Steve Johnson Oral History Interview, August 25, 2018
Interview conducted by Michael Dicianna in Salem, Oregon
Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program Oral History Collection
Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon State University Libraries
41 minutes and 23 seconds long

[00:00:02]

Michael Dicianna: Okay, today is Saturday, August 25th, 2018, and my name is Mike Dicianna. I'm an oral historian for the Oregon Century Farm and Ranch Program. And we're at the Oregon State Fairgrounds here in Salem, Oregon. We begin with if you can state your name, the name and location of your farm, and maybe a little biographical sketch of yourself.

Steve Johnson: Sure. So, I'm Steve Johnson. I'm the great-great-grandchild of Tideman Johnson, who was the person who purchased Tideman Johnson Farm in 1880, which is – at that time a 60 – although my aunt also had 20 acres adjoining it. And just an interesting – it goes back further, and I won't go far into it, but it's just fascinating to me too because I went back to Norway where my grandfather came from a few years back and found out that his – what is – I had a genealogist who was wonderful, helping me out with all these things, went to church records, et cetera. Anyway, I went back to the house there that was 280 years old, and it was still preserved because of a kind of fluke in history.

But what was fascinating was I'm not a Johnson. I go back and I went "oh my God." So, they told me my real grandfather's name was Tidemand, with a D, Storedal Johnson. He was the son of John Olsen and lived on the Storedal farm, and I thought why don't we do that here? But why didn't anybody in my family ever know that, that I'm not – and I'm thinking of myself as a Johnson, and suddenly I get changed.

But it was also fascinating to realize he only moved here in 1870 – he emigrated through Canada – because the family had run out of houses. The traditional ways of Norway is when you got to a certain age they'd cut, literally cut off a part of the house and move it down the street, you know. And so, they ran out of house.

MD: [Laughs].

SJ: They ran out when they – when it came to my great-great-grandfather, they ran out of house, so – and I thought – I was standing on the porch when this guy told me this – and I thought, I can just picture my grandfather standing there going I guess I go to America. You know, and I'm thinking like I would not be here if he hadn't stood on that porch and there had been more house, you know.

So – and, and we lived along Johnson Creek, and we lived there in southeast Portland. We're on the edge of Eastmoreland neighborhood near Reed College. And you know, we're now completely surrounded by the city. People are always surprised. They always come to the farm and they go I had no idea this was here, and I say well, we've tried to keep it a secret in some ways, just to preserve it.

But you know, the – I'll go back to the origins, but it's just thinking, you know, hearing the stories today too, with the other farms and the struggles we all go through are the same

and different. You know, the struggles that I've gone through since I returned there full time back in 1990, you know, I've had to fight off meth homeless camps, just battle after battle. I mean, after all, our property now is in six neighborhood associations, two cities, two counties, and we're totally surrounded by the city. And yet, we've been able to fight back and purchase or get the city to procure an additional – we're back to 80 acres almost of urban wilderness now, and it was almost all gone. So, part of my battle in life over the last 40 years has been to preserve not just the farm, but the land that surrounds it.

So, when he bought it, he moved out here, he was what – Tideman Johnson worked for the railroads, and so he set up for a while at Wisconsin and then followed – built railroads, as the story goes, or helped build the railroad at that time, coming across the country, and his – he met Olava, his wife, in Wisconsin. And they moved I think first into the Brooklyn neighborhood in Portland because it was near the railroad yards, but their dream was to have this farm. So, soon after they moved in, I guess I don't what period it was, he – or got enough money saved up, and so they bought this farm.

And their idea was he was going to retire from working for the railroad and then start a farm up, but it didn't quite ever work out that way. But he did start farming it almost immediately, and put up a – built a house there was always supposed to be a temporary house, and a barn, and started doing crops of I think basically – we're near the town that no longer existing called Willsburg. Wills family was the original large, large – they had three donation land claims I think, of 600 – like all of Eastmoreland, Westmoreland, et cetera. Or maybe not Westmoreland. But anyway, large chunk.

