Heather Coiner

Little Hat Creek Farm - Roseland, Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's November 22, 2024. I'm here in Roseland, Virginia. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Heather Coiner: Sure. I'm Heather Coiner. I'm also in Roseland, Virginia. And I'm here to give an oral history.

Sarah Rodriguez: Great. Would you share when and where you were born?

Heather Coiner: Sure. I was born in Palm Desert, California, February 14, 1978.

Sarah Rodriguez: And who did you grow up with in your household?

Heather Coiner: Yeah, I was an only child with my mom and my dad. And I grew up not in Palm Desert, but in the mountains above Palm Desert, which is now Santa Rosa National Park.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And were you there kind of throughout your childhood, or did you move around?

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Heather Coiner: I was there throughout my childhood, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what did your parents do?

Heather Coiner: My mom was a microbiologist at the local hospitals, and my dad did some odd jobs when I was younger, but mostly was a stay-at-home dad.

Sarah Rodriguez: And could you tell me what food was like in your family growing up?

Heather Coiner: My food kind of occupied the extremes. So, it was either a can of Progresso soup, or we were making noodles from scratch. So, there were a few things that were sort of "normal meals," like spaghetti with meat sauce. But for the most part, it was pretty standard convenience food or, "We're going to grind some grain and make some bread." [Laugh]

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Or, "We're going to buy a 25-pound sack of beans and make chili like that." So, it was a little bit of the extremes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Did your parents have a garden, or did they grow any of their own food or anything?

Heather Coiner: They tried. They tried. The house was built on decomposed granite, so there wasn't really soil to speak of, and it's a desert climate, so anything that looked like it had been watered was fiercely targeted by the local wildlife. My father had originally planned raised beds for the backyard, but that was quickly abandoned in favor of a six-sided garden shelter with hardware cloth.

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But even the lizards found a way to get in there and eat the radishes that were growing in containers on a shelf. [Laugh] So, it was abandoned. But my parents probably were part of, in retrospect, the 1970s back-to-the-land, homestead-on-five-acres movement.

Sarah Rodriguez: And is your family from California originally?

Heather Coiner: No, my father was born in Carthage, Missouri. He grew up in Arkansas. And when he was a young man, he moved to California. And my mother was born in Idaho to a silver miner. And when the silver mines dried up, her family moved to Southern California to join the post-war construction boom, so my grandfather became a contractor.

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Sarah Rodriguez: When you were younger, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Heather Coiner: I thought I did. [Laugh] As probably every little kid thinks they knew what they wanted to be when they grew up. I knew that I loved animals, and I really thought I wanted to be a veterinarian. But that's not how it turned out. But I did end up in science and natural sciences.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about that process, what that journey looked like?

Heather Coiner: Yeah. So, I think the veterinary trajectory got derailed when I got music scholarships for college, so I decided to go that route.

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And I went to UCLA for two and a half years, three years, I guess, total, on a music scholarship.

Sarah Rodriguez: What kind of music?

Heather Coiner: I played bassoon. And I decided I do not want to do that and went back to biology, but biology at UCLA was all medicine- and genetics-oriented, not really the plants, and animals, and ecology that I was looking for, so I transferred to the University of Toronto, which, at the time, still had a botany and zoology program. And I took a zoology class my first year there and quickly realized that I actually really just wanted to study plants, so I ended up with a botany degree. [Laugh]

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Sarah Rodriguez: And then, what did you do after that?

Heather Coiner: Then, after that, I went to Germany for three years. And it was originally supposed to be just one year, but my boyfriend at the time got a postdoc in Munich, and he said, "Hey, do you want to come with me?" And I'm like, "Sure." So, we went, and we had a wonderful time there. And I got a job at the Technical University of Munich in a food lab. So, there's a lot of food technology in Germany around trying to– in this particular lab, they were really interested in natural flavor pathways and identifying the enzymes that generate flavor so that you can transform yeasts with those enzymes and then create sort of "natural flavors" in large quantities.

