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Interview with Bruce Rickard

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Researchers Name: Tim Greenwood

Event: Interview with Bruce Rickard

Place: Middle Ground

Co-workers Present: none

This is Timothy Greenwood , interviewing Bruce Rickard in Gambier, Ohio. It is February 16, 2007. We are going to be talking about the grass-feed beef local food production, beef and the future of the local food systems.

TG: How long have you raised cattle?

BR: we have had cattle on the farm off and on for about 20 years. The real business of raising grass-feed meat didn't really start for us until about eight years ago we are mainly a sheep operation and we have been farming for twenty years. We've had two, this is the second farm we have been on. Sheep are the principle commodity that we produce. We sell about 1000 lambs a year. All of the beef that we raise is direct marketed.

TG: Since you raise sheep is there any benefit in raising sheep as opposed to raising cattle?

BR: Sheep and cattle have different grazing habits and its not just a matter of the sheep grazing shorter, they graze more selectively the graze a different mix of grass and shrubs but if you have them together you can control what your pastures look like. We also control the time that they graze so that they are never in one field for more than three days and if you alternate sheep and cattle then the species distribution in the pins stay about the same. If you keep grazing sheep you'll get blue grass and white clover because ultimately they eat everything else out and it can't compete anymore.

TG: How big is your operation?

FR: about 280 some acres about 180 of it is grass. Right now we have about 750 ewes and about 50 cattle. We have 100 laying hens, four dogs, one cat, two kids.

TG: what are the benefits of grass-feed cattle as opposed to none grass-feed?

FR: Health. Health benefits to people who eat the meat. its one biggie they are higher in omega 3 fatty acids. And the American diet is way to full Omega 6 fatty acids and actually to have a healthy diet they should be balanced. Its also more healthy for the animal because they evolved to eat grass not huge chunks of feed an corn. Their systems have evolved to handle the grass better and in fact feed lots where they feed lots of grain and then grass. Feeding from those pins can make them sick and equally they can make us sick. But if they eat grass the rate for animal sickness is lower. But when the meat is processed there is a always a slight risk of contamination.

BR: the whole idea of grass feed meat is that the sheep and the cattle are taking cellulose that we can't use that we can't digest and they are making it into something we can use. There is a lot of farmland that should not be used to grow crops and that could still be used to raise grass and you can still raise sheep there on steeply sloped areas or around creeks that you wouldn't want to farm.

FR: or rocky ground or places you wouldn't want to take a combine

TG: are you members of any farm associations, or anything like that?
We are members of the farmers union, we are members of OEFFA which is Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, and IFO, innovative farmers of Ohio.

FR: when we first started farming we went to every organic, sustainable conference we could get our hands on but we've been doing it for a while now that we have been getting diminishing returns. We are pretty private people we don't go to that many anymore.

TG: are your animals certified organic?

FR: we are not certified organic and there are a couple of reasons for that. One is the expense because right now to be certified organic you are talking about close to 1000 dollars in certification fees, so there is some cost involved but more than that the organic label doesn't mean that much to us. What means something to us is that we sell our food to the people next door as opposed to some organic farm out in North Dakota who is shipping us their organic beef. I think its instead of having a label that people can look and saying that this means its ok it much better to have personal contact with the people who are eating your food. And with the organic, there are loopholes so it doesn't necessarily mean its better. And we don't want to buy into that.

BR: and on our farm we have an open door policy, so people can see where their food came from which is more important than anything.

TG: how long have you guys lived in the area?

FR: 20 years

BR: we ended up selling that one and we have been at this one for about 12 years

FR: we learned how to farm out of books basically. He has a phenomenal memory and he had be reading books about farming for ages. And so we learned from books and from trial and error.

BR: we were actually able to sale our house in New Jersey and were able to use the money and buy a farm here. The difference in the cost of living easily made up for it. Yeah, but if were going to move back there that would be a problem... you can't go in reverse.

FR: where would we go from here... what North Dakota?

BR: in North Dakota you would have to have 2000 acres instead of 300

TG: so what are your feeling on large scale commercial farms?

BR: when people think of farms most people have this image of what they think a farm should be like and most of those business don't fit that image. There are some tax advantages of being a farmer. That we try to promote agriculture. But these guys don't need it. After a certain size these tax advantages should go away. But that's not just in farms there are a lot of industries that are like that. And when they get more and more concentrated its like investing money. The first dollar is hard the second dollar is not nearly as hard and the millionth dollar was a piece of cake. Once the ball starts rolling it's a piece of cake.

FR: the big farms aren't really farms, they are really corporations and their only goal is the bottom line and to pay their stockholders. Is the food that they are producing healthy to eat, should the land be used better. I think the farming system that we have in this country is broken and we don't know how to fix it. But when you've got a crop farmers who has a \$70,000 dollar a year income and if you take the government funding away he has a 30,000 dollar lose, there is something wrong with that. And so I don't know what I would do about it but I know this is not the way it should be.

TG: have you guys ever considered expansion of your farm?

FR: originally we were 200 acres and we expanded to 280 acres. We saw that the piece of land across the street became available and we thought that we could use it and also we didn't want a housing development to go into there.

BR: we own as much of Knox County that we want to own right now. And when you are direct marketing you need control of a lot of land. You don't have to own it but you have to control it.

TG: How many customers do you have that you direct sale too?

FR: that is hard to answer, because we sell at the farmers markets in the summer. We usually have a sign up sheet there for people who would like local deliveries in the winter. And the mailing list for that is about 120. But not everybody order and everybody doesn't order every delivery. And we also sale to middle ground here.

