

**John Soehner and Cindy Econopouly Soehner  
Eco Farm – Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

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Date: August 19, 2011

Location: Soehner home at Eco Farm, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Interviewer: Sara Camp Arnold

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 46 minutes

Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

**[Begin Cindy and John Soehner Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Sara Camp Arnold:** So this is Sara Arnold with the Southern Foodways Alliance on August 19, 2011. And I'm interviewing Cindy and John Soehner at Eco Farm. So if I can have each of you introduce yourselves, please?

**00:00:19**

**Cindy Soehner:** I'm Cindy Econopouly Soehner.

**00:00:21**

**John Soehner:** John Soehner.

**00:00:24**

**SCA:** And can you all tell me where and when you were born, please?

**00:00:27**

**CS:** I was born in Minneola, New York, in 1956.

**00:00:32**

**JS:** And I was born in Rockville Center, Long Island, New York, in 1960.

**00:00:37**

**SCA:** Okay; and why don't you tell me how you all got interested in farming?

00:00:42

**JS:** Go ahead. [*Laughs*]

00:00:46

**CS:** My—my family has always had gardens, and my father had fruit trees. And so growing up, we always, you know, we always had fresh fruits and vegetables. And when I was eleven, my family moved to Greece. My father is—is Greek, was Greek; he's no longer living. But we moved to Greece, and this was in 1969. And everything was all natural there. They were—we went to Farmers Markets, and—

00:01:23

**JS:** Zarafona.

00:01:26

**CS:** Yeah; you know, we went to the different—

00:01:28

**JS:** Olive groves.

00:01:31

**CS:** You can talk. [*Laughs*]

00:01:35

**JS:** Her relatives had olive groves and, you know, a bunch of olive trees in Zarafona, which was up in—sort of in the mountains on the mainland. And they were all farmers and raised goats and made cheese.

**00:01:48**

**CS:** And then also we got into it when we lived in New York. My father was also a teacher. And I decided I was going to be a teacher also. And I went to school to teach. And then I did my student teaching. And while I was student teaching, and when I would sit in the—in the teacher’s conference room and I would listen to the teachers and the way they talked about their jobs and the way they talked about the kids, and it totally turned me off teaching. I didn’t really want to associate with them all.

**00:02:22**

So we wound up—I was actually pregnant at that time, plus I already had one child, and we wound up deciding to home-school our—our kids, and so we home-schooled our kids for I don’t know how many years, somewhere between five and—probably five years, maybe—you know, while they were young. And—what was the question again?

**00:02:44**

**SCA:** Oh, just how you—how you got started in farming.

**00:02:49**

**CS:** Oh, and one of the things that we did was we—we wound up getting chickens. And so in our backyard we had chickens. And then our neighbors complained about the chickens in the

backyard. And then I looked up everything in the library, and I found you can only have chickens if you have a farm.

**00:03:07**

So we, you know, we had a vegetable garden and we just started selling our produce from our vegetable garden, like a little bit; I started doing that. John was the farming end.

**00:03:14**

**JS:** This is Long Island still.

**00:03:15**

**CS:** This was on Long Island. And so then we wound up—the town asked us to leave because they didn't want the chickens there. And so we bought a farm down here and then we moved down here. And I mean how we got into farming; you know, we got into the [Carrboro] Farmers' Market because I was an artist. I got in as an artist, but I always had a big vegetable garden. And then John started plowing the garden and making it bigger. And then I started selling some of the tomatoes at the Market. And then John started getting involved in plowing and growing also. And then he started doing it also and then we—we changed the Farmers' Market to not be an artist—to become farmers, so that's—. And that was, you know, I don't know how many years ago, a lot of years ago.

**00:04:09**

**JS:** I never plowed the land, never.

**00:04:13**

**SCA:** All right; well, let's back up a little. So you came back from Greece to go to college. Is that right?

**00:04:19**

**CS:** Yeah.

**00:04:20**

**SCA:** Okay; and then when did you all meet each other?

**00:04:25**

**CS:** After college.

**00:04:27**

**JS:** Like 1985. I was a commercial fisherman and I worked in a machine shop with my father also. And then we decided to move down here and bought this place. My mother-in-law lives in Carrboro, and this was total gum trees right up to the door. And we didn't know one thing about farming or growing, really, except for our little garden.

**00:04:50**

**CS:** You didn't know about growing.

**00:04:52**

**JS:** Well, growing commercially.

**00:04:54**

**SCA:** You hadn't had any experience before you came down here?

**00:04:56**

**CS:** None at all.

**00:04:56**

**JS:** I never even saw a tractor in my life.

**00:04:59**

**SCA:** What kind of fishing—what kind—what did you fish for commercially?

**00:05:03**

**JS:** Oh, squid, whiting, flounder, lobster—you know, I would target that from Long Island.

Squid is a big fishery—it was a big fishery in Long Island. I don't know what they let them catch anymore, but that was a big fishery. You'd drag your net around on the bottom of the ocean—called a dragger, the kind the guys with fishing poles, they—but I like to work for myself. But we moved down here and got into this horrendous car wreck five weeks after we moved here. So we were all laid up forever. That's why Cindy is having trouble with these questions, because she had a head injury. And I had a lot of physical damage.

**00:05:42**

So I was pretty much laid up, but I could walk a little bit, and one arm didn't work. And my friend Morris Thompson, this nice guy in the neighborhood, befriended me and helped me out a lot. And he got me a tractor and a Bush Hog and he gave me a bunch of his jobs and told people about Bush Hogging. So I would drive—he got me a trailer, and I'd drive around and

Bush Hog fields. So that's how I got used—and including the other fields, I cleaned up my land with the tractor. And then I got interested in farming and I also went to school for occupational therapy, but I got an assistant degree instead of an OT degree, which is a big mistake. I'm not a good assistant; I like working for myself. I always did, so we just started growing more and more. And then we bought some more land next door, and then Mr. Nutter over at Maple View lets us farm five acres of his land that has a pond and a fence. And my friend Jefferson and Kate have an acre of land we farm down the road. And it has water and a great fence. A fence is very important.