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And strawberry flavor was the focus of this particular lab. And I got hired because of my botany background. And it was a great experience.

Sarah Rodriguez: You were there for three years, then did you come back to California?

Heather Coiner: No, then I went back to Toronto to start a PhD. I did that for six years and graduated in 2012 with a degree in plant ecology. And then, after that, I worked for a year part time in education research at the University and at the Undergraduate Writing Center.

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And the other part of my time, I started a little bread CSA out of the city park, and that was sort of my way of testing whether I wanted to go on and become a teacher, because I didn't really want to do the research. So, "Do I want to do education and teaching, or do I want to get out of academia altogether and start making food for people?"

Sarah Rodriguez: How was that interest started? And why bread specifically?

Heather Coiner: It emerged partway through grad school, when I had a bit of a crisis, and I really needed to do something where I could see results. I was having a hard time getting results out of my dissertation, so I needed something that I had control over.

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And bread had always been– yeasted anything had always been a big problem for me in the kitchen, and I felt like I was a relatively good cook and relatively good baker, but anything having to do with yeast was always a dud for me. So, I was like, "This is the problem I'm going to solve. I'm going to get this because people have been making bread for thousands of years. It can't be that hard." [Laugh] And so, I just made a point of figuring it out. And then, I was making a lot of bread, so I was giving away a lot of bread. And at first, it wasn't that good, but then it ended up getting to be pretty good, and people started saying, "You know you could sell this." And I was like, "Oh, I guess I could." [Laugh]

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And I was lucky to be in Toronto, where there had been a culture of public wood-fired ovens, and I lived close to Dufferin Grove Park, which had one of these ovens. Two of them, actually. And the city actually hired bakers to bake bread in them every week for the farmer's market in Dufferin Grove. And I got up the courage one day to go and ask them if they could teach me how to use the wood-fired ovens. And they said, "Actually, we have a grant to allow you to use our community kitchen space to run your own little business. Would you like to try it?" [Laugh] And

I said yes, not knowing what I was getting into. So, that's how my first little bread business, which was called Pannier Bread Company, was born.

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And so, I had 30 members, and each one of them got either two half loaves or two full loaves every week, and it was delivered by bicycle. And that ran for 20 weeks about, 20, 21 weeks.

Sarah Rodriguez: And you said you were at this crossroads about what you wanted to do. What path did you end up going down?

Heather Coiner: Oh, definitely making food for people. It was way more fulfilling, and I was able to achieve a lot of the things I thought I was going to achieve with academia, and without all of the intense red tape and roadblocks that academia can throw up for you. So, I just really liked the idea of having a business and being able to make it the way I wanted it to be.

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And whatever I could imagine, I could potentially do. In reality, I've learned, 10 years in, that there are still constraints on that, but it's not anywhere like academia, where there are a lot of things that are out of your control.

Sarah Rodriguez: And how did you end up in Virginia?

Heather Coiner: That's a great question. Right around the time when I started baking bread, I also started playing old-time music. It was another one of the things where I was like, "Okay, well, I'm going to go back to music because that's really grounding, and I've gotten away from it for too long." I thought it would be okay for me to just be a listener. I was a very active listener and appreciator of live music, but it just wasn't doing it for me.

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So, I was like, "I actually do need to play some music, but I don't want to do the classical thing." I thought I wanted to learn bluegrass, but what I really wanted to learn was old-time music. Which I was lucky enough to have a teacher who recognized that right away and steered me in that direction. And there's, funnily enough, a wonderful American old-time music community in Toronto that plays Appalachian string band music. And so, I started attending those weekly jams and found my community, basically. And they attend a yearly festival in Clifftop, West Virginia, that is basically just a week of hanging out with your friends and playing old-time music.

