

Fieldnotes

Project: AFC Archie Green Project/VFC2014-0005

Interviewee: Hank Bissell

Interviewer: Andy Kolovos

Interview Date: March 9, 2015

Interview Location: Lewis Creek Farm, Starksboro, VT

The interview with Hank was the first I scheduled with suppliers who provide farm products to Fletcher Allen/University of Vermont Medical Center. Diane Imre identified Lewis Creek Farm as one of the suppliers of vegetables to the food service program.

I arrived on time and had some difficulty figuring out where to meet Hank as 1) we hadn't figured that out clearly ahead of time and 2) I didn't know where he'd be or what house on the property was his. I wandered around a bit to make sure I was in the right place, knocked on the door of what I assumed to be the right house, saw/heard a dog barking through the window, wandered around a little more, sat in the car and tried to call, etc. Eventually Hank came out of the house (to let the dog out, as I recall) and he asked me what I wanted. I identified myself and he realized that he had forgotten about our meeting. He took it in stride, though and invited me in and we sat down for the interview.

Hank's an interesting, personable character with a long history in commercial farming who has a lot to say about the growing of vegetables (carrots and potatoes in particular), the economics of farming, and integrated pest management (IPM) agriculture. He expressed quite strongly his opinion that organic approaches, while a desirable ideal, are not practical on a large scale due to the loss of crops to pest damage and the resulting insecurity of production, among other things. He is a vocal advocate for IPM as a way to keep yields up, costs down, and reduce the use of pesticides in agriculture. I wondered how much of his strident advocacy of IPM (and the related dismissal of organic production on practical grounds) might come in part as a response to criticism from organic vegetable farmers for his practices and/or defensiveness in relation to some other not-defined or expressed issues. He was clear that many of the pesticides and fertilizers he uses are approved for organic production, and that some of his produce is grown in line with organic standards, but that he does use other pesticides and fertilizers when necessary. He presents himself as striking a reasoned middle ground on a continuum that places strict organics at one extreme and "conventional" pesticide-heavy farming at another.

Hank was an early part of the Burlington Farmers Market and his farm (and he) remain as active participants in it. He still goes himself acting as a spokesman for the farm and his products and enjoying the direct interaction with customers it affords. We wound down earlier than I would have liked in response to his schedule and I certainly would have liked more time to talk with him about a range of issues regarding his operation and about VT agriculture in general.