**00:06:46**

So we farm everywhere. And we grow a lot of stuff now, the reason being because I can make more money doing that than anything else.

**00:06:53**

**SCA:** All right; can you back up a little bit and tell me—besides the car accident, which obviously it sounds pretty traumatic—what was the transition like from Long Island to North Carolina?

**00:07:10**

**JS:** Oh, it was—it was fine. We moved down here and me and my daughter were in a big moving truck, and I had a job before I even got out of the truck. I was looking for a place to park on my mother-in-law's street, and the guy asked me if I wanted to start working the next morning—construction.

**00:07:24**

But we just—we just moved down here and, you know, we were busy.

**00:07:31**

**CS:** I had lived here before. I lived here in—oh gosh—maybe '75—briefly I lived here. And then my mother came down and she lived here. My brother lived here, so my family was here, so we knew that eventually we were going to move down here, but we moved down quickly—more quickly than we wanted to, because we had problems with, you know, the town kicking us out because of the chickens.

**00:07:54**

**SCA:** Right; and when you first moved to Chapel Hill, did you move to this house?

**00:08:00**

**JS:** Right here.

**00:08:01**

**SCA:** And how many acres do you have on this plot?

**00:08:04**

**JS:** We bought first twelve and a half with this house, but I'm telling you it was a jungle. And then we bought another ten and a half next door. And then we lease about seven other acres.

**00:08:17**

**SCA:** Okay; and tell me a little bit—how did you join the Farmers' Market as an artist? Do you remember when you joined?

00:08:26

**CS:** Um, I don't know.

00:08:31

**JS:** You did the appliqués.

00:08:32

**CS:** I know, but I don't know—I don't know—

00:08:33

**JS:** Like '96 or something like that. [*Editor's note: Cindy joined the market as an artist in 1995.*]

00:08:35

**SCA:** So you had been here for a while.

00:08:38

**CS:** Maybe two years.

00:08:38

**JS:** Yeah; a couple years.

00:08:39

**CS:** Maybe two, years and what I did was I did—I did appliqué. I started off doing appliqué; like someone would give me a photograph of their house and then I would do an appliqué like—like these things. [*Points to one above her head.*] Like that's an appliqué I did. That's an appliqué I did. So I would do people's houses, and so then they would pay me to do a picture of their house. And that's how I got in first. And then I started bringing in spearmint because we had a whole bunch of spearmint in the fields. And then I started bringing in tomatoes because John had made this huge garden and we had all these tomatoes. So that's how it started off.

**00:09:12**

**SCA:** Okay; so when you joined you think it was about 1996, and then it—was it a couple of seasons before you started bringing the produce?

**00:09:23**

**JS:** It's been about since 2000 we've been starting to bring more produce in, about the last—last five years we've brought a lot more. We basically did it by hand with a hand-tiller and a shovel. And now we have every piece of equipment you can think of. [*Laughs*]

**00:09:40**

**CS:** [CFM manager] Sarah [Blacklin] might have more accurate information her records about when we joined there.

**00:09:44**

**SCA:** Okay; I'll check with Sarah. That's—yeah; I'll check with Sarah. Do you still do any of the appliqué work?

**00:09:52**

**CS:** Not really. I mean I do—I do photography now a little bit. You know, I just take pictures of different farm things, and then I was selling them in a few local restaurants and they would put them on the walls, decorating the walls, and people could just buy them off the walls. And I'd sell them for real inexpensive, because people are hurting financially now. And that way—you know, \$20 for like a picture of whatever, and so that's what I did.

**00:10:15**

**SCA:** What are some of the restaurants where you sold them?

**00:10:17**

**CS:** I had them in Tyler's for maybe two years. I had the whole wall in Tyler's, which was great. And then I had them in—I have them now in the Spotted Dog, and I had them in—they were in Panzanella Is that the only place I've had them? And then I had them in Harry's place. That wasn't a restaurant, though.

**00:10:42**

**JS:** Yeah; you have them in Spotted Dog still.

**00:10:44**

**CS:** Yeah; they're still in Spotted Dog, yeah.

**00:10:48**

**SCA:** Okay; well why don't you tell me about what you bring to Market each season?

**00:10:53**

**JS:** Oh boy; we bring a lot of stuff.

**00:10:55**

**CS:** You have to look at our website, too.

**00:10:57**

**SCA:** I will; I will.

**00:10:58**

**CS:** Because it has all that information on it, too.

**00:11:00**

**JS:** We bring shiitake mushrooms usually from July until November. This year we don't have any. I mean they're just starting to button out a little bit, all kinds of tomatoes and cherry tomatoes and ambrosia melons, and sugar baby watermelons, and corn, arugula, bok choy, Swiss chard, collards, kale, red Russian kale, green kale, a few kinds of cabbage; it just goes on forever—fava beans.

**00:11:34**

**CS:** Did you say flowers?

**00:11:34**

**JS:** Flowers, all kinds of flowers.

**00:11:36**

**SCA:** So right now we're in the middle of August, and what are the things that are really big right now?

**00:11:43**

**JS:** This is the lull of the season; the middle of August, the last week of July to now, and we have a lot of tomato plants that are dying, and we have a lot that are coming in again. We just actually planted a lot of cucumbers and squash that are just starting to come in and will come in until the frost. We're—we planted some greens about three weeks ago, and we're—next week we'll probably set out 15,000, you know, in between collards, Swiss chard, and cabbage plants. We're getting the ground ready now.