[00:05:06]

And so, the place was farmed during that time. You know, we had – he had cattle, or I think there was both milk, dairy cows, as well as raised for beef cows, chickens, and then what we just called, we always called truck farm. So, I don't know how that's defined exactly, but it was a truck farm. And I think – I've never figured out exactly what they did but I assumed since there was the town of Willsburg there was probably some outlets there. The railroad line still was – went through there and stopped at this town and was known for a lumber mill. And I think they probably sold through that, that there was a commercial center locally at hand.

And he continued to have to subsidize. You know, he's like [laughs] all the other stories where they only earned something off the farm but also had to still work at the railroad yard. Sadly he built a house around 1910 to 1912, and he died and never got to live in the house, and that house is still there from 1912. My stepdaughter lives in it right now.

So let's see, that's – and I'm – just to say, I am too. It's like I'm a professor at Portland State University in the Urban Planning, Studies and Planning Program, and I've had a long-time involvement in agricultural conservancy around the northwest. Like I helped start an organization called Tilth and organized the first natural farming conference in 1974 in Ellensburg, Washington, wrote a book, helped edit a book called *Maritime Gardening in the Pacific Northwest* that introduced people to how you could grow food year-round. I helped start a farmers market, what else, just been very active in terms of just the politics of food for as long as I can remember. You know, all my growing up.

I'm not even sure where that came, but it – so, I've been an activist, not just at my site, but also in these broader issues around – especially around natural farming. The main education

program that I replaced is sponsored by the Permacultural Institute for Children, and the idea is to teach the next generation about growing food and how to live more broadly from a culture of means, of a certain form of farming, but it's also more broadly now. I call it permaculture with a big P is how to create a more permanent, sustainable society.

So, it's continued that way, but you know, there's this history of succession, like with all those other stories, of this was the original intent, then a change, and you know, so you get to the stage where my uncle Telmer was – lived there actually kind of one of the longest times from after when his brother Tideman died, so he lived there for a very long time. And they farmed some but mostly they're the ones who brought in these Italian farmers who were farming when I was even born. I used to go over there.

So, they had 40 acres that they leased right across the – I mean, it was visible right from the house. It was right across the street. It was most of the northern Milwaukie or Ardenwald neighborhood in Portland. And I'd go over there with my dad to collect rent, which would be they would serve us, including me – and I was only like 10 or 11 years old – they'd serve us homemade wine in mason jars. And they paid us in gold coins which, you know, I always remember that because I had – this is just so – I was so clueless. So, like I thought I was in some movie, you know, kind of like I saw Celilo Falls when it was still operating and I kept looking at it going like is this a movie? You know because it didn't seem like it could be part of my life in reality.

So, it was farmed in that way, and then the family, as most families go through this stretch point when, about 1940, Uncle Telmer died and then they had to decide what to do with the property. And my father struck an interesting deal. He was not the direct descendant, as his father was the direct descendant who would be divvying up the property, but he struck a deal with them. He was a professor at Lewis & Clark College, and that was that he would do all the managing of the property and then sell it off if they would give him this five acres that was with the original homestead and also had some of the farmland that's right by Johnson Creek but also has these year-round springs there that are still, they're still drinkable, clean, cold, 55˚ salmon-bearing waters. And we're like, you know, 20 minutes [laughs] from downtown Portland, so kind of a rare hundred gallons a minute of freshwater that might be useful if we have an earthquake or some other disaster.

[00:10:09]

So you know, they then – so, they did – at that time they gave six acres to the city of Portland as a park because the family had always let the public use it. A streetcar used to come out there, and they would allow people to come on any of our property to have picnics, even had Fourth of July ceremonies for them. So, it was just de facto public. After – when they got to that point they said well, it's kind of public anyway. So, we donated that to the city.

And then, you know, my father continued to sell things, kind of farmstead stuff. So, he particularly got interested in flowers for quite a while, so he'd grow probably an acre or acre and a half of cut – so he'd just do cut flowers. On the one picture I did donate, I put in with the collection, it's just so fascinating, is that like he didn't put a – you know, probably it's normal in many places in… that is, he just put the flowers out on the stands and then just a jar, right? It was no – nobody's going to steal anything [laughs]. He just assumed that someone would get their flowers, put the money in the jar, and go away.

