Craig McClung

All Farm Organics - Louisa, Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is October 15, 2024. I'm here in–where are we technically?

Craig McClung: Louisa, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Louisa, Virginia. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Craig McClung: No. My name is Craig McClung.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what do you do?

Craig McClung: I am retired, but I've actually picked up farming since I've retired. I'm farming on a certified organic farm. It's probably one of the first certified organic farms in Louisa County. It's been organic for approximately 30 years.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what's the farm called?

Craig McClung: All-Farm Organics. It's not the most unique name, but it says what we are.

Sarah Rodriguez: I think that's important.

Craig McClung: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, backing up, when and where were you born?

Craig McClung: When, I was born May 28, 1958 in Baltimore, Maryland. And I was raised in Maryland for my first 18 years of my life, and then I left Baltimore and went to Boston for college for engineering and actually spent my working career, a paid working career, [Laugh] as an engineer in the nuclear power industry, actually.

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So, kind of, like, very opposite from where I am right now.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Could you tell me about who you grew up with in your household?

Craig McClung: Sure. My mom and dad were from West Virginia. They're World War II vets, or they were. They've since passed away about 10 years ago. They met during the War. They were, like, from adjoining towns. My dad was on leave visiting his cousin. This is kind of a side story, sorry. My dad was visiting his cousin on leave. My mom was her friend, and she was coming out of the bathroom in just a towel, and my dad, and his cousin, and my mom went out on a date to the movies.

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And they corresponded by mail during the service, and they got married when he was on leave. And the rest is history. They were married for, like, 65 years or something. And three boys. I'm the youngest of three by a long shot, almost 12 years. So, it was kind of like–there were two miscarriages, my parents thought they would never have any more children, and then dad was still in the Reserves. They went to the beach, left the boys with the neighbors, obviously had a very good time. [Laugh] "Guess what, Glenn? I'm pregnant." So, yeah. So, I'm, like, the last of the bunch.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a little bit what food was like growing up in your household?

Craig McClung: Oh my gosh. Very basic. This was probably–obviously, I was born in 1968, so through the 60s window.

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It was, like, basic meat and potatoes. There'd be liver every now and then, salmon cakes, hot dogs, hamburgers. Just the basics. Casseroles. Green bean casseroles with Campbell's mushroom soup and all of those typical things back then. Yeah, that was, like, the major thing. And then, the Sunday dinner would be, like, the big thing. Be either, like, a ham, or a chicken, or a steak, if things were well or whatever. And that was, yeah, meat and potatoes the whole nine yards. Cap'n Crunch cereal in the morning, PBJs for lunch. It was very basic. Heavy. Yeah, iceberg lettuce for salads. It was a whole different dietary setup back then, so it was very different than what we have today. Yeah.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Did you know kind of growing up what you wanted to be?

Craig McClung: Well, my dad worked for the Department of Defense as a designer engineer, and I kind of followed in his footsteps as far as the engineering career. And I went to school at Northeastern University and graduated with a degree in civil engineering with structural focus. So, part of Northeastern University is, they have a co-op program. And I worked for a small company doing–this was just as Three Mile Island accident happened, and we realized all the shortcomings with the nuclear industry at that time, or designs, I'll say. So, there was a lot of refit work to improve safety and add defense and depth to instrument control systems, a lot of sorts of things like that.

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So, a lot of the more entrepreneurial engineers left the larger firms, like Bechtel, Stone & Webster, up in that area, and started their own companies to do all this small retrofit work. Because they had done the designs, they knew the plants, they knew how to add additional

instrumentation and additional things. So, as I was a co-op student, I worked for one of these companies, and when I graduated, that's who I went to work for. That was my path to the nuclear industry world. It was good. It certainly allowed me to have a pretty successful career. But yeah, I guess I was in that from, like, 1981 until I retired about six years ago.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where did you go for college?

Craig McClung: Northeastern University in Boston, right downtown. So, we went from, like, the suburbs of Baltimore to inner city Boston in 1976.

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It was a whole different town than it is now, or city, but it was still very exciting to somebody coming from the suburbs. First time on your own, it was kind of–not having the most solid study habits. It took an extra quarter to get out. [Laugh] So, I think I enjoyed the city a little bit too much. But yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And did you live there when you were working, like, after school?