**00:12:18**

But tomorrow we'll have squash, cucumbers, Sungold tomatoes, red tomatoes; we still have a lot of potatoes and butternut squash, you know that store—they're all under the house and out there in that RV. Not too many mushrooms—

**00:12:39**

**SCA:** Tell me about the process of cultivating the mushrooms.

**00:12:42**

**JS:** It's called inoculating the logs, and we usually just do shiitake mushrooms, and there's a million different strains out there, but I like to use the sawdust spore. And we cut the logs in the

fall when it's just a few leaves left on the trees. They say the sugar is up when the sap is down. And that's what the mushrooms feed off of in the beginning, I guess. And then we stack them for a week or two or three out here. We do probably 1,000 a year. I don't know how many I'm going to do this year because it didn't go over too good this year.

**00:13:16**

And then you—we put them up on these stands and we drill like forty, fifty holes in each one. And we get these tubes, these hollow tubes, and jab it in the sawdust that fills up the tube and we jab it in the hole of the tree. And we—the holes that we drill—and we put wax over that and we have a bunch of us standing around the circle, drilling and plugging and waxing at the same time. And then we—it takes—if you do them in the fall, the winter, like October, mycelium takes over the log. And then we start soaking them in tubs and we get mushrooms. We soak them overnight; we do thirteen tubs a night, submerge them in cold water, throw cinderblocks on top of them and keep them under water, and then we take them out and hopefully—well, I'll show you. There's some popping out right now.

**00:14:02**

**SCA:** Okay; we can go look at it afterwards. Where did you learn how to do that?

**00:14:07**

**JS:** I didn't—I just did it—nobody taught me anything, not one thing. So, you know, we started with dowels. I don't know how I learned—

**00:14:17**

**CS:** Well, we started with the ones that we got from those people—

**00:14:18**

**JS:** Oh yeah; my friend Annie and Ernie lost their farm on some bad advice from one of the universities around here. And they needed a place to store some of the mushroom logs, so they used the sawdust spore because they got it for free. But that looked too hard for me, and I just used mycelium. So I got an idea just from looking at their logs. They brought about fifty over here. And we used the dowels in the beginning. But now I like the sawdust spore better.

**00:14:46**

**SCA:** Hmm; interesting.

**00:14:48**

**JS:** Yeah; [North Carolina] A&T [University] has a program and they'll give you the spore and teach you how to do it and all. But I'm really a one-man guy, you know, because then you got to write all these papers and man—it's enough trouble keeping up with my bills without writing books on—. You know, people that write the books on farming never did it. And people that do it don't have time to write the books, so it's a pretty vicious, sorry circle of learning farming.

**00:15:15**

**SCA:** Did you ever see—before you two were married and started with the chickens on Long Island—did you see yourself becoming a farmer?

**00:15:23**

**JS:** Never in five million years did I think I would farm.

**00:15:29**

**SCA:** And with your family heritage of the farming in Greece, did you see that as being more of a path?

**00:15:37**

**CS:** Not—not—I don't really think I thought about what I was going to be, but I didn't really think I was going to farm, and I—I do it differently—you know, I don't do it the same as he does. You know, I do more—I just do the flowers, basically, and they do a lot of the planting of the flowers, so I'm just basically cutting and making bouquets. And then I also do the food for all of the crew and everything. So I don't get into the farming side of it as much as—as he does.

**00:16:06**

**SCA:** Right; tell me about the food that you've laid out for your staff today.

**00:16:11**

**CS:** Willie got fish. Where did he get that fish?

**00:16:15**

**JS:** He bought it at the Southern Village Farmers' Market.

**00:16:17**

**CS:** Oh okay, all right.

**00:16:18**

**SCA:** And Willie is your—?

**00:16:19**

**CS:** Our son.

**00:16:19**

**SCA:** Your son, so Willie and Nichole are your two children?

**00:16:22**

**CS:** And Shane also.

**00:16:23**

**SCA:** Oh okay.

**00:16:24**

**CS:** Shane is the one who is mowing or doing something down there. What's he doing down there, John?

**00:16:28**

**JS:** He's cutting the blueberry patch.

**00:16:29**

**CS:** Okay.

**00:16:31**

**SCA:** So it's a family operation?

**00:16:33**

**CS:** Yeah.

**00:16:34**

**SCA:** You've got your three children, and then how many other interns or workers?

**00:16:39**

**JS:** We have no interns. They all get paid. I just hate people working for free. I—I don't know; I guess we have four other employees. Not everyone is full-time. It's the equivalent to having like five full-time employees. The end of October, a few of them will be gone.

**00:16:58**

**SCA:** Can you tell me—besides the fish—what you made for lunch?

**00:17:01**

**CS:** This was a lot of leftovers today, because Willie had a party last night. He had a dinner party last night and he made a lot of food. And so I think everything on there is leftovers from last night.

**00:17:13**

**JS:** Well, what is it, like eggplant from the garden? You made your eggplant dip—

**00:17:16**

**CS:** Oh yeah; I did make an eggplant dip. I did make the eggplant dip.

**00:17:18**

**JS:** It's great.

**00:17:21**

**CS:** And then—and Nicole brought me in a bunch of basil, so I also made some—some pesto and then I heated up some bread. I get a lot of free bread because I work at Weaver Street Market and they give me—I asked for the bread that they're just going to toss because nobody bought it. So I bring home a lot of free bread, which is nice when you have this big crew of people to feed. So I made two different dips for the bread—and what else did he have? There was also like a red rice dish that he had. And then also there was a tomato dish also, like just raw tomatoes with cheese and basil on it. I think that was everything that we had.