And it got tougher for him, and my uncle also lived on the same property. The two continued to do the agricultural aspects. When I came back because they had been aging for a while – and I don't think I ever really left the place, I mean I didn't live there all the time but I always had to help – had to, or it was part of my duty to help my father and my uncle maintain the property. So, I never felt like I left there. But then when he died and my mom was still there, now she's on eight acres with two houses and we're surrounded by some pretty bad people.

I mean, this is – we're near the site where Gary Gilmore, a famous serial murderer, learned how to shoot a gun, and who my father had to beat up once. So you know, there was always this sense of a lot of tension surrounding us, so I didn't feel like I could just leave my mom there alone. So, I moved back there. And for a while, I struggled with what to do. I mean, I actually had to hire a security guard once because I started fighting back and they started to figure out who it was, and so they started threatening my life.

And I had to find – I remember I came home one day with a – that I had hired a Green Beret security guard to watch out for my place while I was teaching because I'd have to come back at night. And he's sitting there when I come home on my place, this place that's – that I've loved all my life, that I'm almost thinking about giving up on because I can't live this way because especially I'm coming back and here's this guy, you know, loaded up with ammunition. And he's looking at all these monitors—he's got – all the property is now monitored with the screens that were infrared night vision screens. And he's telling me, he's going "howdy, Mr. Johnson, let me report in." And I'm listening to this going this is weird. I can't do this. I can't – I mean, I want to protect this place, but can I live like this where I have to have a security guard with, you know, a Green Beret at my place just to make sure I just live through the night?

And so, I came up with this thesis that good people push out bad people and I helped organize, start the Johnson Creek Watershed Council at a larger level, and then I helped start the funding for the Springwater Corridor Trail, and I started getting the City of Portland to buy up lands all around us. So, I'd be the spotter and I'd go out there. So, now there's Errol Heights Park, which is now a nice natural park. So, I just started doing this strategy, and eventually, now, I think it was just a few years ago, there was a Friends of Tideman Johnson Natural Park now, and I remember just seeing they were organized and there was like 50 of them over there cleaning, like this is so cool.

I mean, or I have Capstone, I have had so many – at Portland State, Johnson Creek is really well-known partly because of me – and it's like I've had hundreds of people teach students from PSU out there, and faculty who know the area really well and use it as part of their lab. And I thought, well all this activity is going to push out the bad element. And it's, you know, it's not 100%. We still have problems, but I'd say compared to where it had to hire a security guard was – there's no comparison.

So, in part when I started these strategies and now with the farm as it is, as I think I said in that paragraph description, the first CSA in Portland, Urban Bounty Farm, was started there. And when these people came out to talk to me, for a minute I didn't know what they were asking. I thought because I'm a farm political person, they're just asking me these questions. And then I thought – because they said we're looking for land – I went [laughs] – and it was a delayed response – I went "well wait a minute, I have land" [laughs]. [Unintelligible] oh, okay [laughs] let's do it here.

[00:15:01]

But at that time it was still overrun by these vandals and mean people. And it was also, the farmland, was 20-foot-high blackberries. And so, the first thing to do was return it back to the way it was, and that took a while. It's now really rich land because we've had this succession for a little less – almost 30 years now. We've had the succession of really well-educated farmers who have added to the soil and have – we used – we have an irrigation system off of the springs, and so we have the CSA, which is a pretty small one right now, but it's been up to 40 members, I think. But it's also an education sight. So, we had something called Mother Earth School for a while which taught little kids, and now it's an adult education program.

So, we'll have just – just two days ago there was a seed collecting workshop hosted by one of the people. And what I love about it is what I see when [00:16:08 unintelligible] hearing his stories, my predecessor here, is that the – that I see all these young people that want to farm. You know, maybe not in some of the ways that some of the other members that got this award would think of farming. You know, not a large wheat farm, but they want to farm. They want to [stumbles] they want to be a member of a CSA, they want to make their own garden, or on a larger scale, you know, where they're growing for – one person I know just grows for six restaurants [laughs]. And because she knows exactly what they want and they know exactly what she'll grow for them, you know.