Craig McClung: Yes, within commuting distance. I lived in New Hampshire, in Manchester, which was just across the line. 50 minutes away on a good traffic day. You just, like, blast right down 93, or you're able to take the commuter rail system right into Boston and then walk to the office. And then, I took jobs at–part of our work was, we'd do the redesigns, and then we'd go do the implementation.

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So, we'd go to the stations and work during an outage or a maintenance window when things were available, and we'd stay at the stations or wherever they would be located, Vermont, New

Hampshire. Yankee Atomic was the company I worked for at that time, and we would essentially just be at the power plants during that window or back in the main office.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me how you ended up here in Virginia?

Craig McClung: Sure. So, as the consulting industry was collapsing on itself because no one was doing new construction, and all the retrofit work had taken place, new designs were improved, I ended up moving to Virginia and taking a job with Dominion, or Virginia Power at that time. And that was, I guess, 1990 is when I came down here.

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And then, I finished my career here at Dominion, and a whole group of us came in at the same time, young engineers. And we noticed that every four years, Dominion would have a buyout program to, like, buy out all the senior engineers, to reduce salaries, I guess. So, we just waited around, and we had 29 years with the company, and they announced the new package was coming up. So, I was, what 64 probably at that time, 63, somewhere in that window. I can't even remember anymore. 62. I remember looking at my good friend, it's like, "What are you going to do, Kevin?" And he goes, "If Lisa found out that I turned this package down, she would kill me." I said, "So, let's put our papers in." So, we both applied for early retirement, and we both went out at the same time. We came in at the same time. So, it was kind of like your old college buddy, meeting freshman year, and you graduate, and you stay in touch or whatever.

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It's just kind of like the same thing. It's like family. You spend 30 years with somebody. So, it's kind of cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Craig McClung: But yeah, that's how I ended up here. Yeah, I don't have any regrets about that. It's worked out really well.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did you meet Lisa?

Craig McClung: Lisa?

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, you said Lisa.

Craig McClung: Oh, that was Kevin's wife.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, I see, sorry.

Craig McClung: No, that's fine. It's all good.

Sarah Rodriguez: And how did you meet your wife?

Craig McClung: My wife, wow. My wife's name is Annie, and it was a blind date, so to say at Ashland Coffee and Tea in Ashland, Virginia. A mutual friend of ours worked there. And I worked there, like, after work, just helping this couple out that had the coffee shop. It was a comedy club and a music venue. And Tracy was there, and she called Annie, who was a therapist working for Hanover Community Services Board at the time.

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Said, "Why don't you come to comedy night?" And Annie was like, "I just got in my comfy clothes. I'm getting ready to watch Seinfeld. I don't really want to come out." And she kept pushing her and pushing her, and she finally came out. And the two of us kind of hit it off, and

we started dating. And that was 1999. And we've been together ever since. So, yeah, it was kind of a blind date that kind of turned pretty good.

Sarah Rodriguez: And do you have any kids?

Craig McClung: We have one daughter. She is 15. So, I started late, kind of like my dad. Or my dad finished late, I should say. And it's been one of the best things, I think. We had no intentions of really having kids, and we were just more of, like, "Well, if it happens, it happens." And it happened. And it truly is a life-changing experience.

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Good, bad, sometimes indifferent. But overall, I think it gives you a whole different perspective. Like, I remember one time at work, when I first got out of college, you think you know everything, and you really don't know anything. I remember hearing people talk about their families, and their kids, and stuff like that. I say, "Well, how hard can it be?" There's times it is really, really hard, and there's times it's not so hard. And like the old adage goes, "You don't really know until you've been there," and it is really, really true in so many aspects. But yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And how did you get into farming? Did you have gardens growing up? What was your influence with that?

Craig McClung: Sure. My mom's family was a coal mining family. They're originally from Poland. She's first generation.

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My dad's family had a subsistence farm as well as a small coal mine on their farm that they were hand digging in the side of the mountain. And then, my dad would go load the coal truck, and

haul it down to Lewisburg, and sell it there. But they also had a garden, and cattle, and sheep. And when I was growing up, my parents had a fairly sizable vegetable garden in the backyard, so we would have fresh produce that way when it was in season. And then, when I got out of college, I had a small garden in New Hampshire. And when I moved down here, that's when I started having a larger garden for myself. It was just myself at that time. And that's how I met William Hale at All-Farm Organics. I would buy compost from him, and we developed a working relationship that way. I'd buy his compost, we'd talk about the stuff in the county, the neighborly thing you do.

