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Interview with Maureen Buchwald, owner Glenn Hill Orchards

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Maureen Buchwald

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Researcher's name: Erin Molnar

Event: Interview with Maureen Buchwald, owner Glenn Hill Orchards

Place: Glenn Hill Orchards

Co-workers present: None

When I spoke to Maureen on the phone yesterday, she was more than willing to talk to me. So, I have an appointment. I have the tape recorder; I have the tapes. I know how to record. I checked the batteries and they're charged. I have my questions. I have a pen and a notebook. It's all in my car and I know where I'm going. I shouldn't be nervous, but I am. It's my first interview. Deep breaths.

I arrived at Glenn Hill Orchards a few minutes before my meeting – that's one thing I could check off as doing right. I walked into the retail store, where I had been a couple weeks before buying apples. The woman who worked there called Maureen to tell her that I was there. I looked around the store at the varieties of apples and the descriptions for each of them. I worked hard to keep my jitters under wrap. But I did feel conspicuous browsing with my tape recorder strapped around my body. Maureen came over from her house, which is located on the orchard, and we introduced ourselves in person. She couldn't shake hands with me though, because she was sick.

She said we could go to her office to do the interview. The office was basic – filing cabinets, a desk, phone, fax machine, calenders, charts – nothing very fancy. It smelled of cigarette smoke. We had a seat and she asked me what the purpose of the interview was. I told her that I was working with the Rural Life Center at Kenyon and that we were investigating local food – mostly its sources and its movement within the community. Before we proceeded further, I asked her if it was alright if I tape recorded her – she agreed – and I told her that at the end of the interview – after she knew what she'd said – I would ask her to sign a release. (Phew, two more things done right.) She said that was fine and I knew it was time to start the interview.

I pressed the record button – I had already advanced the tape beyond the leader – and introduced myself, “This is Erin Molnar, interviewing Maureen Buchwald, on October 26, 2000, at Glenn Hill Orchards.” Relieved that I'd gotten that technical aspect out of the way and after a brief spell of “so's, likes and um's”, I managed to ask my first question – how she got involved in growing apples. She said that she'd been an administrator for a manufacturing company and had known the previous owners. At the time, the orchard was not capable of producing fruit, but because she had a background in farming and was interested in trying something new, she decided to give it a try and bought the orchard. Since then (over the past 23 years), the entire orchard has been replanted and the most current methods of packing and storage have been integrated. I prefaced my next questions by saying that I had read the article that had been in the Mount Vernon News about her and the orchard. Before I could actually ask another question, she said that there were a lot of inaccuracies in the article. She confirmed that the orchard had 110 acres and produced 60,000 bushels per year. She also confirmed that they produce 23 varieties of apples, although only five or six of them are grown for the commercial market. (When I asked, she said that these varieties were, Red and Gold Delicious, Jonathan, Macintosh, Rome and Gala.) The other varieties are experiments or trials, or they're grown for smaller markets like the Farm Market in Mount Vernon. 90% or more of the apples produced by the orchard go into the commercial market; they're sold to warehouses, and after that, it's unknown where they end up. The orchard sells to Big Bear, Kroger's and other grocery chains, but these apples go to a central warehouse in Columbus and are distributed from there. The remainder of the apples are sold in the retail store at the orchard, to Neff's and the Farm Market or to places in Utica, or Centerburg.

While we were talking, Maureen seemed a little nervous. She was fiddling with her keys. On the other hand, maybe she just has a little ADD like I do and can't sit still very well. She was also a little sick – hence the coughing on the tape. And she was also probably a little wary of being interviewed because the MVN article had so much wrong information.

I asked Maureen if, as the article said, the orchard also produced peaches, plums and cherries. She said that they did. Cherries were a pick-your-own operation. Pick-your-own is a dying field, but they've kept it up because the trees are there. It will probably be phased out in the next five years. Maureen said that the orchard used to produce a lot of peaches, but after some particularly cold winters, the peach trees died. When she first bought the orchard, they didn't immediately replant the peaches, but have since then.

This is mostly because of a series of mild winters in recent years. However, peaches are a unique crop; if they're harvested when ripe, they bruise easily and don't store well. If they are harvested before they're ripe, to make them easier to store and move, the flavor suffers. So, the peaches are sold mostly through the store at the orchard.