BR: this place is exception because they deal with directly with farmers and they pay top dollar for what they get. It would be much easier for them to sit down and a computer screen and have everything they want delivered right to their door.

FR: I am not trying to say that they pay top dollar, but they are willing to pay a premium for local fresh stuff its more than if they got it through the regular channels but it is less than

the retail price. We also sell eggs to some of the stores in Mt. Vernon.

TG: do you have and contracts with the store like Kroger or anything like that ?

BR: No, if you were to have a contract with them you would have to deal with their buyers in Cincinnati. that's how that would work. And they would want 50 pounds of lamb chops a week year round and it's a seasonal business

FR: part of the problem of supplying wholesale is that like in a restaurant you need so many lamb chops year round and a lamb only has so many chops in it. It can be tricky. Its great when it is a small local restaurant and they are willing to vary their menu depending on availability for the beef its not particularly seasonal but with the lambs and with vegetable that we don't do its difficult. And even then the eggs have seasonal ups and downs.

TG: what is the average size or weight of your cattle?

FR: I don't know you answer that one?

BR: well we have 50 head of cattle but they average about 800 pounds, but that means we have a lot of calves that weigh 260-400 pound and then we have some are just ready to go to the butcher and they are going to weigh 1400. And then we have some cows too, some beef cows. Then we have bull to he throws up the average. He weighs about 2500 pounds. We call him junior.

FR: actually we have two calves now, we are raising one

TG: what is the average size after the butchering and do you use a local processor?

FR: we use two local processors, we use DJ's in Fredericktown does all the lamb and some of the beef and Young's in Danville does some of the beef. They have different advantages in my perspective. So I like to mix them up a little. Some of our beef is Holstein, a dairy breed but we have found that the Holsteins make very nice beef on grass. So when you feed them a ton of grain the meat gets fattier. And Holsteins are going to be a little bit fattier in general at least more than the beef breed. So when you put them on a lean grass feed diet, they usually make really nice beef. And we also have Hertford and Angus.

FR: What is the project?

TG: it's a local farm project were we are trying to inform the students and surrounding community about the benefits of eating local foods. I am doing this for professor Howard Sacks. And my project is going from the farm to the table. So I am interviewing members of the beef community about their products, jobs and experiences.

FR: have you visited a butcher?

TG: I visited a processor this morning. In Zanesville, Phillips Processing.

FR: How big is it?

TG: not that large

FR: well like you know we have a lot of sustainable agriculture types around and we try to always let them tour our farm and also tour DJ's processing plant, our butcher.

TG: the only reason I found it was because I spotted on the OFA website

FR: another place you might be interested in is the producers livestock auction in Mt. Vernon. This is the place where you sale your animals as commodities. You have all you animals in this big auction house and they do cattle and sheep and hogs, and what else, goats. And the auction is every Wednesday and you don't have to call them or anything you just show up on a Wednesday and look around . They have catwalks above the animals so you can look around. And then there is a tiny auditorium where the auction is held. Its pretty fast but it is worth seeing. And its good because if any farmers have animals they want to sale they just go in there on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning and they go through the auction process. They get a check in the mail, minus the commission and there are little fees. That is a really important service there. You don't even know who are buying your animals necessarily but it is a place to sale them locally even if you only have one.

TG: How often do you guy do the farmers market?

FR: it is June to October and I go every Saturday usually with my daughter Hanna, sometimes with my sister. I might start going to another one in Worthington also. it's a different set of customers, to see if we can expand a little bit.

BR: we need customers who think about what they are eating, those are the only customers who we are going to get. If you exhaust the supply locally you have to make the circle bigger and look for more. There are some other suburbs of Columbus which is still like within a 50 mile radius of where we are.

FR: and we do have some customers who come all the way up from Columbus. But we can always use more of them

BR: always at least once a year we have Muslim slaughters on the farm, and they come from Cleveland, Akron, Toledo and they come from everywhere. And we sale them live lambs. We can't butcher on the farm. But we can sale them live lambs and they can butcher them. Due to religious beliefs, for their own use. But we provide them with a place.

FR: its getting really big, this last time we sold like 27 lambs.

BR: Most of these guys know each other so it's a big party when they come around. And most of the times it's a religious occasion, so they go through the whole ceremony first. Then after that its just a party. The feast this year was December 31. It was fun to watch.

FR: there were some kids there this year.

BR: these people, most of them come from Turkey and they grew up in one environment and then their kids are growing up in the US and there is a divide between them culturally and its interesting to watch.

TG: well I have pretty much spent through my questions.

FR: well there is something else, are you familiar with the way most of the beef in this Country is raised, on feed lots

TG: Kind of

FR: if you are looking at grass-feed beef the big difference is to know that most of the beef that you buy is corn feed. The thing is that it is in these buildings by the time it is whined from its mother to the time it is butchered. There is this really great article by Michael Pollan called Power Steer, it was in the New York times magazine. And he bought a baby steer and followed it through its life on the feed lots. And they don't get out at all and are just on concrete. Its not good or healthy.

TG: we have read Omnivore's Dilemma for this class.

FR: I think the most important thing for local food is for people to be interested in where their food comes from. Interested in not just where it is but what it is. If you have something that is shipped across the country and raised in a closed in environment with everything pumped in and pumped out that's not the same as a family farm from the 1950's but most people don't wonder about that and its all displayed the same way in the grocery store. Its all about making informed decision.

BR: but times are changing even since we been here, and that's the way it goes. The small farms are dying out. But this is the network the keeps communities going. This is how the Amish community thrives so well.

TG well I don't want to take up too much of your time but would it be ok if I contacted you if I have further questions.

BR+FR: sure, especially if you have problems with the tape or hearing the tape.