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And that's how my relationship here developed. So, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so, you said you started farming more once you retired.

Craig McClung: Oh, totally. When I retired, once you get all the things done around the house that needed to be done, it was like, "Okay, what else are we going to do?" And actually, the other job that I have is a miller at Deep Roots Milling in Lowesville, Virginia. And we were talking to the other millers there in the evening one day, and we were talking about where you're from or whatever. And they said, "Oh, you must know William Hale since you're in Louisa." And it's like, "Well, yeah, as a matter of fact, I do." And I had been talking to William for some time, several years. And they said, "Well, we understand he's getting ready to retire and stop farming." I was like, "Oh." So, I texted William and said, "Hey, if you want help at the farm as just a farm hand, I'm happy to help you keep the farm running and still grow whatever you're growing.

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I’m happy to help out." And that was, like, around Christmastime. And he said, "Let's talk later." And he got back in touch with me and said, "If you're really interested, come on out to the farm. Let's talk." So, we connected again, came to the farm, and I’m sure he was a little like, "Well, what do you really want to do?" I told him, I said, "Really, anything. Grease machines, run machines, whatever." And we worked with him and are still working with him. He has kind of moved out of the day-to-day actual running equipment, planting, harvesting, and is kind of giving that up more and more to me. So, it's kind of been a transition over the last four years, I think.

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The first year, all I did was really, like, check the machines and help with the harvest. Periodically drive the tractor or whatever. And then, as we finished harvesting rye one year, we parked the combine, and he said, "I'm finished with small grains. If you want to use the equipment, and use the land, and grow wheat, or rye, or whatever, let's work something out." And I said, "Sure." And he was still growing popcorn at the time. And then, when we finished popcorn harvest last year, he said, "I'm done with popcorn, so if you want to do popcorn, take the popcorn side of the business, it's yours." So, at this point, William is 75. And when we just finished popcorn harvest last week, we set the machine up, and he said, "Let me make two passes."

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We made two passes, and he never drove the corn picker again. He said, "Go ahead and finish." It's like, "Okay." So, it's kind of like, yeah, we've kind of–people ask, "Are you running the farm now?" It's like, "I don't think I run the farm. I use William's brain and knowledge more than

anything else at this point." I'd say it's still very much a collaborative effort. And that's just kind of, like, how we ended up doing what we do right now.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what made you decide to kind of expand from just keeping your own garden into farming?

Craig McClung: I don't know. Maybe it's the idea of being able to do bigger scale. And working at the mill, I always had the ideal of, like, "It would be so awesome to grow our own wheat, sell it to the mill, mill it into flour, sell it to a baker, and then go eat the loaf of bread that he baked with the wheat that I grew."

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And same with the popcorn. It's really awesome to, like, grow the popcorn. Funny thing is, I don't really eat much popcorn. And then, sell it to the mill. And then, like, last year, we sold out all of the popcorn that we grew. And I remember Aaron saying, "Grow as much popcorn as you can because I know we will sell all of it." It's like, "Really? People really buy that much popcorn?" So, I think last year, we grew close to 900 pounds of popcorn. And this year, we tried to grow more, but the weather was not cooperative with the drought. So, I think we have probably about the same, even though we planted more. So, I think it's more of the ideal of growing something, the satisfaction of watching it actually grow after you planet it, and then just the mechanical aspects of harvesting it and cleaning it, and just being outside, and paying attention to the seasons.

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And then, the aspect of actually milling it, working at a historical mill, keeping that running. It's just, like, a big circular chain that kind of, I think, is what's drawn me to that. And then, the fact

that it's all organic is a stronger part. I would never want to go work for a place where, like, we spray everything to do weed control or spray everything because it's time to harvest, and we want to stop its growth, or any of that stuff. That's the other aspect here at All-Farm Organics that really attracted me to help William out with his project or with his farm.

Sarah Rodriguez: How do you get involved in Deep Roots Milling?

Craig McClung: We drove by the place years ago, before it was Deep Roots.

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And the previous owners had it as a small mill still, and we stopped in, it was an open house. We did a tour of the mill and then kind of, like, just filed it away. Let me see, that was probably 12 years ago, 13 years ago. I think our daughter was 2. And then, later on, I noticed that Deep Roots was at Woodson's Mill, which is the name of the mill, selling product in Charlottesville. So, I was thinking, "Oh, wow, the mill must be running again." So, World Wide Web, saw that it had actually changed hands to a new set of millers, and actually becoming a commercial mill as opposed to a small boutique mill, and doing wholesale and retail orders. And I always liked the idea of water-powered old historical structures.