So, I think these variations, I'm fascinated by them because it may be the foundation to avoiding some of the larger issues that face some farm—some of the farming community, anyway. So, I'm glad to be a part of that where it's both educating – we're using the site… I love it. I like to say I have grazing rights. It's literally I can walk from my house and there's a little hedge, but otherwise, I can walk around the side of the hedge and that's where the farm in. And I just tell them look, I have grazing rights. I get to go over here and wander through your garden [both laugh]. And they don't care, I'm only one person, you know. But I can go over there almost any time of the day or night and there's something going on.

You know, there's something – there's people – my average age of interaction I think is 25 to 35 years old. You know, it's like most of the people that are coming there are these young inspired activists who are interested. Maybe they got started from just wanting more natural food in their diet, and then they go let's do something about it. And I can't tell you how many stories there are of people that have – it's just lovely to have a place. I mean, people have gotten married there. They've, you know, there's been all these activities. They've fallen in love there, they've – the idea of being a farm place where you're growing food but you're also just a place, it's – and we also do what we call forest farming.

So, what that means is there's – we're growing some native plants, like we just put in some wapato recently. We teach around that aspect of what you get out of the forest. And it's [00:18:18 unintelligible] I helped to organize Zenger Farm, organize it back in the nineties, and it's got a bigger outcome that can have up to 8,000 kids a year from Portland schools go up there. We're not that big, you know, and we have road access issues, but I think it's an intimate setting where people really get the idea that there isn't a boundary specifically between forest and farming and that there's a Native American way to look at that land too.

But also just like they – you know, so you go out in the farm and you have to [stumbles], it's fascinating because you can't even tell where the crops are sometimes. I mean, I'll go out there and I'll watch them when they're collecting food for their collection on each Friday and you'll go like – you'll look at what they've just pulled together, all the tomatoes and, you know,

all these crops they've pulled together, boxes of them, and you look out in the field and you go like where were all those? And it's partly because it's all intermingled, right? And they leave some what we would call weeds inside, inside the cultivated area. And you can't even tell where the cultivation ends [laughs] and begins, right? It's hard to distinguish between that.

And then they're doing more and more back in the forest edge area where they're just growing certain wetland kind of plants or things that are taller and that have shade or where there's more moisture back in that because it's a wetland area. And so you know, and it's also just the way in which you can teach this sense of how farming can be integrated with conservation in a helpful or healthy way, you know. So, it teaches on so many levels, I think, in that way. So, that was a long introduction but I don't know if I did enough about the beginning.

[00:20:03]

MD: Yeah, we've covered a lot here. Now, one of the things that I find fascinating is that it's like an oasis in the middle of urban.

SJ: Oh yeah, feel it too, and…

MD: And…

SJ: Yeah, it feels that way to most people who arrive there [laughs].

MD: But basically the urban has grown around this farm and it just never changed.

SJ: Right, well we'd maintain it but as, you know, like I said, the beginning of this struggle was, as you know from the other farms, everyone has a different kind of series of struggles but mine has been a lot of that. I mean, my first battle was they wanted to put a freeway there during the Robert Moses days of rebuilding Portland. You know, they were going to put the Johnson Creek expressway because there was nothing down in this canyon where some of the remaining – most of the remaining farmland is. And they would call it a ravine and I realized a ravine made it easier for them to put shit there. Sorry, stuff. Bad stuff.

And so, I got them to rename it as a canyon until the – the idea is that now we have a canyon way that goes a mile and a half from Errol Heights down to the Eastmoreland golf course and that we're trying – I'm trying to create an agenda so there is an actual mile and a half long corridor that's almost – it's almost completely preserved now, but it could be soon. But it's just changing people's attitude in name. They didn't want – because there was nothing down there. I go "there's nothing down there? What do you mean there's nothing down there?" So, let's just put a freeway through. So you know, from stopping freeways to, to realizing you've got a meth addict as your neighbor and he's about to lose his property so you tell the city like "look, this guy's going to lose his property. Can maybe you could buy the wetland part of it from him." And it worked. He got – he saved his mortgage investment and moved but, you know, he didn't lose everything that way and we all gained because it got rid of a meth house.