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And that was life-changing for me. And that first year, that festival was the same week as the Ecological Society of America Festival, which I was presenting in in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh's not too far from West Virginia, so I thought I could do both. And I forgot to look at the map and realized that there were no north-south highways between where I was in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, nor were there north-south bus routes, or train routes, or anything [Laugh] connecting those two places. So, I happened to be looking on my computer at the one, like, Wi-Fi hotspot in the office at the music festival, explaining to someone my situation, when somebody overheard me and said, "Well, I can give you a ride to Charleston. Can you get a flight from Charleston to Pittsburgh?"

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And it turned out to be the Minister for Interior Affairs for West Virginia [Laugh] who was there, and he gave me a ride, and I paid $600 for that flight to get me there. And the whole time at the conference, I was like, "These are not my people. Get me out of here. I do not want to be here. I do not want to be like them. Get me back to West Virginia." And so, a lot of the people that I met–to get back to your question–were from Virginia, or from West Virginia, or from North Carolina. And so, that raised my awareness of the possibility of this area as being a place I wanted to live.

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But then, when I graduated, I took some time to travel because I just wanted to see if there were other places. And I went out west to an old-time festival out there and met some people in Oregon, and Washington, and BC, and that was really cool. So, I was sort of weighing the two regions as a possibility because I'm a western girl. And then, around that time, I connected with the person who's now my husband. And so, we sort of had a really loose long-distance relationship. It barely could even be called a relationship. We just sort of stayed connected. And he called me at some point in 2012, that year that I was baking and also teaching at the University, and he said, "Hey, so would you want to move to Virginia with me and start a farm bakery?" [Laugh]

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And I said yes. And so, that's basically how– and he's originally from Indiana. Ben is his name. And he also was interested in this region for the music community and also, at the time, there were a lot of young people doing cool things with land and food here, which interested us. So, the combination of those three things, plus the proximity to good markets, the D.C. area, Richmond area, Charlottesville, etc., made the prospect of having a land-based food business imaginable.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me how Common Grain Alliance fit into all this once you got here?

Heather Coiner: Yeah. So, when I was baking in Toronto, I was able to drive out of the city for three hours to a local mill and pick up a lot of my flour. And I just assumed that that was going to before possible in Virginia because it's a very agrarian landscape. I mean, Thomas Jefferson. Come on. Everywhere you look, there's grain growing in fields, and combines, and siloes. Surely, there would be somebody milling grain for people to eat here. But it was really hard to find. And the closest mill that had usable flour for me was in North Carolina, in Asheville. I was like, "What? Something is wrong here. Why is there not food-grade grain and flour available in Virginia, of all places?"

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And my thinking on that was heavily influenced by my friend, Michael Grantz, who now goes by Miguel, who, the year after we started Little Hat Creek Farm. He and his then-partner started Great Day Gardens in Forest, Virginia, also a farm bakery. He was also interested in local grain. And in the winter of 2018 when we were baking together, we were just commiserating how we had to team up to buy a pallet of flour, pay the freight, and all this stuff, and it wasn't even all that local anyway. And Michael was like, "I'm pretty sure there are farmers here who are interested in doing that. And I know a miller in Roanoke who wants to mill local grain. These people just need to know each other and get together."

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And I was like, "It sounds like what we need is an organization." And he's like, "Yeah. You're right." And so, we sort of looked at each other, and, like, high-fived, and were like, "We're going to start this." And he was like, "Okay, I'll make some calls," and I was like, "I'll make some calls, too." And we got 13 people in the basement of the Waynesboro Library in March of 2018 together to be like, "I don't know what we're doing, but we all are here because we think that there needs to be more support for food-grade grain in Virginia," at the time. And there were farmers, and there were millers, and there were bakers, and there were just some interested citizens there. And that's how it started.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me what those early days of it were like, trying to get the ball rolling, having all these different people with these different interests coming together?

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Heather Coiner: It was really just magical. It didn't take much to get the ball rolling. The ball kind of rolled itself. A lot of the early meetings were just informal grain exchanges. People would, after the meeting, offload bags of grain from one vehicle to another or, like, set up phone calls to discuss the next season's crop. A lot of the informal networking that we were hoping would happen did happen without really the organization doing anything other than just calling a meeting. And so, it was kind of easy in the early days because people were just like, "Oh, you're interested in food for humans? Me, too!"