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The engineering brain, watching all the gears, and the belts, and the pulleys, and everything else, it's, like, the basics of, like, 1700s equipment still functioning. And then, maintaining an historical structure, and that part. So, I went down for a volunteer day, which they hold periodically, and then after that, I came back, and you're all excited. So, I wait a while and got in touch with them again, and it's like, "Hey, could you guys really use help during the week, like, when you really mill?" It was like, "Yeah, sure. Come on down." So, I worked with them

essentially for no pay for a year, just volunteering a week a month while we mill. And the following year, they said, "We really do need to pay you." It's like, "All right, go ahead," and became an employee.

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And now, actually, I kind of call myself the third miller. Because there's two main millers. There's really three millers, but one is working on another project. So, it's kind of grown from what our responsibilities were. So, it's like, we've taken a bigger role as the mill continues to grow business. It's like, we need more people, we need more stuff, so need more people to do different things.

Sarah Rodriguez: And did you start volunteering with them when you were still working for Dominion? Or was that after?

Craig McClung: Probably volunteered while I was still with Dominion. And then, I knew I was retiring, so I could see that probably on the horizon, I think was the timeframe of that. Or it was right after I retired. So, yeah, you're talking about going from one industry to another industry.

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It's, like, night and day. It's so different. It's so exciting. But anyway, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk a bit about–you have maybe these two pieces with the milling and All-Farm Organics. What does a typical day look like? What's a typical day at one or the other, or if you do both?

Craig McClung: Sure, yeah. Well, we don't do both because the mill is not too far from Heather Coiner's house, who you're going to go visit. So, it's an hour and 20 minutes from here, so we don't really work at the farm and then run down there. But a typical day here will be, since we are regenerative, it's a process of the years that you are not growing what they call a cash crop, like popcorn for us, or a small grain like a wheat or a rye.

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Your plots will be in a cover crop material to do weed suppression and really put nitrogen and nutrients back into the soil through the actual plant. Like, legumes and other varieties of plants will actually fix nitrogen into the soil. And then, you mow them down, and then lightly disk. We still do a light disking on this farm as opposed to a true no-till and only drill farm. So, we will flail mow the fields after they've reached their maturity, before they set seed, and let that material decompose on the surface, and then slightly disk it back into the surface, and then either plant another cover crop for the second year of fallowness, and then the third year, we'll actually plant our cash crop, be it wheat or popcorn.

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So, the typical day here is, like, checking the fields, what weeds you're growing, what good things you're growing, and then as a farm, there's always equipment to fix and look ahead. Like, right now, this is October, so we're looking at, what do we want to plant for a fall crop? We generally focus on winter wheats. So, winter wheat generally is planted by Halloween in this area is the day that the old-timers use. So, we're trying to figure out, how many fields do we want to grow? What variety do we want to grow? What is the market using? What are the bakers

using? The other thing we do is small seed grow-out. With Deep Roots Milling, we tried a different variety this year.

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One of our millers went to Wales last year for a little bit, and over there, they have this thing called a population wheat, which is a wheat that's been grown for years, and years, and years, and years with other wheats, so it's kind of crossbred. So, Aaron said, "Why don't we try a mixture of variety of wheats in one plot?" So, you plant them all together, put them in the seed box, mix them up, and plant them as a unit, as a mix. So, we did four different types of wheat. It grew out, and we call it the population mix. And if we continue to plant that or another farmer takes our seed stock and plants out a bigger portion than we have, over time, those will self-pollinate on their own, and probably in four or five years of saving the seed and regrowing it, the cross-pollination will occur, and it will have a different flavor profile and growing profile than each of the four individual wheats.

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It's a very, very long process. I never realized, like, if you're trying to do small-scale grow-outs, what a long-term game it really is to see the end result of what you're trying to grow as things mature, variations happen through the growing cycle. Then, next year, there's more variations. So, every year is the same, but it's not the same. The weather's different. You might have a crop failure. You might not get it in in time, and it sprouts in the field. So, there's all these different challenges. And being organic, you have less control over a lot of things than a conventional farm, I think. But yeah.