And you know, so it's that kind of continuous struggles and battles that you can't – and you have to learn these skills that have been invaluable in the rest of my life of patience and it's more of almost a geological level of time – it doesn't happen overnight – that you build. I mean,

we went with the Johnson Creek Group, we called it the Johnson Creek Marching Band in the mid-eighties when we started trying to preserve this whole area and we called it the Johnson Creek Marching Band because we felt so hopeless. You know, it was this like oh, well [scoffs], nobody's paying attention. They just think it's a polluted, terrible place.

And so, it was partly changing the image of it, you know, to get people to think differently about it because once they – if you create a generation of preservationists, it's better than planting trees, you know. I mean, of course, planting trees is good; I just mean like the long tail is building, just like it is with the younger generation of farmers, it's just building a generation of people who care. Then that will change over time, and now there's salmon returning to the creek, you know. So, it has succeeded.

And I think, I think that part of what you mentioned too is important because it is just like you come to this place I think, and it does feel like this oasis and there's not – maybe not ancient growth, but old-growth trees there and stuff, so you – and it's magical because you – what we've done is we put a Japanese tori up at the top of it. We even had a Shinto priest come from Japan to bless it. And the whole idea is we want that experience. So, as you enter it, my ideal is when anybody comes there – people who come there to get their vegetables, people who come there for education events, I imagine the kids going off their cellphones and going quiet.

You know, that's my ideal, is that what we do by leading, they go where am I going, what's going on? Because you descend and as you – right at the top here at the top of the trees, you know, and so you go down past the tops of these trees down into this place until you get to all the farmland. And there's a yurt there for educational. We can have up to 25 or 30 people for educational events. And there's an outdoor kitchen so they can do cooking classes. And I think people just feel – and they don't want to leave sometimes, you know. They just go like oh, I think I'll just stay here now for a while [laughs], you know. I keep saying I'm going to find feral hippies [laughs], you know, on my property [laughs].

MD: Yeah, been there since the sixties, yeah.

SJ: Yeah, didn't notice you, huh. Anyway [laughs]…

MD: Well, it's a fascinating farm.

SJ: Yeah.

MD: Because of the, you know, the location as well as the, you know, the way it's being utilized today. Where do you feel that this is going to go? I mean, what are your goals and what are your thoughts about the, you know, the—

[00:24:50]

SJ: So, I – well, one part of that at least, and you may have to remind of the second part of your question, but I've worked on the principle of adding layers of protection. So, I helped rewrite the zoning code for Portland to include environmental zoning. So by doing that, I increase protection on our place very directly too, by just creating a new tighter zoning regulation to a

preserved place. I down-zoned that property to open space, and I had to go all the way to the city council to get it because it wasn't quite legitimately normal in a way. And the open space again adds some level of protection. It meant I can't build on it. Nobody can build on it. I mean, at the time I moved back there in 1990, I could have built 36 houses there, by the zoning code. Now you can do two.

So again, like so a bunch of it's useless. That means I have not paid as much tax over the years, but it means also I can't – nobody can really sell it for much of a profit. It's not that valuable. The only person that could buy it would have to be rich and want a little estate of their own or something.

MD: Yeah.

SJ: And then on top of that, so there's open space, environmental zone, Johnson Creek Basin Plan, and even this to some degree. You know, not quite in the same regulatory, but it's another, it's another body of interest in public, you know, which I can say all right [laughs] – I used to say that with people when they tried to something at our property I didn't want to, I'd say "well okay, City of Portland, you can deal with the neighbors who just started complaining, or you can deal with me, and I have invested water rights, let's see, so you'll have to do that." I'd say, "I don't have a title deed from when the road – we used to own it, so you'll have to do a"— You know, I'd just go through these layers of protection that's on the place.