**00:17:59**

**SCA:** Do all three children live here with you?

**00:18:02**

**JS:** Yeah; they all live on the property somewhere, but not—

**00:18:06**

**CS:** Not in the house.

**00:18:10**

**SCA:** And have they always been working on the farm?

**00:18:13**

**CS:** They were—well, they were little kids.

**00:18:17**

**SCA:** Right, right.

**00:18:17**

**CS:** They were playing on the farm.

**00:18:19**

**JS:** Nichole went to Ireland and worked on a farm for a couple months, and Willie did the same thing. And they both were in AmeriCorps and gone for a while. None of them went to college. Like, we don't have money to send our kids to college, and we definitely don't have health insurance, so it's not such a great living. We have trouble paying hospital bills when we go, but—but otherwise we live pretty good.

**00:18:44**

**CS:** And also as far as—I mean we didn't really want to send them to college because he went to college for being a—an occupational therapy assistant, I went to college to be a teacher, and neither of us are doing it. And people who have gone to college are all having a hard time right now getting jobs, you know, and—so I think doing this is a pretty good way to earn a living, you know, as long as they're happy with it.

**00:19:07**

**JS:** They have low rent. So they don't have to make a lot of money.

**00:19:11**

**SCA:** Do they ever talk about starting their own farm, or—?

**00:19:15**

**JS:** Willie is trying to buy the land out front. He's been working on a deal for a couple months.

You know, it takes a while to see what happens, but I don't think he wants his own farm yet, you know, because you have to work seven days a week.

**00:19:30**

**CS:** And he likes to travel and have fun.

**00:19:32**

**JS:** He's only twenty-two.

**00:19:32**

**CS:** He's—yeah, twenty-two, yeah.

**00:19:35**

**JS:** You know, if he was smart he would just do a strawberry patch, maybe the first planting of tomatoes, and go surfing in Hawaii all winter.

00:19:47

**CS:** Suggest that.

00:19:48

**JS:** I've been telling him that for ten years.

00:19:51

**SCA:** It sounds like a pretty good life. *[Laughs]* Why don't you tell me, so today is Friday and y'all have Market in the morning—can you tell me what you'll be doing today and early tomorrow morning to get ready for Market?

00:20:03

**JS:** Well, it is a lot different now than it used to be, because I do it by myself and just with Cindy. So usually you have me running around like a nut harvesting all day, and then by 5:00 or 6:00 you start loading your truck and whatever you can, and cleaning up, and organizing all your tomatoes, and culling, and so on. But now I have a lot of employees, and we have a few more things to harvest, a few deliveries; got to get to the bank before 2:00, you know. And by 5 o'clock we'll have most of the stuff we need in the truck, anything—. If it looks like it might rain we'll leave it on the porch and load it in the morning, and in the cooler. And so it's a lot different.

00:20:45

But we used to stay up—I used to stay up until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, you know, getting ready for the Market—bagging and washing arugula, and all that mess. It worked pretty well. We do six markets a week now, so we're pretty well ready to go already.

00:21:00

**CS:** But it's not just us doing it; the kids are doing different markets.

00:21:03

**SCA:** Right; I've seen them there, too. So you're doing Wednesday and Saturday in Carrboro.

00:21:07

**JS:** We do two on Wednesday; we do the hospital and Wednesday at Carrboro. We've never missed a Wednesday Market. The Saturday Market at Carrboro—and we don't miss those either. We haven't missed one in years. One day there was only two of us. And we do the Ferrington Market, which is a great market on Tuesday, and we do the Southern Village Market, which is a great market on Thursday. And we go—we have a CSA, too, and our drop-off point is at Johnny's in town, and we sell a little bit of stuff there.

00:21:40

**CS:** On Mondays.

00:21:40

**JS:** And giving out stuff.

00:21:41

**SCA:** Okay; how many CSA subscribers do you have?

00:21:45

**JS:** We had thirty-five this year, the reason being I wasn't going to do a CSA. And then, like two weeks before—well, I figured out that I lost this contract I had—not really a contract, but I sold bratwurst to this one certain restaurant in town for the last couple of years—like 5,000 pounds a year—and all of a sudden they stopped buying from me. And so I told them, “Man, now what am I going to do?” So I started my CSA really late, and I got thirty-five people, and I just put an end to it. And it helped me get enough money to keep going, because I didn't know what—I was pretty short.

**00:22:23**

**SCA:** Right; well why don't you tell me some more about the livestock that you raise and what kind of meat products you do?

**00:22:29**

**JS:** Sometimes we raise some turkeys, maybe 100 of them or something.

**00:22:32**

**CS:** Willie started that; he wanted to do that one year.

**00:22:35**

**JS:** Yeah.

**00:22:36**

**CS:** He raised turkeys and decided it didn't pay.

00:22:39

**JS:** Yeah; you cannot make a nickel selling turkeys. I don't care what they say.

00:22:41

**SCA:** Why is that?

00:22:42

**JS:** Unless you sell them for \$200 each.

00:22:47

**CS:** Because people don't want to have to pay as much as what it costs to raise them, you know.

00:22:50

**JS:** It cost so much money for feed for hogs and chickens. We're raising hogs, and I'm not sure if I'm making a nickel on them. The feed is—

00:23:00

**CS:** Because the feed just went up, you know.

00:23:00

**JS:** [*Dog Barking*] Yeah; let's let that dog out or something.

00:23:05

**CS:** Romeo, be quiet.

**00:23:08**

**JS:** We—feed has gone from \$230 to \$240 a ton to \$410 a ton.

**00:23:16**

**SCA:** Wow.

**00:23:16**

**JS:** Since last November.

**00:23:18**

**SCA:** What kind of feed is that?

**00:23:19**

**JS:** It's corn and soybean meal, minerals, all kinds of stuff.

**00:23:23**

**SCA:** Do you think you're going to stop doing the pigs because of that?

**00:23:26**

**JS:** No; I'm working on trying to get the leftover stuff after they make beer from Carolina Brewery, and I've okayed it with the Town and now I got to—I've been working on this for two years. This has been like working for the State.