The orchard doesn't process the apples to produce cider or apple butter. There are a lot of government regulations, which would mean a lot of investment; and besides, neither of these are particularly big markets. Apples are sold to Yoder's Cider Barn to make these products though. There are specific apples that are used for these purposes. Cider apples are picked from the tree; this is to prevent E. Coli poisoning which could be picked up from the ground. They are washed in Clorox water and then soapy water and they are taken off the line and inspected by a person. Process apples (for apple butter) are perfectly fine apples, with a little surface blemish that make them undesirable in the commercial market. Because Maureen brought up the government regulations surrounding the production of apple by-products, I asked her if there were other legal, liability issues that she had to deal with. She said that she could get sued for almost anything and that most food growers carry a couple million dollars of liability insurance to protect themselves. The co-op that she belongs to also carries liability insurance. There are also various inspections: the Ohio Department of Health, the EPA, Worker's Comp. She also mentioned the stringent requirements that the commercial buyers have for the apples they purchase. They have to pass a sugar content test, and a pressure test. A color percentage is usually specified also. There are also specific instructions about how to pack the apples. When the warehouse receives the apples, they're randomly tested to make sure that they meet the requirements.

Maureen said that the orchard, and most fruit growers, employs an integrated pest management system. This means that the smallest amount of chemical control is used. They don't spray anything on the trees after mid-August, and the fruit isn't harvested until mid-September – a month later. And then, of course, they're washed twice. I asked Maureen about the wax that they use on the apples. I had been surprised to learn that it was made from tree bark; I had always assumed that it was artificial. She said that apples lose moisture and the wax helps to prevent this from happening. If the wax weren't used, a bag of apples that's supposed to be three pounds – and would have been at packing time – would be less than that at buying time. Secondly, the wax makes the apples shiny and more appealing to consumers. When she was explaining this, she said that most people shine their apples on their shirts before they bite into them. She made the motions to emphasize this. Besides, all commercial consumers demand waxing; they wouldn't buy apples that aren't waxed.

More apple trees are planted every year; which varieties are popular often changes, or a certain segment of trees may be declining in production, or perhaps the wrong trees were planted in previous years. Apple trees take about five years before they can produce at a commercial level; this means that the orchard needs a long-term plan. Maureen also stressed that tree planting is not just sticking a tree in the ground and waiting for fruit – it's a science of sorts. The grower has to consider what the most productive size for the tree is, given soil content and conditions and wind patterns. Training a tree (encouraging a canopy to allow the tree to produce its best under the conditions) takes about three full years.

The annual cycle of farming starts in the spring when protective oils are sprayed on the trees to help prevent apple scab; this occurs before there are any leaves or blossoms. When the tree blooms, the orchard rents 65 hives of aviary bees to pollinate. Maureen said that this was another inaccuracy in the article, which said that the trees are pollinated by feral bees. This cannot happen because there are no more feral bees. This is also when the integrated pest management would be implemented. This includes nutrients, as well as preventative measures. Maureen said that the orchard doesn't grow fruit, they grow trees. The goal is to maximize the ability of the tree to produce apples, by encouraging the tree's ability to process light, water and nutrients. Toward this end, during the summer, the trees are pruned and fertilized. A clean strip underneath the trees is maintained to allow easy application and absorption of nutrients. The grass is also kept short to minimize its competition with the trees.

In the fall, the apples are harvested. This is the most labor intensive portion of the cycle. It's also very specific; there is an optimum day to pick the fruit, usually a certain number of days after bloom. Labor has to be coordinated so that the apples are picked as close to this day as possible, without requiring that all the apples be picked on the same day. If the apples are picked when they're overripe they don't store well and since the market demands that there are always apples available, storability is important. This is also the time when apples are put into storage and the year's harvest begins to sell. After harvest, during the winter, all 28,000 trees in the Orchard are pruned. This is important because it affects the size and productivity, and ultimately the quantity and quality of the fruit. Apple trees are hardy and survive the

winters well; generally Ohio has a good climate for growing apples. However, an early frost can damage fruit and can cause a certain percentage of the fruit to be lost. How much depends on the temperature of the frost. Maureen showed me a chart that she had on her wall that showed the correlation between temperature and percentage lost.