So, in my – I don't have anybody in my bloodline that will probably inherit the place, but my stepdaughter – her mother died and I raised her – lives in the farmhouse house and is very dedicated to staying there and preserving it. So you know, there's no guarantee, but between – even if she didn't and then part of the land that's more of the farmland and the real part of it they're problem—we're going to develop a trust that will just have a board of directors who oversees the operation, and that my daughter will be a president of. But there'll be other people involved, like the ones that manage it now. So, there'll be a trust regulation on t—so, if you think about it, you go okay, let's see if you can do something here other than what it's for, you know? You're going to have to go through these six layers of protection [laughs].

You know, and I got some of that from my – I was a – I've been a community organizer all my life, so I know how to organize. And then I'm in the planning field, so I know about zoning. So, you know, I had a certain skill set that made sense in terms of being able to accomplish some of these protection zones. So you know, she lives in the – my daughter lives in the house and it's just a nice landscaped house and the house is well kept up, but the main primary farmland I would hope, and I think I have created, a way in which for the foreseeable future, short of earthquakes and wildfires or whatever, you know, it's going to stay the same. It can't – there's nothing else you can do with it anymore, you know, because I made – tried to made sure of that [laughs].

MD: Now, to your knowledge, is there another model like this elsewhere? Other, you know, urban—

SJ: Oh, there must be. There – I mean, probably not too much urban. There are – the [stumbles] – some of the CSAs are, you know, often in urban areas. But I don't know, I haven't found many quite like this, at least not with the – the difference, I think, like I say, is someplace

like Zenger Farm, and there's a lot of education farm sites, like at Sauvie Island, et cetera, around. So, there are sites that are doing – but they all – what we tried to do at one time when meeting when some of those different groups got together was to decide well, what's your domain?

And like I say, well Zenger Farm couldn't really entertain large groups of people. Well, we can't but we can do something that shows that we're really good at being able to be intimate, small, and we're, you know. Sauvie Island, one of the parts, or one of the people, has a real commercial farm, and so the workshops they tend to do really are more geared towards – Zenger Farm's not commercial really but they, you know. So, they have more freedoms, as we do. We don't have to succeed in that same commercial. But if you don't have the commercial one too, then you're not really teaching everybody the whole farming array of things [laughs].

So, it's different sites for different reasons and trying to figure out which ones serve the best function in that way. But you know, I know land trust groups have been around for a long time, like Salt and other ones that are trying to work on some of that regulatory base. I think I just had a different philosophy that I haven't seen quite conveyed, which was just layered, as I call this [laughs], this idea of just layers going okay, I'm going to make it – I can't… I can't do absolute, but I know I can create just a whole series – and the other one's constituency. I mean like I say, 5,000, probably 6,500 visitors by now because that count was several years ago.

[00:30:13]

That means some portion of those people will come and defend this place. You know, in other words, if you think of 5,000 people from 30 countries, every state in the union, and people who've had all these marvelous experiences, and I said the farm's about to go under, I now – even if I could count on 10% of those people I've got several hundred people that would come to bat, you know.

MD: Yeah.

SJ: And so it's partly that, just going o—I told people that when I was beginning some of these. I said, "I'm trying to build a constituency of people so"—because I didn't see any way me, or when I was partnered back then with a step kid, I wasn't – it wasn't meant for me to just roost there and say "mine!"

MD: Yeah.

SJ: You know, it wasn't mine. I'm indigenous in that sense. I feel like I'm just a caretaker for one generation after another, and I'll try to do what I can do with what [stumbles] unique skillsets and interests. You know, my daughter and the other people [00:31:11 unintelligible, might be Errol?] will probably have some differences in what they would do or not do. But you know, so you have to change that generationally, in terms of the – even the stuff he was talking about like technol—you know, all the changes and you have to adapt to what's going on. You can't expect something like our place to stay exactly the same. But I think I will have been able to carve out an area where I can say well, this is the range [laughs].

MD: Yeah.

SJ: This is the range of what's doable. So, I could imagine coming back there, short of all these other climate change catastrophes, I can imagine coming back there 50, 100 years from now, and I don't think it'll look that different. You know, I don't know exactly what will be grown there, given all the changes that happen, but I think I was able to basically… I feel like I succeeded [laughs].