**00:23:42**

**SCA:** What gave you that idea?

**00:23:45**

**JS:** Well, my friend Rick, who got me into raising pigs, who now has a farm up in Asheville, he was going to do it but then he moved. It's sixteen percent protein. And I have another friend that gets it from the place in Pittsboro, but—

**00:23:59**

**SCA:** So it's like the barley and the hops?

**00:24:01**

**JS:** Yep.

**00:24:02**

**SCA:** And the pigs like it?

**00:24:03**

**JS:** Oh yeah.

**00:24:06**

**SCA:** Interesting.

**00:24:06**

**JS:** But they like everything. We feed them tons and tons of stuff—melons, and whole tomatoes, and this and that, but you need grain to put the fat on them.

**00:24:15**

**SCA:** And the chickens you just keep for yourself?

**00:24:17**

**CS:** Yeah.

**00:24:18**

**JS:** No; we've sold chickens. One time I did chicken sausage, but I—I really love to raise chickens because it's so good for the soil. You move them around and they fertilize and eat up everything. But I just—it costs \$4.00 to process them. It costs—each one; it costs a fortune to feed them. You have to sell a chicken for \$20 bucks, and it's just too expensive.

**00:24:47**

**SCA:** Do you see that changing at all, or getting better?

**00:24:49**

**JS:** No; I see it getting worse, especially with all the ethanol. And we just had a drought from Southwest Georgia all the way to Texas, where they grow a lot of the corn. They'll come up with some kind of an excuse. We probably get most of our corn from South America, but—what do we really know?

**00:25:09**

**SCA:** Uh-hm, right; well, let's go back to the Market. So what time will your alarm clock go off tomorrow?

**00:25:17**

**JS:** Well, we do not have a lot of stuff, so I probably won't get up until 5:00. I'll have the pigs fed late tonight, so I won't have to feed them in the morning, and all their water full. Pretty much just hop in the truck and we'll throw a few things in, pack the meat, take about a half-hour and tomorrow is an easy day.

**00:25:37**

**SCA:** So you think you'll get there at—6:30 tomorrow?

**00:25:40**

**JS:** Oh no; I have to get there way before that. I like to get there by 5:30.

**00:25:45**

**CS:** I'll get there about—probably by 6:00—6:15.

**00:25:48**

**SCA:** What time do your customers usually start—?

**00:25:52**

**JS:** In the summer I like to get there at 5:00, but now it's a little bit of a lull. The customers, it used to be a really early Market; people would be there at 6 o'clock buying stuff. But now, pretty much 7:00. And a few restaurant owners will come real early then, and, you know, so they can park and they can get the first choice of stuff. But—and there's a few people in town that really

like to cook. They buy a lot of good foods, so a few of them come and buy a lot of stuff—not so much from me.

**00:26:25**

**SCA:** Do you have any regular customers that you've gotten to know over the years?

**00:26:28**

**JS:** Tons of them.

**00:26:30**

**SCA:** Can you tell me about maybe one or two who stick out?

**00:26:35**

**JS:** I just feel like that's unfair, unless I mention everybody, but—.

**00:26:38**

**SCA:** Okay; that's fine.

**00:26:39**

**JS:** But I have some you know pretty good friends and they're customers.

**00:26:45**

**CS:** Yeah; customers who have become friends.

**00:26:47**

**JS:** Yeah; a lot of the volunteers at the Market are good customers, too.

**00:26:52**

**SCA:** And tell me about—it sounds like you had one restaurant relationship go bad recently—or one contract. Do you work with other restaurants?

**00:27:02**

**JS:** Yeah; it's a whole other thing. I guess it's sort of like the country music scene, you know, like you're hot for a while and then you get—they throw you off in the woods. But I used to have a ton of restaurant business. I would bend over backwards to sell stuff to restaurants—riding in Friday nights at 6 o'clock because they forgot ten pounds of arugula or this or that. But I basically sell a lot to Acme restaurant, a lot of stuff. And then there's quite a few—

**00:27:33**

**CS:** And we're also good friends with them.

**00:27:35**

**JS:** Yeah; as a matter of fact he got married here last year.

**00:27:37**

**SCA:** [Acme chef] Kevin [Callaghan]?

**00:27:37**

**CS:** Yeah; he had his wedding at our house, on our farm.

00:27:40

**SCA:** Okay.

00:27:43

**JS:** And then we have the Panzanella dinner coming up and they just bought a mountain of stuff yesterday—meat, which is helpful, and they buy a little bit of stuff, but this has been a really weird year. People are really cutting back.

00:27:57

**CS:** Weaver Street started buying from you, right?

00:27:58

**JS:** Yeah; Weaver Street was buying some stuff, some tomatoes and all. But really if you're going to buy tomatoes from a farmer, you need to tell them like now for next year. I mean, basically next year is already done right now. I mean, I've been getting ground ready for next year, and a lot of stuff you winter over, you know, you really—you have to be a year ahead of the game, which makes it hard when you're trying to apply for more markets. Because you really got to get a lot of stuff like your strawberries and different flowers to plant in September, and garlic and all. And then, you know, you can't anticipate you're going to get into a market—especially if you're a new person. They're not—you're not even in the market, and you go plant all this stuff and you don't get in the market, you're really stuck. You know, they should really choose who is in the Market now, and not in the middle of the winter. That's a mistake they make, but—.