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A typical day at the farm is, walk the fields, you see what's there, you fix what broke as far as equipment-wise, and then you're always, like, looking, preparing a few weeks ahead of, "What is my next stage?" Watch the wheat. How's it growing? Get the combines ready, get your grain storage ready. Same way with the corn. At what point do we go harvest the popcorn? You're always checking that for moisture, and bugs, and everything else. And you do the best you can organically. It's a different kind of work as opposed to a conventional farm as far as your diligence, I think. A conventional farmer would probably disagree with that.

Sarah Rodriguez: What does a typical day at the mill look like?

Craig McClung: Typical day at the mill–Deep Roots Milling is a mill-to-order mill. None of us live near the mill. One gentleman, Ian, lives in North Carolina.

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Aaron lives in Christiansburg. And I live here in Louisa County. And the other people who come to the mill, another one from North Carolina, another one from Stanton, so we're kind of a mix. So, anyway, we all live at the mill during mill window. It's a very communal working environment. It's kind of very unique from my past background from that aspect. So, generally, somebody will wake up. We all wake up. Different times. Somebody starts the coffee. First thing we do at the mill is, we will grease the machine, all the bearings that need to be lubricated, check all the belts, open the water, and start the wheel rolling, and let the grain start flowing into the wheel, and start grinding flour or corn.

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And then, everybody else gets up. Somebody makes breakfast. There'll be a communal lunch and a communal dinner at the end of the night once we're finished. And then, we actually run the mill

Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Wednesday–probably five to seven days out of that window. It's really almost two weeks that we're there. And then, once we've milled all our product, we bag all our product, either in wholesale bags to bakers in Maryland, Virginia are our major areas, D.C., Richmond, Charlottesville are our biggest major bakers, I'll say. And then, retail. Retail orders, online orders go all over the country.

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And I think we've actually had some down in the islands, some people purchase material. So, yeah. So, essentially, you mill, and then you bag it, and then you clean it all up and put it away for two weeks, and then you come back and start it all over again.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, it's every couple weeks y'all do that?

Craig McClung: Yep. Last week of every month is, like, the major mill cycle. But, like, somebody's always running around and picking up grain or delivering grain. So, I don't know why we call it a week because it really is growing into being two weeks or more. So, it's becoming more and more full-time.

Sarah Rodriguez: You mentioned being regenerative here. Could you talk about when you first came across regenerative agriculture?

Craig McClung: I guess when I was doing my garden. We started reading about organic farming. You always heard about organic farming, so what was it, really?

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And then, when I started to work with William, he really kind of gave me the education of, "This is what regenerative really means." And there's different ways to do it, but essentially what

you're really trying to do is build the organic matter in the soil either through a true no-till process or a low-till process, which is kind of splitting hairs. Or some people–we were talking to a farmer in California the other week, she actually–and there's more and more people doing this–will mix pasture animals into it. So, like, she was growing a wheat. And the wheat grows in different stages, but in the spring, when it reemerges from its winter dormancy period, it'll sprout and then start what they call tiller.

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And that's where, from the single seed, you end up with a main shoot, and then you'll end up with a bunch of branch shoots, which will also develop a seed head. What she does is, she actually allows sheep to graze over the pasture to eat all the new shoots down, and at the same time as the sheep are moving through the field, they're also dropping, obviously. And so, they're adding manure back into the top area of the soil. And then, just like cutting the grass, because wheat is kind of a grass, it regrows, so the stalks come back a little stronger. Just like when you cut the grass, it keeps coming back and multiplies. So, she has found that doing the pasture method will actually increase the number of tillers that she's getting from her–and a stronger stem, so it's less prone to lodging.

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Lodging is when the wheat lays over. The variety that she was growing can grow four, five, six feet tall. And here, we tried to grow a turkey red variety, which is an old heritage grain, and it got about five feet tall. And unfortunately, in Virginia's thunderstorms, you get a good, strong breeze for a thunderstorm, it will just lay right over. And once it lays over and starts to mat on the ground, it's extremely hard to harvest, leads to other problems with funguses and things like that.

So, the heritage tall grain is much, much harder to grow. There's more challenges to it. The lodging, how to harvest, and just those sorts of things that grow with it. Where the more modern varieties that only grow waist high or knee high, it's not going to fall over because it's short.