At this point, I thought that I had a fairly complete picture of the production side of the operation and I shifted my questions to marketing and sales. I asked Maureen if the orchard participates in the Farmer's Market in Mount Vernon. She said no, primarily because the market takes place in the summer, before her crop of apples is available. But she went on to say that it wasn't really economically beneficial for her. The amount of money that she would have to pay someone to take the apples to the market and sit there and sell them would be more than the money actually made from the sales. Understanding that the orchard functioned on a larger scale, I asked about the truck fleet that I had read that she had in the MVN article. She said that was another inaccuracy in the article – they have one truck, not a whole fleet. The truck is necessary for the commercial sales – 40% of the orchard's sales are delivered with this truck. Maureen explained that she belongs to the Fruit Grower's Marketing Association, which is a co-op of the 40 largest growers in Ohio. This co-op is responsible for the orchard's sales and marketing. The co-op takes orders and then faxes the information to the orchard, including all the details about color, sugar, pressure and packing. Maureen then calls the co-op back and confirms whether or not she can fill the order.

Maureen said that information about the storage facilities that was in the MVN article was correct. The orchard has a Controlled Atmosphere Storage facility – this is 98% nitrogen, 2% oxygen and 85% humidity. This slows down the maturation of the apples, basically putting them to sleep. The apples are also drenched in calcium, which enhances their storability. Hopefully, these stored apples run out by summertime. I asked Maureen if the co-op sold mostly within Ohio. She said that it did – shipping costs would consume any profits. As it is, most growers are losing money. Again, she pointed to an inaccuracy in the article: the author referred to a “problem in China.” What this meant was that China began dumping apple concentrate into the world market, which depressed the commodity price. It is also possible that apples are over-planted, in general, which would lower the price. Maureen continued, saying that they do sometimes ship out of state, but this is very rare. Also, Ohio is a net importer of apples, so there is sufficient market for local growers to sell their entire crop in state.

The article in the MVN said that Maureen and the orchard are involved in various community activities. When I asked Maureen, she said that she was a member of the Ohio Apple Marketing Committee. Apple growers give 9 cents per bushel to this organization and the funds are applied to educational and marketing programs. They produce packets for teachers and students. They produce posters, releases to newspapers and newspaper articles (which usually aren't printed) with accurate nutritional information. Maureen also gives school children tours of the orchard. While she feels that the tours are of “limited value,” she thinks that it is important because children generally have no idea where their food comes from. She also tries to explain the significance of farms, in general, but also considering the role of agriculture immediately surrounding them. She also loves the children's reactions to the smell of the apple barn – they love it!

I asked Maureen if the orchard was currently expanding. She said that they had been for the past twenty years, but they weren't any longer. They had no more land, and considering the market, it wouldn't be economical. However, when I asked her if she would ever not harvest some of her crop based on market conditions, she said that it isn't necessary. Although, if part of the crop is damaged, it may prove more economical not to harvest.

When I was in the store, I had noticed that there were big plastic bags of apples labeled “utility grade.” We hadn't covered what that meant yet, so I asked. She said that these are perfectly fine apples that either have some kind of surface blemish or do not meet the color requirements for a specific order. While she seemed to recognize that it was a little absurd that grocery stores would require specific color percentages – it doesn't affect the taste – the market does demand that these requirements are met.

During a pause in the interview – while I was trying to figure out my next question – Maureen wanted to clarify that she is not the only person who makes the orchard function. She said that Richard Reinbach – who had come into the office earlier in the interview – was the farm manager, a horticulturist, a licensed chemical applicator and an expert at tree training. She is mostly responsible for the financial side, the longterm planning and public relations. She also mentioned the migrant laborers, who are responsible for the majority of the picking. She said that payroll during harvest was \$15,000 per week for 35 workers.

She said that this is something that makes farming difficult. There is often a period of intense investment that doesn't pay off immediately.

I asked Maureen if she would be interested in more local business. She said that she's tried in the past. For instance, she has supplied to Kenyon in the past, but the volume isn't there. And, on top of that, ARA doesn't pay its bills on time. She has tried calling every school, and they may order a bushel. She's tried restaurants, but again they order a bushel, maybe, when they're having apple pie. She even has to call service organizations like Interchurch to ask them if they'd like her to donate apples. She does participate in local festivals, like the one in Apple Valley, but this is mostly for publicity and not for sales.