**00:28:53**

**CS:** Yeah; there's always people wanting to get into the Market who aren't in. What they need to do is start more markets. And they did; I mean there's the one that they started in the—at the mall.

**00:29:01**

**JS:** But there's just too many now.

**00:29:02**

**CS:** Too many markets, you think?

**00:29:06**

**JS:** And then the restaurant, you know when you're new, like when I was new—I'm not new anymore—and you get worn down after a while, but I used to run around. I mean, after the Market on Saturday, I would go to every restaurant and try to sell, you know, ten pounds of cucumbers. Until I finally figured out, you know, to drive to town with \$5 worth of cucumbers or \$10 worth of cucumbers, when it cost me \$12 in gas and two hours of time, it just didn't make any sense. So I don't do that anymore. But a lot of new people do, and it makes it really hard to sell at restaurants. You know, people are picking figs now, so every Tom, Dick, and Harry is running to town with figs and selling them for like \$1 instead of, you know, \$4 a pint, so—. Restaurants—that's a tough one for me. But there is one or two guys that—if you're really organized and you do deliveries like two days a week and you—you have time to talk on the

phone and call them, or maybe e-mail them and tell them what you have and they can e-mail you back—I could do it if I put a little more effort, but it doesn't work the way it used to work.

**00:30:11**

**SCA:** Uh-hm; so to you—does most of your income on the produce then come from markets?

**00:30:17**

**JS:** I don't have any income. [*Laughs*] Yeah; markets, the CSAs, I sell a lot of firewood. That's a big business of mine; different stuff.

**00:30:31**

**SCA:** Given the difficulties of farming—and there are a lot—what makes you keep doing it?

**00:30:38**

**JS:** Well, that's one hell of a question. This year actually I have a notebook, and every day this whole year at the end of the day, I write down what I spent money on and what I made money on. And at the end of the day you write plus so much money or minus so much money. I'm trying to figure out if it is really worth it. It's a lot of time and effort.

**00:31:03**

**SCA:** So are you seriously considering getting out of it?

**00:31:07**

**JS:** Well, if I was losing a ton of money, I would be. I mean, I'm a little short on money now because my mushrooms didn't come in. That's usually a lot of money.

**00:31:15**

**CS:** But then if you ask *me* about farming, I am into farming because—into *organic* farming because it's the thing to do, it's the way the whole country is going to have to turn in this direction, and we're—you know, we're leading something. We're at the beginning of something and helping people learn about something that's really, really important. So that's why I'm into it.

**00:31:36**

**SCA:** Well tell me what you mean when you say that's the thing to do. Do you think that's here or that should be all over—?

**00:31:42**

**CS:** All over—all over the world, all over the world. I mean other—you know, in the world and a lot of different places they're already doing organic. Here, you know, in America, everybody—you know, I guess because of TV and everybody watching TV, and they want, you know, all the things that they're being told to get in the commercials. And they don't know about how important it is to eat healthy.

**00:32:03**

You know, they believe what the advertisers tell them about what's important to eat healthy, and they're—you know that's—that's not true.

**00:32:11**

**SCA:** So you feel that part of your mission is an educational one?

**00:32:13**

**CS:** Definitely; definitely. You know, I didn't want to—I didn't wind up teaching in a school. You know, I—I was going to do that, but I feel that what we do is educational and it's really, really important. You know, going to the Farmers' Market and just all of the people that are there—it's very social, but it's also educational. So—and I really believe in that; I think it's really, really important. And I'm really proud of my whole family—him especially, you know, and the kids being into doing this, so—.

**00:32:42**

**SCA:** Have you all—speaking of the social part of the Market, have you all developed relationships with any of the other farmers at Market?

**00:32:52**

**CS:** Uh-hm.

**00:32:53**

**JS:** Definitely; yeah.

**00:32:54**

**SCA:** Do you learn from each other?

**00:32:55**

**CS:** Yeah; we're friends with a lot of them.

**00:32:55**

**SCA:** Or share things with each other ever?

**00:32:58**

**JS:** Not a ton; sometimes we talk a little bit about it.

**00:33:00**

**CS:** We buy stuff together.

**00:33:03**

**JS:** Yeah; a lot of kids that used to work for me that started farms, I talk to them a lot.

**00:33:06**

**SCA:** Uh-hm.

**00:33:09**

**CS:** Yeah; they're now farming and in the Market.

**00:33:10**

**SCA:** Who are some people that worked for you who now have their own?

**00:33:14**

**JS:** Well, George O’Neal, he’s got Lil’ Farm. He’s one of them that’s in the Market, and you know, like Stuart and Alice [of Bluebird Meadows Farm] are friends of mine and—

**00:33:23**

**CS:** Do you know them?

**00:33:25**

**SCA:** I don’t think so.

**00:33:25**

**JS:** They’re really nice. They’ve got a great farm. And Shiloh—didn’t work for me, but she’s been farming up in Boone, and—but she used to use my equipment on Mr. Woodfield’s land. A lot of people used my equipment. My friend Andy, he farmed for a little while; he used my equipment on another piece of land that I’m using now. And gosh, who else; I can’t even think of it. Alena’s now—she’s here now. She just came for lunch. She’s working at a woodshop down the street. She worked here seven years. And she’s farming a little on her own now and has a stand on her own, and she goes to the Ferrington Market.

**00:34:05**

**SCA:** Okay. Tell me if you think—so you [*to Cindy*] sound like you definitely want to stay in the organic farming. If you [*to John*] were to get out of it, what do you think you might want to do?