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It's not as affected by the rain, and the wind, and the storms as much. So, it's a little more predictable, I guess. But regenerative is really regenerating the soil because as you grow stuff, it extracts the elements out of the soil, the nutrients. So, you want to try to put it back in in a way that is not using commercial fertilizers. And we do that here by using the cover crop method, and then just lightly till it back in. We will, every now and then, add, like, a seaweed mixture or compost. We still produce compost on the farm, and we'll lay that through the fields, or we'll make the compost tea and spread that on the field as well. But we really don't use a lot of typical fertilizers. Some people will be using, like, chicken manure and things like that.

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But yeah, we tend to shy away from that and stick to just cover crop. And it's worked out pretty well for us so far. Our yields are not the same as a conventional farm, but we think the taste and the quality is superior.

Sarah Rodriguez: Using those methods.

Craig McClung: Yeah, using our methods. And we know that we're not adding anything harmful to the soil, we're just letting nature do its thing, and all the earthworms, and microbes, and everything else.

Sarah Rodriguez: Is there a community around regenerative agriculture that you've noticed either here or more broadly in the region? Have you met other people doing these kinds of methods? Do you learn from them?

Craig McClung: Sure. Yeah, actually, it's a growing trend, I think is probably the best way to phrase it.

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There is the Virginia Association of Biological Farms, VABF. They're more focused towards regenerative agriculture, either with animals or with crops, or the combination of the both. Their bigger focus was vegetable as opposed to small grains and corn, but I think they're kind of broadening out. So, they hold a conference every year, they hold classes throughout the year. There's a lot of outreach through that project. So, that's where you go to learn, and they have speakers come in from all over the country. It's a weekend-long conference with all sorts of different subjects. How to grow the best tomatoes, how to improve your soil structure. What is the actual elemental breakdowns of the various crops that you grow?

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All sorts of information is out there for that and education that they provide. Yeah, and then we just held a demystifying organic certification with part of VABF, and American Farmland Trust, and Future Harvest Organization. So, there's lots of organizations that are out there. And the Common Grain Alliance is another one for grains more than vegetables. But you start to develop a network. Like, when I first started doing this, not that I've been doing it very long, we'd call up another farmer, and it's like, "Hey, I have this problem. How did you get around this problem?"

Or, "When do I really need to take care of this?" And it's like, "Well, you kind of missed that window."

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So, then you work to catch up. Or if you find out that you still have time, it's like, "Ooh, I got a little bit of time." So, to get back to regenerative agriculture is a growing trend in this area, and there's various degrees of it, I think. Everybody's soil may not adapt as well to different planting methods, so you have to adjust from whatever you've read. Like anything, you need to take it with a grain of salt, and what works best for you may not work for the guy 15 miles away. So, everybody's soil is different, but I think we're all working with the same goal of doing as little soil disturbance, using as little commercial fertilizers as possible, and no sprays.

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Regenerative doesn't necessarily mean organic because that's a different–and even that, you can still have organic methods and not be organically certified because that's an extra level of certification that you don't necessarily need all the time. It depends upon your market. But you could still be doing all the same good practices and just not have that label, I guess is the best way to put that. Did that answer your question?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, definitely. I should've asked this a little earlier, but what specifically do you grow here at All-Farm Organics.

Craig McClung: Oh, sure. Popcorn. We grow a–we call it a dynamite, but it's actually a South American version. Has a butter flavor to it, a large pop. There are so many different varieties of popcorn. So, that's the one that we grow best, that works best in our soil.

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And we sell seed stock as well as to the mill, so we sell to, like, Fedco Seeds and Southern Exposure Seeds. And then, for wheats, this year, we grew a variety called Alice, which is a white winter wheat. Last year, we grew turkey red and Appalachian white. And then, the other that we grew this year was the population, which was a mixture of new east, redeemer, which are two hard red winter wheats, and then we grew Appalachian white and a little bit of expedition red, which are also winter wheats. And I think there may have been–there was no Alice in that. There may have been a little bit of Alice in that. So, that's our main crops here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk about some of the challenges you've experienced doing this type of work?

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Maybe any that's particularly standout, like a moment of learning, that kind of thing?

Craig McClung: Oh, gosh. Yeah. I think crop-wise, it's just like paying attention to the seasons and, like, really believing after you plant it, that it really will grow. William is great for that. It's like, "Just wait. Just wait. It will come up." Because when you do vegetables, you throw a radish seed in the ground, and a radish pops up, like, right away. You put the corn in the ground, and it's like, "Where is it?" You come back a week later, and you still don't see any sprouts. I'll finally start digging up in the row to, like, "Okay, did it germinate? What stage is the seed? How close is it to coming out of the ground?" So, it's really rewarding when you actually see it emerge very evenly across the field, and you don't have any skips with your equipment.