MD: Yeah, you've created something—

SJ: I've created something that's going to be either more or less in the same shape. There'll be some farming; there'll be some preservation and environmental activities. But what's nice is, I mean this farm, we've been able to preserve the wildlife there too. So, like we have a herd now of eight deer, which is, in the city of Portland, is probably pretty unique. And the pond that's in front of my house I just realized just two days ago a beaver just built a damn, and I went, I wonder why the pond is getting so much deeper, suddenly.

So, the idea that you have this – and the kids feel that too. They're coming there, they're learning about some agriculture, but they can walk five feet and suddenly they see – I mean we had to put up – and we teach them that because we're just playing around with how – they were really doing in the garden, the deer were, I mean. And so, we put up this one fencing, and they figure that out, so now we got to, you know. And we'd said – and what we'd say with the kids is that it's just a game, you know, kind of.

I mean, it's a serious game sometimes [laughs], if your economics is at stake, but it's still like okay, that didn't work, why didn't that work? So, now we've got this idea we're going to – we have bamboo on the place – we're going to build crisscrosses across where these other ones are with something down at the bottom [unintelligible]. Okay, so we're trying to picture like okay, will you not go through something that's only this big maybe, you know? But that's constant – but there's benefit.

I mean, we hadn't had hawks there in years and they started nesting in these tall fir trees right above the farm. And one day I had – the insight came to me about the relationship because I was crawling through the field looking for something, and I think I was getting carrots or something, right, so I'm like crawling through this field and suddenly this hawk comes out of nowhere, just you to me, I mean literally lands – and I realize… all this is happening in 20 seconds or whatever, that he – there was a mouse there that I hadn't seen, and it had a mouse in its mouth and we have this interspecies moment where we both freak out, right? I fall over backwards and he does the same and drops the mouse because we're – he didn't see me, I guess. I was, you know, quietly down there and then just [snaps fingers], so we both go ahh!

MD: [Laughs]

SJ: Like a little interspecies moment where you feel like okay, sorry about that, I [mumbles]. He's like what are you doing down there in the ground, you know [laughs]. But then I realized that it had become hunting ground for them because there was all these places now where all the other mice and other shrews and all these animals are coming. And so having their nest –

and so in that sense it was symbiotic, in which before it had been blackberries, 20-foot high, and there wasn't probably anything of interest to hawks in 20-foot high blackberries.

MD: Right, yeah.

SJ: You couldn't get through it. So you know, I like it when I can see this symbiotic relationship in which something we do – and everything we do we always – even the lease that the farmers have, have these criteria for what they have to do. We have to make sure we don't have too much impervious service, so we keep it at one half of one percent, even though the city standard is 30%. You know, and so we just have a series of steps that you have to go through if you want to make a change in terms of the crops, in terms of not getting invasive species or, you know, what you can do with the soil or the water.

[00:35:11]

So we have – and that's another thing that's in… I don't know if it'll be there after I live, but this is like this living document. And it started out with the first farmers that have just said we'll give you $50 a month for leasing the farm. That was the end of the lease. It's now a 12-page document [laughs].

MD: Right [laughs].

SJ: The things that you learn over time, like okay, I guess we have to put that in writing too. Anyway…

MD: They're not paying in gold coins anymore [laughs].

SJ: [Laughs] they're not paying in gold coins anymore. No, that's changed. So, yeah…

MD: Well, this is absolutely fascinating and, you know, and totally unique as far as the program grows. Do you feel that there's anything – I mean, more that you could possibly add or that we haven't covered because we've talked about the past, we've talked about where it's at today and, you know, and what the goals are for the future of this.

SJ: Well, I think I'd just repeat this sense of the, you know, the stake of farming interest into the future are obviously in peril sometimes, in terms of what it's going to look like, what it's going to employ and, you know, does it all get computerized and down to one grower and, you know, franchised and everything. And that – and I think that is a true thread and we don't know where some of the changes in climate's taking this farm, food-wise.