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There was a lot of energy in those early days, and we would have monthly meetings. And when we became Common Grain Alliance that summer, one of the early discussions was, "Is this just a Virginia group, or is this more of a regional group? And if so, what's the region?" And we already had people from North Carolina and West Virginia in the room, and then they were like, "Well, it shouldn't be a Virginia group because we're here." So, it became a mid-Atlantic group.

And I think that makes a lot of sense for a grain-focused group because there's a wide enough region that crops that have a drought in one summer can potentially thrive in another part of the region and vice versa.

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So, there's a little bit of built-in hedging for the crops in a larger region. And there was also a void that was the size of the mid-Atlantic in sort of the larger national grain movement. At the time that we were starting Common Grain Alliance, there were already grain movements in the South, led by that mill that I mentioned earlier in Asheville with Jennifer Lapidus, Carolina Ground. And in the Northeast, there was Maine Grains, there was the Northeast Grain Growers, NYC Grows had their local grain movement happening. But from sort of Pennsylvania to North Carolina, there was nothing going on.

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So, it seemed to make sense to position Common Grain Alliance to fill that void. And I think that was one of the main decisions that we had to make.

Sarah Rodriguez: Because this project is focusing on regenerative agriculture, what's been your exposure to that concept? What ways do you think it's played into some of the work that you've done previously with Common Grain Alliance?

Heather Coiner: In 2018 when we started, regenerative agriculture, even the term wasn't really that common. People were still thinking in terms of organic or conventional. And this was another early discussion.

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"Are we going to allow conventionally grown grain or growers in our group?" And we decided that we weren't going to say no to anybody who was interested because conversations are the way that you promote your ideas, not putting up walls. So, we also had growers in the room with us who were conventional growers, who had won soil health award and soil conservation awards for their practices, and they made the extremely valid point that there's a spectrum of growing practices, and that a conventional grower can have really good practices, or even different practices, within different areas of the farm, depending on how much they're paying attention to their land.

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And that is valid, and a lot of people make that choice, and it should not be discounted. And similarly, organic farmers can use all OMRI-listed products, but till the bejesus out of their fields, and orient their fields incorrectly so that it causes erosion, and not cover them in the wintertime, and do all kinds of things that are really bad for the soil, and still call themselves organic. So, really, the important thing is to understand a particular farmer's growing practices, and the organization's role then could be to educate what practices are good for the soil within all of their different types of growing practices.

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Because grains are a really important component of regenerating soil, so really highlighting that and identifying ways that both conventional and organic growers can use grain to improve their overall farm soil health, while at the same time giving space for people who have conventional practices but want to improve their practices and need a market to help justify that. So, we wanted to provide a market for conventional and organic grain growers who were interested in not using glyphosate to kill their crops, dry down their crops for harvest, who wanted to grow rye and winter wheat instead of just spring wheat to keep the soil covered in the wintertime, and to try growing some quick summer annual, like, pseudo-grain crops like buckwheat and millet because we can create a market for that.

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You can't sell those on the commodity market, but if you want to have something to grow in your fields other than corn or soybeans in the summertime, then if you're going to grow millet, or sorghum, or buckwheat, you've got to have a market for it. That's how Common Grain Alliance sort of positioned itself to be able to work with growers of all sizes and all different growing practices in the service of just overall farm soil health.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about some of the challenges that Common Grain Alliance experienced as it was getting together and continuing on?

Heather Coiner: Sure. One challenge is the size of the membership. So, the energy of those initial meetings, pre-pandemic, was driven by in-person meetings. And they just propelled themselves. Then, the pandemic struck, and we switched to remote meetings, like everybody else. That was much harder. And 2020 lined up with the year that I stepped down as the chair, and we hired a part-time executive director.