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That's really kind of like, "Ah." That's a little ah-ha moment for myself. It's like, "Ooh, it worked. Okay, so I guess we really are starting to get the hang of this." Or when you go to harvest and nothing breaks down, which has not happened yet. [Laugh] Except with the corn picker. It's like, when you have a failure of an equipment, and you can fix it right away, that's always, like, a great satisfaction, and I think that's where maybe the engineering background comes from a little bit, being very hands-on with equipment definitely helps. You don't have to rely on somebody else. And I think most farmers, as a whole, if they've been farming for a long time, they just know how to fix these things. And that's just the way it works. But yeah. And then, it's interesting, like, I'm coming at it from a different angle than William a little bit.

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William still does a lot of in-the-field equipment running as far as, like, when you plant your wheat, there's a window of time in there when you run through called a time tiller. Essentially, it's just like a big back scratch, only it's tied to a tractor, and drives through the field, and tears up the old weeds or the weeds that are trying to sprout while the wheat is also sprouting at the same time. And it seems counterintuitive. It's like, "Wait a minute. I'm running this tractor across my field with this thing on the back that looks like a back scratch tearing up the soil. It's going to rip out my plants." Well, it does some, but not that many. So, I'm looking at it as I'm going to hurt my field or hurt my crop, and I'm also using fuel, which I really prefer to use as little as possible.

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Not so much for cost, but also just for, "Do we really need to be burning that much fuel and putting that much pollution?" And so, you read, and you read, and you read, and there's this couple in the Midwest that actually, their farm was big enough they could do different plots. So,

they did a study over years. Again, it's the long game, long time game. And they found that if they only tine tillered every other week versus every week, that they saved time to go do something else, saved fuel, and it didn't impact the yield of their wheat that much. So, William would, like, tine till every week. And I'm like, "Let's wait." And he's like, "I don't know." So, you have two people with different ideas. And this last time, I think I only tine tillered twice, where William probably would've tine tillered six times, and we still had a really good yield.

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But I do see by not doing that, there was more weed pressure. So, depending upon what crop we put in next, that weed pressure may be detrimental to whatever that crop is. The ah-ha moment on that one was, "Okay, maybe we really should spend the extra fuel and the extra time because weed suppression in an organic farming system, where you're not going to spray roundup or a geophosphate to wipe out your weeds, is really important. So, weed control through mechanical methods is probably more important. Is more important. Is, like, the key, as well as cover crop or interspersing at the same time. Throw another layer of–you can grow corn, and there are some people who will interplant clover through it to help suppress the weeds that are growing between the corn plants and in the rows.

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So, there's a lot of different approaches. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And can you talk about any major successes that stand out in your mind?

Craig McClung: I don't know, I guess the success of, like, actually having–like, this year, we're still kind of debating, like, was it a good year? The drought definitely hurt us hard. William, years ago, put in a separate well for irrigation, and we actually irrigated our corn.

Otherwise, I don't think we would've had the harvest that we had. So, I still think this year was a success, talking with the other farmers in the area whose corn didn't really come in very well.

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Ours came in, not as good as last year's, but compared to others in the area, I think we did really well. Same way with our wheat fields. This year, I think we're a better harvest than some of the others in the area. Now, I don't know if we have enough organic matter that was able to hold onto what little moisture we had for longer because we have better material in our soil than others. So, I would say yeah, I think our success this year was the fact that we sold everything we grew, which is a plus, which is always our goal. That's why when it comes time to plant, we want to make sure we can plant something that the market wants to buy. It's nice just to see stuff growing, which is really kind of awesome, but at the same time, we're not doing this just to do it, even though it is obviously not my main source of income because I don't see how, honestly, any farmer does it on the scale we're using.

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We only have 26 acres in production or in crop, so to say, that's cover crop included. So, at any one time, we only have seven acres in actual cash crop production. Like, we can't grow enough to be a sole-source farm to the mill. And we wouldn't want to do that anyway. As a miller, you want have a variety of farmers to grow from, work from in case somebody has a major crop failure. Then, you've lost your source of your material. So, yeah, if I can sell everything I grow, to me, that is a success. And if we have an equipment failure, if we can get it repaired in time to continue the harvest and not lose the crop–two years ago, we had an equipment failure that we couldn't fix quite right away.

