

Oral Histories of Tompkins County

Archival Finding Aid

The History Center in Tompkins County
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2018 - Agricultural Imaginaries

The “Agricultural Imaginaries” Oral History Project includes sixteen oral histories recorded in 2018 by undergraduate students of the Cornell University English Department through the course “Cornell English Class 1158 – Agricultural Imaginaries: Farmers and Farmland in American Culture” taught by Professor Molly MacVeagh.

Interviews with:

Tyler Beck* (45 minutes)

Tyler Beck owns Beck farms, which was started by his great-grandfather in 1920. He discusses his veterinary work with the cows on the farm and his employees, most of whom are Mexican immigrants. He also speaks about the evolution of the dairy industry, which started with small, family-owned farms that now need to grow into larger operations to make a profit. Finally, Tyler Beck explains his choice to stay close to home and inherit the family’s farm rather than move away and go into a different field.

- *Recorded 10/17/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-17_Beck-Tyler*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-17_Beck-Tyler_Transcript*

Jen Bokaer-Smith* (36 minutes)

Jen Bokaer-Smith, Senior Associate Director of the Learning Strategies Center at Cornell, discusses her role at West Haven Farm and how she got there. Her agricultural journey began with meeting her husband at an agriculture class at UC Berkeley and attending the Northeast Organic Farming Association Conference with him, which inspired them to start an organic farm. She discusses the importance of organic farming as well as its limitations in comparison with conventional agriculture and her hopes, successes, and challenges for the farm.

- *Recorded 10/31/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-31_Smith-Jen-Bokaer*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-31_Smith-Jen-Bokaer_Transcript*

Brian Caldwell* (38 minutes)

Brian Caldwell discusses his research at Cornell comparing organic to conventional approaches and improving the practices that farmers use within an organic framework. He shares his observations of modern farming trends and his critique of genetic engineering, which seeks to solve problems that may be better approached using systems analysis.

- *Recorded 10/27/2018*

- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-27_Caldwell-Brian*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-27_Caldwell-Brian_Transcript*

Dan Carey*

Dan Carey's great-grandfather bought a farm in Groton in 1898, the same one he now runs. He discusses his family's history with Carey Farm, from the farm's transition from horses to tractors after World War II to his grandfather's government positions representing Northeast dairy production, including on committees formed by President Kennedy. Dan Carey describes the farm's procedures and infrastructure during his time in business, beginning in the 1970s. Finally, he speaks about employing immigrant workers from Mexico and Guatemala and his reactions to President Trump's immigration policies.

- *Recorded 10/29/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-29_Carey-Dan*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-29_Carey-Dan_Transcript*

Gabriel Carpenter* (55 minutes)

Gabriel Carpenter grew up on a farm that his grandfather bought shortly after World War II. He now works for Keystone Mills, a family-owned feed manufacturer in Seneca County, as a Dairy Nutritionist and Dairy Sales Manager. He speaks to the role of small, family-operated farms in both the global food system and local communities and discusses the misconceptions about organic farming versus conventional agriculture. Finally, he describes economic problems across agricultural industries between 2016 and 2018, both domestically and internationally.

- *Recorded 10/22/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-22_Carpenter-Gabriel*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-22_Carpenter-Gabriel_Transcript*

Steve Cummins* (45 minutes)

Steve Cummins' family is from Illinois, where they go back generations of orchards, but his orchard, Indian Creek Farm, is in Ithaca. He discusses his decision to go into agriculture after receiving a degree in science education and his process of learning about farming through work with his father and brother. He also speaks to the operations of Indian Creek as a U-Pick retail program and his philosophy of farming.

- *Recorded 10/19/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-19_Cummins-Steve*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-19_Cummins-Steve_Transcript*

Erica Frenay* (29 minutes)

Erica Frenay discusses how she got involved in agriculture, from volunteering on a farm as an undergraduate student at Cornell, to doing farm nonprofit work in Portland, Oregon, to deciding to run her own farm. She also speaks to how she uses her farm as a laboratory to develop methods to teach beginning farmers in the Cornell Small Farms Program, as well as the many facets of organic farming.