**00:34:17**

**JS:** Can't say it on that. [*Points to tape recorder; laughs*]

**00:34:19**

**SCA:** Okay; that's fine. That's fine.

**00:34:23**

**JS:** I mean, there's nothing I'd rather do than be on the eighty-five-foot trawler going up and down the coast catching fish—I mean in the ocean—but I'll be doing this. I got it pretty well organized in my head now. [*Alena comes into the house to use the restroom.*] Alena, I was just talking about you.

**00:34:39**

**SCA:** Do you ever still fish?

**00:34:41**

**JS:** Never. I don't have time to do anything—really don't.

**00:34:45**

**CS:** You went a couple times with Willie.

**00:34:48**

**JS:** Went once last fall, about a year ago. I love the water.

**00:34:56**

**CS:** He grew up on the water in New York, so—

**00:35:00**

**SCA:** Right; with so many—it seems like a lot of young people in this area, like you’re saying, are getting into farming. What kind of advice have you given the people who have worked for you—or your children, or other young people who are getting into it?

**00:35:16**

**JS:** Really now, they have all these sustainable agriculture programs, and—which is great and all—but really the whole—farming, the whole thing is work. I mean, it’s not like it’s a job and you punch the clock. There’s always something to do; it’s nonstop work every day, just about. Now there’s a few guys, like my friend Ray, he’s smart enough where he goes surfing in Hawaii. And—there are ways around working every day, you know, but—.

**00:35:47**

**CS:** If you don’t have a family—

**00:35:49**

**JS:** Yeah; well, he has a family but he does it.

**00:35:49**

**CS:** If you don’t have kids—but they’re older, right?

**00:35:53**

**JS:** No; they’re our kids’ ages.

**00:35:52**

**CS:** Well, that's older; they're older now, you know.

**00:35:57**

**JS:** But—you just plug away you know, and man, you have—what's the word, not endurance, but perseverance. But it's hard. Most farmers or fishermen—anything these days, factory, people that inherited that stuff you know, they inherited farmland and equipment—. If they're just starting, buying land and a house—it's hard.

**00:36:24**

**CS:** The government should be helping with all that and—

**00:36:30**

**JS:** Well, that's a problem, is because the government subsidizes Smithfield and all these places that sell pork and chicken and all this so cheap. And we're not subsidized, you know, so there's no way we can beat their prices. We have to buy our stuff. We're not having it given to us, so—.

**00:36:48**

**SCA:** Right; how would you like to see those government regulations change?

**00:36:53**

**JS:** Well, I don't know what the regulations are, but we do have some pretty good tax breaks on land. And basically, we don't pay a lot of taxes because everything we do is an expense—

everything. So it all—that helps a lot. But the feed, man, that’s a killer—that’s for sure. And there’s some programs and grants out there. I use a lot of plastic now; we have what we call black plastic layers—although you can use white plastic, green plastic, red plastic—and you get the ground ready and you pull this bed former over it, and it shapes it, and put the plastic over it—like when you pick strawberries, you see the plastic. They also have biodegradable plastic, but it costs like three times as much. It would be nice if the—I’m sure in Europe, they get it—the farmers don’t use plastic; they probably use that. It would be nice if we could get some help and getting a break on something like that at least for the environment, if not so much our financial—because we throw a lot of that in the garbage.

**00:38:04**

**SCA:** Do you see—so, you sell to Weaver Street, and you said you work at Weaver Street. Do you see any other grocery stores approaching local farmers for their merchandise?

**00:38:17**

**JS:** Well there’s the co-op in Pittsboro that does it.

**00:38:22**

**SCA:** Yeah. Right—what about the chain grocery stores?

**00:38:26**

**JS:** Nah, they say you need insurance, and so on. And ECO Organics [Eastern Carolina Organics] buys a lot, but you have to be certified organic, and we’re not.

**00:38:32**

**SCA:** Right.

**00:38:32**

**JS:** And we never will be. Because it's too much paperwork.

**00:38:36**

**SCA:** Right; and tell us—I know on your website you talk about that a little bit.

**00:38:42**

**CS:** It's me talking about it.

**00:38:43**

**SCA:** Okay.

**00:38:43**

**JS:** Well, you know, it costs—it costs money to do, but you'd make your money right back. If you were certified organic—there's a lot of people that do things by the book, even though most of my customers know me and know I'm organic. They all sell to certain people. They—man, it better be on paper, or just they couldn't do it, so it would definitely benefit—and it's not that expensive but the time. I mean, to write all of that—

**00:39:08**

**CS:** Yeah; if you just even looked at that application form it's unbelievable, so it—yeah it would take a lot of time to do that.

**00:39:15**

**JS:** If you were growing 100 acres of sweet potatoes, or you know, 20,000 tomatoes plants and that's all you did—or five acres of strawberries; but when you're growing ninety different vegetables, man alive.

**00:39:26**

**SCA:** Do you have to fill out a separate application for each crop?

**00:39:31**

**JS:** There's a lot of separate filling out, yeah.

**00:39:32**

**CS:** Yeah; just—different questions about each crop. You know, like the size of the land that it's in—you know, and then we switch everything every year. So every year you're out there measuring everything and checking the soil and all that; you know, it's way too much work. So that's something that the government could do; they could come in and fill out those frickin' application forms, you know?

**00:39:54**

**JS:** Yeah; I mean if you had some kid in school, you know, in the agricultural department, and they—you know, if that was their job to just do that—you know, come help you on the farm, they'd learn a lot too.

**00:40:05**

**SCA:** Yeah.

**00:40:06**

**JS:** Just like you have residents in the hospitals, and so on.

**00:40:11**

**SCA:** Uh-hm.

**00:40:11**

**JS:** Writing the medical notes.

**00:40:15**

**SCA:** Can you all think of anything that you should tell me about the farm that I haven't asked you?

**00:40:23**

**JS:** Well it was a farm before we moved here.

**00:40:25**

**SCA:** What kind of farm was it?

**00:40:26**

**JS:** I mean Mr. Yow, he raised tobacco. He raised hogs. He had a bunch of greenhouses up here—the old-style, the wooden frames—that he raised plants and flowers that he sold people.