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And again, farmers helping farmers, you hate to borrow somebody else's equipment, but we called a friend who's eight miles away and explained the situation, and it was Father's Day weekend. So, we're getting ready to harvest our wheat, and that's when our combine broke. Glenn said, "We'll, I'll bring my old All-Crop over." He came over and harvested with his equipment, and we developed a relationship, and then it's like, I go over and help him harvest buckwheat. We planted more corn for him this year than he's ever planted before. So, it is a collaboration between two farms and two farmers that, I think, you would see that in any farming community, not just here.

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So, to me, that's not necessarily a growing success, it's more of a success in camaraderie, learning from each other. I've learned how to do bees from Glenn. So, it's, like, always a learning process and trying to strengthen relationships. To me, that's kind of more important than what's coming out of the ground, but coming out of the ground is the way to do it, I guess.

Sarah Rodriguez: Virginia, for some, it's the mid-Atlantic, for some, it's the South. Could you talk a bit about especially the regenerative agricultural practices that you've seen, do you think there's a kind of southern connection to that? I know it can be very regionally specific. Especially as someone who's not from the South, coming into this environment.

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Craig McClung: Yeah. No, that's fine. Not to, like, diss what you're saying, but I–I think you'll see certain areas may handle it differently, but maybe that's based on their climate and their soil. But across the country, and in Europe even, I think regenerative agriculture is a growing

movement. I don't think it is, I know it is. It's definitely a growing movement. There are, like with any vocation–I don't know if I really want to call it a vocation, but there are people who this is their real business, their whole source of income. There are people out there that are teaching people how to do this, how to shift from conventional farming to a totally regenerative agriculture farming practice, trying to get people to get away from using bio-sludge, or chicken litters, and things like that and actually do cover crop method.

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Or other sources of that nitrogen fertilizer, like soy-based nitrogen is one way to do it versus a commercially produced product from wherever the phosphates come from. So, yeah, I think it's an increasing trend. I don't think it's necessarily mid-Atlantic. I think you have movements within certain regions. Like the VABF, the Virginia Association of Biological Farmers. That started by a group of likeminded farmers wanting to share information. And it's like, "How do we do this? Well, let's go find out. Let's go find somebody else who knows more about this."

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And I think you have–like, the Common Grain Alliance. That's a local area. There is a similar group in New England, in New York, another one in Maine. I was just on vacation–not just, but this year, we were on vacation in Seattle, and there's a whole movement in Washington and Oregon, just like there's a group in California, and I imagine there's probably something in the Midwest as well. But that is such a whole different agricultural business. That is, like, where Big Ag really is. You have hundreds of thousands of acres in wheat production versus maybe 10,000 acres in Virginia in wheat product, so it's really apples and oranges from the Midwest to the two

ends of the country, either end of the country, I think. Virginia was originally a strong wheat state, and then as the Midwest developed, that became the area for wheat.

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So, wheat disappeared from the mid-Atlantic area, or certainly the Virginia area. And now, it's coming back through the Common Grain Alliance and things like that. Farmers looking to grow something different. But as far as the regenerative being regional, I think there are regional groups, but on the country as a whole, I think the regenerative agriculture idea is really growing, either through farmsteading people, which is another growing movement, or just farmers wanting to get away from the high cost possibly of commercial fertilization, fertilizers. Not that cover crops are less expensive, but you may see the benefit of improving your soil that way because there's longer-lasting impacts through soil regeneration, through plants versus a top dressing of biosolids or something like that.

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And there are so many different ways of biosolids now, different things coming out where there's, like, the forever chemical traces and things like that. So, I guess people become aware of that, and the farmers become aware of that, and have an interest, and realize, "Ooh, this really is not good for my soil," and shy away from that. Maybe you'll see regenerative demand pick up that way. Or you see the marketplace try to start to drive it. That's a whole bigger picture as to how that all happens. Does that kind of line up with that question?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure. We're kind of wrapping up, but is there anything that I didn't ask about that you want to talk about?

Craig McClung: No, I don't think so.

Sarah Rodriguez: No? Okay.

Craig McClung: This is kind of all new to me. So, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Well, thank you so much.

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Craig McClung: You're welcome.

[End]