At this point, I had asked all the questions that I had prepared and any that I had thought of during the interview. I asked her if there was anything else in the MVN article that she wanted to clarify. She said that apparently the author had misunderstood something: the article said that the co-op processes 9 million bushels of apples per year. This is wrong; the truth is that the co-op processes \$8-9 million per year. She said that she felt that the interviewer/author was mostly interested in talking to the migrant laborers. Contrary to popular opinion, the migrant laborers are housed in good, clean facilities. There are a lot of regulations in order to employ migrants, and this ensures that conditions are generally good. There is also a document that Maureen prepares that says how many workers the orchard needs, the duration and the wages. Most of the workers do not speak English, so there are a few bilingual people in the group who can serve as coordinators. This also helps Maureen when she's figuring out the wages; she pays by the bin and she needs someone who can communicate with the workers to keep track of who picked what.

In closing, Maureen said that midwest apples aren't as pretty as western apples, but they taste much better. And the Ohio Apple Marketing Committee does what it can with its funds to advertise, but they simply don't have the financial resources to do more.

After the interview Maureen took me through the packing line and the storage area so I could get a better feel for some of the things that she talked about. Her packing line is pretty hi-tech. When the apples are picked, they're put into a large bin. These bins are then submerged in the Clorox water and the apples float out and begin their journey down the line. One of the first things that happens is the machine has some magical way of removing all the leaves – okay, maybe not magical, but I was impressed. Then the apples move through the soapy water and are waxed. And, again, the machine does something amazing and sorts the apples by size, which determines what they'll be used for. There is a certain size that is used for tray packing, or for bagging, or for whatever. The trays are packed by hand, but everything else is automatic. So, yeah, the packing line was pretty impressive.

Next we went to the cold storage. Maureen said that to build that storage facility it cost around half a million dollars. And it costs \$1600 a month to keep it cold. It's a major investment, but it's necessary for the size of the orchard and the amount that they produce. And Maureen was right about the smell in there – it was so wonderful. I felt like I was dancing around in the magical, tasty land of apples. The other type of storage is the Controlled Atmosphere System. These storage units have two doors. If you open the first, the second has a window in it, so you can see inside. These are kept at 98% nitrogen and 2% oxygen; this is maintained by a bladder on the ceiling of the unit. Yet another part of the hi-tech apple orchard.

This was the end of the tour. I thanked Maureen and said goodbye. She said that if I needed anything else to give her a call. I got in the car, breathed a huge sigh of relief and drove off back to Kenyon.

I suppose that my interview went pretty well. Needless to say though, I'm not the smoothest interviewer. My biggest problem was being prepared to ask the next question. There were a lot of pauses while I looked over my questions to find something that hadn't been answered yet. In some cases it was okay, because during these pauses, Maureen would interject something useful. It's certainly something that I should try to improve in future interviews. I also think that Maureen is fairly used to being interviewed, which probably helped. If Maureen hadn't gone into as much detail as she did without my prodding, I probably wouldn't have been able to get the amount of information that I did.

I didn't have any serious technical difficulties. My only concern is about flipping the tape over, or changing tapes. When the first side clicked off, I couldn't remember if I was supposed to ask her to pause for a second while I turned the tape over, or I was supposed to let her continue talking. I did the latter, mostly I think because it was the least obtrusive. I did miss a little bit of what she said when I flipped, or switched tapes. I did pay closer attention to what she was saying when I was doing that, in case I had to fill in any gaps. The majority of the information was there though, so that's good. I guess one other technical

problem I had was with background noise. There was a lot of machinery outside the office that created background noise on the tape. And someone came into the office at one point – although that didn't really cause a problem for the interview or for the tape. But the phone did ring three separate times and it's hard to hear what Maureen was saying on the tape when this happened. I don't think that these interruptions negatively impacted the flow of the interview though, which is good.

In terms of our project, I think that Glenn Hill Orchards is potentially an operation that we can incorporate into the program, but only after it has proven itself to be effective. Maureen, as the financial manager, is mostly concerned with economic implications. From her experience, and given the size of the orchard, she doesn't see increasing her local distribution as imperative or effective. I do think that she is interested, however, but I would only approach her again once the program has shown itself to work. This is probably true for any large producer in the area, especially for those producers who are mainly involved for the business/economic aspects of farming.