- *Recorded 11/3/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-11-3_Frenay-Erica*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-11-3_Frenay-Erica_Transcript*

Fred and Pat Howe (31 minutes)

- *Recorded 10/22/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-22_Howe-Fred-and-Pat*

Christianne White* (36 minutes)

Christianne White of Steep Hollow Farm reflects on her childhood visiting her grandparents' farm, which she now owns. She started with a sustainable chicken project, which was not profitable but connected the farm to the community. Since then, Christianne White's farm has sold trees, built a sound garden, and operated rental houses, but they are aspiring to a larger, sustainable farming operation to make use of the land.

- *Recorded 10/18/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-18_White-Christianne*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-18_White-Christianne_Transcript*

Joanna Green* (34 minutes)

Joanna Green, Founding Director of Groundswell, discusses her work with the Farming Alternatives program at Cornell and the pressures and limitations she faced from the university. After working for Cornell, she developed the Groundswell Center, which was designed to grow a sustainable food system and train beginning farmers. Joanna Green reflects on the work she did with Groundswell, especially in confronting racist practices and inequity and building an organization that prioritizes farmers of color. Finally, she discusses her current political activity and volunteer work with the Tompkins County Poor People's Campaign.

- *Recorded in 2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018_Green-Joanna*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018_Green-Joanna_Transcript*

Skip Hardie* (67 minutes)

Skip Hardie's family bought Walnut Ridge Dairy in Lansing, NY, in 1951. Since then, the farm has grown to encompass four barns, three milking parlors, and 1,600 cows. Skip Hardie discusses the farm operations, leadership, and the effect of declining milk prices on Walnut Ridge Dairy's financial situation. He also discusses his opinions on GMOs and organic farming.

- *Recorded 10/21/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-21_Hardie-Skip*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-21_Hardie-Skip_Transcript*

Thor Oeschner* (85 minutes)

Thor Oeschner discusses his experiences as a mechanic and farmworker in Europe and the United States before renting land and starting his own farm on 400 acres. For a while, his farm was one of the only farms in New York State that grew wheat. His grain has been sold to bakeries in Ithaca, New York City, Boston, and Chicago and processed into beer.

- *Recorded in 2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018_Oeschner-Thor*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018_Oeschner-Thor_Transcript*

Mark Renodin* (28 minutes)

Mark Renodin, owner of Six Mile Creek Vineyard, discusses his unexpected transition from working in the restaurant industry to buying a vineyard and

selling wine. He describes the process of producing wine, from pruning grapes at the beginning of the season to harvesting and processing them at the end of the year. Mark Renodin also gives information about the variety of wines he sells, his favorite wines and experiences of owning a vineyard, and the wine industry in the Finger Lakes region.

- *Recorded 10/24/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-24_Renodin-Mark*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-24_Renodin-Mark_Transcript*

Monika Roth* (11 minutes)

Monika Roth is an Agriculture Specialist at Cornell Cooperative Extension. She discusses her first job in Ithaca, a campus job in plant pathology, and her work with Cornell Cooperative Extension since then. She reflects on the growth of Cornell Cooperative Extension's agriculture work, especially the alliances it has created among farmers, such as the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty and Finger Lakes Cheese Alliance. Monika Roth also recalls several books that inspired her work.

- *Recorded in 2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018_Roth-Monica*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018_Roth-Monica_Transcript*

Eric C. Shatt* (29 minutes)

Eric Shatt discusses his 14-acre certified organic and biodynamic farm, Redbyrd Orchard, whose primary commercial product is hard cider. He also speaks to his work with the Cornell Research Farms, which involves growing fruit, conducting research, and teaching. Finally, Eric Shatt discusses the differences between owning a farm and working collaboratively on the Cornell Orchards.

- *Recorded 10/22/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-22_Shatt-Eric*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-22_Shatt-Eric_Transcript*

John Wertis* (47 minutes)

John Wertis' first experiences with farming were in the summers between his years of high school, which he spent working on a dairy farm near Delaware County. He continued to work on farms as a Cornell student, but changed his course of study from Agriculture to English and Science Education. John Wertis later bought 120 acres of farmland near Trumansburg NY, which he has used for various part-time farming projects.

- *Recorded 10/26/2018*
- *Audio File: OHTC_2018-10-26_Wertis-John*
- *Transcript File: OHTC_2018-10-26_Wertis-John_Transcript*

CITATION FOR THE COLLECTION

“Agricultural Imaginaries” Oral History Project, 16 oral histories recorded in 2018 by undergraduate students of the Cornell University English Department, The History Center in Tompkins County. Oral Histories of Tompkins County Audio Archives, Ithaca NY, 2021.

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