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And in retrospect, myself and the board didn't do enough to prepare the organization for a change in leadership, so it definitely floundered with that leadership transition. And it has now recovered and is thriving, thankfully. But dealing with the scale of the membership, how to maintain connection and energy from North Carolina to Pennsylvania, and then just common problems of growth, leadership transfer, securing funding, sort of general funds as opposed to just, like, project-related soft money are probably ongoing concerns.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. You mentioned some of the early energy and success of the organization. Can you highlight any other successes that stand out in your mind?

Heather Coiner: I think the Common Grain Alliance has definitely achieved one of the goals, which is just raising awareness about grain. The existence of the organization, and its presence at farming conferences, and its presence at D.C. farmer's markets, and on social media has really, I think, achieved the goal of people thinking, "Oh, yeah. Huh. Like, I can get local milk, and local vegetables, and local meat, and locally baked bread. But where's that grain coming from?"

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And that's brilliant. And the other major success, I think, is that there's been a proliferation of new businesses that are intentionally using local grain, from distilleries and breweries, to small bakeries, to cafes. And that's amazing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Functionally, what does Common Grain Alliance kind of do now? They raise awareness, it sounds like there's some education happening. What other kinds of activities do they do?

Heather Coiner: That's probably a better question for the current leadership of Common Grain Alliance, so I don't really want to speak to that.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Okay, that makes sense. Could you talk about that process of you coming down as chair of the organization, what that process looked like?

Heather Coiner: Well, I was naive, and I thought that my term was coming to an end. And I thought that my job preparing the organization for a leadership transition just entailed hiring somebody whose responsibility would be to lead the organization. So, here's an executive director, and there's a board that existed before and can help train the executive director, and we had all of our documentation, and I assumed that was all that was needed.

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But I didn't really reckon with another resignation on the board happening, so the board was sort of left with actually not that much operational knowledge, as much as I was hoping. And I had not prepared the documentation in a way that– myself and the board hadn't prepared the documentation in a way that made it easy for someone else to figure out what was going on. What grants do we have? Like, what are the projects? Like, who are our partners? Where's the money for this coming from?

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How do I invoice this grant? All the sort of things that you need to know to run an organization were there, but unless you understood how all the pieces connected, it was really hard for her to figure it out. And I still feel really bad about that, but it's a learning experience, and I'm grateful that the organization survived. And I'm grateful to the board at the time for keeping it afloat. They did a lot of work to pick up the slack. I could've been more available for the transition, but I was burnt out and needed a break. I had to have a clean break. And that's how it was.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure. What were some of the projects that the organization kind of took on early in its life? You mentioned connecting people, but what other kind of initiatives did y'all take on?

Heather Coiner: Well, from early meetings, it became clear that farmers were in the room who wanted to grow grain but were like, "I don't really know what varieties bakers want. What do y'all want?" And, "You want these heirloom varieties, but they grow really tall, and they're going to lodge in the first storm. How do I deal with that?"

Sarah Rodriguez: That's just when they fall over, right?

Heather Coiner: When they fall over, yeah. And so, it seemed really apparent that there needed to be a farmer education component right off the bat.

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"What about cleaning? How do I clean the grain? What do you expect? Straight from the combine, is that cool?" [Laugh] So, there needed to be a farmer education component, like, "This is how you grow food-grade grain. These are the tests, and this is the type of cleaning equipment that you need. This is, if you already have a livestock enterprise, how you can fit grain into your livestock enterprise to help soak up some of those extra nutrients that you always have to deal with. And then, all you have to do to sell it is to do this." So, that was a CER Education Grant that we won. That was our first big grant, it was a $50,000 grant. And we won it in 2020, for funding year 2020.

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And we had planned all kinds of in-person educational events, which got kiboshed with the COVID-19, and so it turned into a series of videos, some webinars, and a handbook. So, I was the PI on that project, and it got some extensions, got a year extension because of the pandemic, and was finalized last year. And so, the handbook, most of it, is online, and there's a YouTube channel and some webinar archives online. So, that was a big project, the Farmer Education Project. There were also some small funding sources. There was one from Go Virginia for, like, a local food network kind of wholesale buying software.