But I do also see, and I'm glad I get to see every week, I can walk over there and see a whole different part of the generation of X's and millennials or whatever they are, you know. And they're not… they've even, some of them, have had farming backgrounds and they're not so interested in going back to that old model. Well, some of them are, but you know because they see that as too stressful I think, or too much industrialization to farming, or a way that they

wouldn't want – but their interest in food and farming is their whole life. And I see these people every day.

I go like – I see this other news, and my experience versus the news is like I see them by the hundreds coming to this place. So, I'm aware of all these, you know, younger people, 25, 30 years old, 35 maybe. And they just have a different take on it, you know, and it's fr—it may have – most of the time, many times it didn't just start from being part – it did sometimes start from a rural upbringing or farming upbringing, but sometimes it just started from food. It wasn't agriculture; it was just their interest in seeing that food was not good, that they were, you know, sugared cereal sweets or whatever. You know, they were just – they were more from a self-interest, or for their family and kids, was they wanted more natural foods.

But that brought them to these broader interests of like oh, what about we do this? So, one of my friends just started a program called Growing Gardens, and all they do is they just go out and help poor people start little gardens in their backyard. You know, so there's this whole new industry of small, but I think a very hopeful, sign to me of just how many hundred thousands of people are [stumbles] – I think there's an invigorated interest in farming. Not q—but it's not the same as the 1,300 wheat ranch farming. It's this farming down to the garden level or, you know, what do you call when you get crops that are extra? I can't think of the name [mumbles], you know, at the end when you have too many.

MD: Oh, like the gleaners, yeah.

SJ: Yeah, the gleaning programs. I mean, I made a list of those because I teach part of this in one of my classes, so I just made a list of all these different alternative kind of food and agricultural projects like CSAs and gleaning, and it's pretty astounding to go through it and realize how much innovation there's been in terms of finding a way to be a part of growing food.

So, it's part—it's like these people I'm talking about, they want to grow food. They, they – and some of them are spiritual about it, you know? And I think farmers are too. They don't always talk the same language, but you know, when they talk about standing out there when the sun's setting on their land, that's spiritual [laughs]. You know, they may not call it that, but come on. You're standing there, you're like, uh, what do you think you're thinking about? You're closer to God or whatever you call it. And I think that the people I'm working with are like that too where they're – they… you know, I see them at the end or beginning of their volunteer days or whatever they're doing on the farm, and you can just see the emotion that comes over them. They want to be next to the land. They want to be working with the plants and the – and they love learning about it.

I mean, like this Henry, who's one of the farmers here, he's a soil guy. And it's just fascinating to be around someone like that because he's just all about – he knows everything about soils, right, and somebody else will know everything about seeds and, you know, and they're – I think they're very dedicated. They just don't have the same farming model that some of us are used too.

MD: Well, in their apartment they don't have the capabilities of—

[00:40:01]

SJ: No, but they've joined together on these gleaming and other things, community gardens, you know, that that to them is the scale – it's, again, not the same level of commercial skill farming, but it – I don't think we should forget it because it's not that the people – they may elements like he was saying, too. They may hate elements of industrial farming the way it's become with big, you know, Monsanto or… anyway, the big farming chains and stuff, but doesn't mean – that is not, by any stretch, the same as – if anything, I'd say there's been an invigoration of interest in food and growing methods and agriculture, and it's not as easy to transform that into a single farm family ideal, but you turn it into an enterprise and you become an entrepreneur around something this garden, Growing Gardens Program, or you become a nonprofit or you do education on the farm sites. And I think that's where there's a lot of hopeful change happening, I guess.

MD: Well, it has been an honor to hear about this.

SJ: [Laughs] thank you, yeah. It's been great to do it, you know.

MD: I really want to thank you for your contribution to the oral history project here. This is, this is quite unique.

SJ: [Laughs]

MD: And I enjoy this.

SJ: Yeah, thanks. I did too.

MD: Thank you for—

SJ: I enjoyed sharing. [Unintelligible] both of you guys to doing this all, by the way.