepared food, value added, South Burlington Farmers Market, marketing, prices, consumer</p>

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
	<p>really interested in shopping at open-air farmers markets on Saturday, not Sunday. Big difference in customers. Farmers markets are big piece of net earnings and gross earnings for farm, but could work around it. Would take a while to adjust. Prices at market based on cost of production, plus what will the market bare? What are others charging, what is perceived value of yours versus general market? Heavily what will the market bare. Have fairly steady pricing, but things fluctuate as growing season of each product shifts. Excess crops go on sale. "People have a perception that it's very high priced, but you can shop around and always find almost everything at a very competitive price. It's really quite reasonably priced overall." One of larger vendors at BFM, has some impact on other's prices and price comparisons but part of larger market comparison. Farmers markets are valuable to get Hank off farm, gets interaction with people, talk about product. Not conversationally inclined but likes to talk about product. Also very short interactions with people, can use same conversation, gives people feeling of connection. Enjoys it a lot, why he continues to do it himself. Gets to keep the jobs that he likes for himself, but when coming up short on money or labor has to do what others are no longer available to do.</p>	
00:56:00-00:58:30	<p>Fletcher Allen Hospital is good customer, buys certain items very consistently. Does lots of business with them, but also really supports their mission to serve healthy foods to patients. Large institutional buyers typically want products that farm is not producing, like peeled onions, peeled potatoes, don't want their kitchen staff to do it. Problem for farm business. If local producers were able to meet those demands would be large market, but would then need to become food processor which has its own complications.</p>	<p>Institution, University of Vermont Medical Center, wholesale, retail outlets, processor</p>
00:58:30-01:01:02	<p>Value added to Hank is bagging something, putting in storage facilities to keep foods later into season. Would otherwise have to sell things to Black River Produce at very low price, so return on storage is being able to almost</p>	<p>Value added, storage, distributor, Black River Produce, grant</p>

**Vermont Folklife Center
Audio Log**

Time	Content	Keyword 1
	double price on product by storing it through winter. Very simple version of value added. Storage increased business by 40-50%, had always done some but put investments into it in 2006. Got value-added grant, so had to spin story to show packaging and storage as value added.	
01:01:02-01:01:50	When started farm, had so many ideas of possibilities of future on farm, very exciting to try out all of them. 35 years later, still tons of ideas that he's excited to try. Hank loves what he does.	Business plan, opportunity
01:01:50-END.	For many years hired local people, often college students, just in summer when season ended with Thanksgiving. Now with winter sales, harvesting through mid-November, need people to stay and work. Hire very few people for just summer, became harder because seasonal employment for someone with year-round responsibilities (versus student). Labor market also goes through cycles. Started hiring Jamaican workers as legal guest workers through H2A program in 2001 during peak of technology boom. Then, someone out of college could get great starting job with quick promotions, so no workers for hourly wages. Fall of 2000 didn't have enough people and ended up leaving some crops in field, then joined H2A program in 2001. Jamaicans are great workers, also have US workers, but backbone is H2A. Jamaicans come mid-April, stay through mid-December. Do all handwork on farm, drive tractors, etc.	Labor, employees, Jamaica, harvest, institution, H2A