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And then, the next big projects were also USDA grants. One of them was targeted at consumers, raising consumer awareness, and so that is the funding that brought the grain stand to D.C. farmer's markets. And that's been really wonderful. They've created all kinds of consumer-facing promotional materials, educational materials about grain and what's available in the mid-Atlantic, why you would even care about local grain. And so, all those materials are really wonderful.

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And I think the piece that is– you'd have to ask Madelyn, but I believe now, there is also funding for logistics, which is another big hurdle. It's kind of like, "You got the farmers on board, you got the consumers on board. How do you get the grain from the farm to the consumer?" All of the, like, refrigeration, milling hubs, transportation, centralized testing. Is there shared equipment? To what extent is the Common Grain Alliance going to facilitate all of that? What is needed? Where? So, all of that planning and research now I think has funding, too, which is amazing.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. What kind of work did you go into after Common Grain Alliance?

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Heather Coiner: Well, I went back to what I'm doing now, which is Little Hat Creek Farm. So, I'm still a wood-fired baker, and my husband and I run this business, which is vegetables and plant starts on the one hand, and wood-fired bread and pastry on the other. After I left Common Grain Alliance, I started a line of dry goods or snacks that is local grain-focused and co-branded with the Common Grain Alliance to raise awareness about grain. People eating crackers, you're eating local grain, and that's been fun. We've had things like rye chocolate chip cookies, and oat graham crackers, and things like that.

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So, that's sort of my way of continuing to contribute to the mission of the Common Grain Alliance. And I'm also still working on the last couple chapters of the handbook, too.

Sarah Rodriguez: Are there any favorite memories that you have from your time working in the Common Grain Alliance that stand out?

Heather Coiner: I loved the early board meetings. They were really fun. The early board was just a great bunch of people. And I would take my twins, who were 1 and 2 at the time. Yeah, it was just really fun. Like, getting together with friends and dreaming big, and just talking about what's possible and how to get there was super energizing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Love that. Where do you see kind of the future of your work going into? Any plans? I know that's maybe a tough question. [Laugh]

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Heather Coiner: That's a great question. Well, my work completing the CER grant and learning about the role of grain in soil health, and learning a lot more about soil health has made me really interested in improving the overall soil health on my own farm. I'm not really interested in growing grain here because the infrastructure is too daunting for me, and we really don't have enough land if I don't want to harvest it myself by hand, so I don't really want to do that. There are plenty of other people doing wonderful things with grain. But my dream for this land is to add perennial fruit.

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And if I were to have more time, that's what I would focus my energy on. Still in service of the soil, but with fruit.

Sarah Rodriguez: Because Common Grain Alliance is a mid-Atlantic group, could you tell me what your thoughts are on Virginia as part of the mid-Atlantic versus part of the South? Especially as someone who's not from here. And how does regenerative agriculture or the agricultural practices play into that?

Heather Coiner: That's a really good question. I remember when we were looking up the boundaries of the mid-Atlantic, there were any number of maps you could pick and choose from that would say, "This is the mid-Atlantic."

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And it was frustrating because in some places, on some maps, Virginia was not part of it, and in other maps, North Carolina was part of it. So, we decided that your regional identity as a business or as a farmer is up to you. And it's probably driven by your practices and your markets more than anything. What is your workflow, and what is the cultural milieu that you're working in? And how does that align with what you're actually doing? Two farms could be side by side, and one could think of themselves as being a southern farmer, and another one could think of themselves as being a mid-Atlantic farmer.

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[cat meows] Yes, Mishka. Your voice is preserved for posterity. It's really more of a cultural definition rather than geographic, I think.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. As we're wrapping up, is there anything I didn't ask about that you want to mention, any stories, anything like that?

Heather Coiner: No, I think you asked really good questions.

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

Heather Coiner: Yeah, thank you, Sarah.

[End]