**00:40:40**

**CS:** Yeah; we had—when we moved here it was all like broken greenhouses back there, just wood and glass. We had to clean up all that where the—the—

**00:40:46**

**JS:** Trees growing through. Well somebody bought it from him before we got it and built this house, and then we bought it from them. But—but we're still friends with his son and daughter-in-law, who are older than us. And they're a lot of fun. They're real country folks. So it's fun meeting these folks and hanging out with them—the locals.

**00:41:08**

**SCA:** Do you see yourselves staying down here in North Carolina?

**00:41:11**

**CS:** Uh-hm.

**00:41:13**

**SCA:** I guess my last question, can you tell me—we talked about what Willie made for his dinner party but can you tell me a little more about what you like to cook with the food that you grow?

**00:41:28**

**CS:** Um—

00:41:29

**SCA:** Who does more of the cooking?

00:41:30

**CS:** I do. I do a lot of Greek things, and I even do like a little Greek cookbook that I—that I sell. And I'm vegetarian, so I do, you know, just Greek vegetable dishes is what I generally do. But I'll make meat—you know, if he needs meat, then I'll make meat. And then we also—we're members of the fish CSA. Do you know about that?

00:41:51

**SCA:** Uh-hm.

00:41:51

**CS:** Yeah; so then—

00:41:52

**SCA:** The Core Sound one?

00:41:53

**CS:** Yeah; so then once—one day a week we would have some kind of seafood. And it seems like there's always a lot of people eating here, too, so—. [*Laughs*]

00:42:04

**JS:** A lot.

00:42:06

**CS:** Which is nice.

00:42:09

**SCA:** Do you find that the—the Greek food, does it translate pretty easily to the kind of things that you grow?

00:42:12

**CS:** Yeah; yeah.

00:42:16

**JS:** You can try some. We made that eggplant; it's excellent. That's if the animals left us anything. *[Laughs]* You know, you were asking about different customers at the Market and who stands out. I'd have to say there's some pretty cool—a lot of great customers there. And not only do they buy stuff from us or we go to their house or they come here, and parties and so on—. Like, it's impossible for me to get a loan, you know. So I have customers that actually lend me money, you know, and I pay them off—I mean a lot of money. Like one time I borrowed \$16,000 just to buy a tractor.

00:42:56

**SCA:** From a regular customer?

00:42:56

**JS:** From a—yeah, a customer who is a friend now. And I’m thinking of asking him for more money. But I paid him back. He never once asked me you know, “Hey, where is the money?” or—I just paid him back.

**00:43:07**

**CS:** Because he wants to help farmers.

**00:43:09**

**SCA:** Right.

**00:43:09**

**JS:** It is a lot of people you know that—who are pretty—pretty friendly and helpful.

**00:43:15**

**CS:** Like when the weather is really, really bad. If it’s snowing and we’re there, or if it’s just raining bad, and people come and they say, “God, I really did not want to come out in this weather, but we knew you’d be here, so we had to come.” Which is nice. They’re there for us. You know, I mean they also wanted their food, but they could have gone somewhere else, you know, the next day when it wasn’t raining.

**00:43:36**

**SCA:** Do you have—where do you think that kind of dedication comes from?

**00:43:39**

**CS:** I think—well, I think they're educated and they want something that's really good for them and healthy. And they're—they're our friends you know. So I mean not—not that they're all our friends but they're friendly—you know.

**00:43:56**

**SCA:** Have you talked to Carla?

**00:44:00**

**CS:** Carla is on my list to interview.

**00:44:03**

**JS:** Tell her she's not my friend. [*Laughs*]

**00:44:04**

**SCA:** Why is that?

**00:44:06**

**JS:** I'm only kidding. She—she's there every Saturday morning—

**00:44:09**

**CS:** First thing.

**00:44:10**

**SCA:** I hear I have to get there at 6:30 to catch her, though.

00:44:13

**JS:** At least! No, she's—man, she's there at quarter to six, easy.

00:44:17

**CS:** She doesn't like crowds.

00:44:19

**JS:** Yeah; she's always looking for a deal. She comes here and picks strawberries a lot. What did she do? She lost a crutch one day. She needs a crutch to walk, you know; in the strawberry patch, she was really stranded out there. I told her, "I wish I would have known"—I told her I hid it on her, but—. [*Laughs*]

00:44:38

**SCA:** Did you help her out?

00:44:39

**JS:** Nah; I didn't know. You know, I wasn't up there because I have so many different fields. But she used to come to the Market and go—we used to sell eggs, and she—not a lot, but a few dozen eggs. She would go through like fifteen dozen eggs and pick the twelve biggest eggs. [*Laughs*] So we like to give her a hard time; yeah.

00:44:59

**SCA:** That's pretty good. Anyone else or any—anything I've forgotten to ask you about?

00:45:07

**JS:** Well, if it's on the Carrboro Market, I can just say I'm glad to have a Carrboro Market. I really am. Yeah; it's a—it's a good Market, and—that's all I can tell you.

**00:45:24**

**SCA:** Well good; thank you so much. I appreciate—did you have anything else, Cindy?

**00:45:28**

**CS:** Uh-um; not that I can think of, no.

**00:45:31**

**SCA:** Well, thank you.

**00:45:31**

**CS:** How did you remember all that? [*Editor's note: She means the questions, not the answers—of course she knew the tape recorder was on.*]

**00:45:32**

**[End Cindy and John Soehner Interview]**