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## Interview with Judy Sacks

Elena Rue

Judy Sacks

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Researcher's name: Elena Rue

Event: Interview with Judy Sacks

Place: Red Door Café, Gambier OH

### **Interview Transcript**

On Friday February 20, 2001 I interviewed Judy Sacks at the Red Door using a Sony tape recorder.

EH: February 20, 2001 at the Red Door. How long have you been farming? How long ago did you move to Knox County.

JS: We've been living in Knox County for 25 or 26 years but our farm is something that we've been involved in for 16 years. We didn't get involved in animals and therefore food raising until about 5 or 6 years ago.

ER: Had you had any previous connection to farming? Did you have any relatives or anyone in your family?

SJ: We're the first generation both Howard and I come from Pennsylvania from Philadelphia and we're city people, but we've been living in this place for a very long time and we were the first people that lived on land in our families (at least in modern times). My mother grew up in a little farming community outside of Philadelphia where her mother had chickens. But none of that knowledge ever came through to either his parents or my parents. So we're learning from scratch.

ER: So her hadn't had any experience either?

JS: No, not before our time in Gambier, and what started our whole interest in the food raising part of it and also just farming in general is that we essentially put together a farm. We bought a house on some land and then over a period of time we bought the surrounding land and restored in to its original parcel size. It was originally about a 93 acre farm and over time we sort of recreated that farmstead and we only finished doing that about six years ago in which time we said, "Well gee. What should we do with all of this? We don't just want to have a house and look out the window to a nice view." We wanted to make it a functioning farm again. It was my interest to get involved with livestock. It was my project and still is.

ER: Cool. What do you feel the benefits are in farming? What benefits do you get – mental, physical, emotional or spiritual?

JS: I think of those dimensions I'm interested in restoring a way of life that I think is really important and on the wain and specifically the diversified old fashioned farm. 50 years ago people had a variety of things happening on a farm. They didn't just have one of two big crops of soy or corn, which is the way farming is today. We both felt that having the more diverse farm is a pleasant way to live. Surrounding ourselves not only with crop, but also with animals. We also feel that it's a benefit to have a child raised in that environment. Aesthetically it's got an important benefit to me also because I think it's beautiful to have a farm that does many different things from vegetable garden to food production by way of livestock to food production by way of crop. Those things are not only economically diverse, but they're aesthetically diverse. It just pleases me to do the hard work it takes, but also to build a relationship with animals. That's aesthetics, but

it's also forming that human-animal bond that farmers do when they get involved with livestock. For me that's very important.

ER: Do you think the benefits outweigh the time and money that go into farming?

JS: For me probably because I don't depend on farming as my income. This is more or less hobby farming. There's a difference for people who have much larger scale flocks or much more dependence on the economics of it. I can get aesthetic and emotional and practical benefits out of it without fearing that I'm going to fail to pay my mortgage. I think that would be a concern for a larger scale livestock people 'cos the economics are not very good and they have to work really hard to maintain livestock as a means of life. For me it's got great benefits. My number one benefit is probably the satisfaction of being able to feed my neighbors well. I make a product that has a small following. Word of mouth kind of organic lamb and it pleases me a lot that people enjoy what I put all that work into. So for me that is a great benefit.

ER: What values do you think you've adopted since you've started farming. Were there a lot of things that you didn't realize before hand and learned as you began farming?

JS: Every year I feel like I'm developing ten years worth of knowledge. The amount of knowledge that goes into doing things well inspires me with awe. A value I have is the valuing of the farmer's knowledge. I spend time with an old time sheep shearer who knows more about animals just by looking at them than I might learn in 20 years of reading about them. The value of knowledge that's transmitted person to person, farmer to farmer is something that I am newly aware of. That I never knew before. Another really important value to me is a new sense of time. Time is used differently in farm tasks than it is in say intellectual work. Every farm task takes a certain amount of time and it must take that amount of time. You can't take five minutes off of it when you're trying to get a sheep to go into a barn. It just takes a certain amount of time. So that whole idea of being in the moment, really in the moment, when you're working with animals is a great new discipline and a new value I have for a different sense of time.

ER: What lifestyle changes have you made?

JS: I'm much more aware of the problems with food distribution and the American system of being separated from food production. I find it much more important to consume locally and to support local food. I think it's a really important well being and a physical benefit, but I also think there's something to making the community survive in patronizing local food. That's probably the biggest thing.

ER: Do you think the values and lessons that you've learned are similar to those people who have been farming for many years or do you think your experience is different?

JS: I think they would have to be different by the fact that I am an outsider to it. I'm a little bit book learnt. I really have put a lot of time into reading, but I really did find that most of the help that I got was from real life practice with animals. I think that my wonder at it all is different because I don't take it for granted whereas if I had come up in a farm tradition I might have seen it as just the family trade in a way. The sheer experience of the something like birthing a lamb for the first time – it has to be exciting for anybody, but to someone who grew up in Philadelphia in a row house surrounded by concrete, I think it's an unmatched kind of experience.

ER: What benefits do you feel you contribute to the community as a new farmer?

JS: I think I serve that an example that even though I'm far along in my professional career it's always good to learn something new and to reinvent oneself. I sort of

reinvented myself as a shepherd. I think that's kind of a cool thing to show people. That lifelong learning is important. I also think it's great that I can feed people. I've always been interested in cooking and I do dinner parties and I take a lot of pride in that kind of hospitality that goes with sharing food. Hospitality is a very big part of food traditions, but it also extends to growing healthful, safe food. My lamb product can be eaten by people who are allergic to all the hormones and chemicals in American meat so I feel that I'm doing something good. I'm also making sheep have a future in this county. That may sound strange, but unless farmers really work at it the sheep industry is going to go down and down. There's just a lot of pressure from foreign sources of lamb in this country. I feel that I'm supporting a traditional American way of life.

ER: How would you describe your relationships with the older established farmers?

JS: I deeply respect them. I feel that they know so much that's undervalued by our regular society. I love hanging out with them. I have one in particular, but I have a few older folks that I try to learn from and they're so generous with what they know. And so humble about what they know that other professionals don't seem to be like. There's not this terrible competitive relationship between the farmers. There's a real collective and collaborative feeling I get out of them. I also a lot of the old farmers are worried about the future and I feel that when they see someone who's trying – I'm only trying – I think they feel that it's a good thing to keep trying. Because their own sons and daughters very often are choosing not to try to continue farmer. I try to spend as much quality time with older farmers as I can.

ER: That's something I've experienced just in this class. They're worried about the future and excited about new people.

JS: There's a very generous spirit. They're worried, but they're also very pleased if someone's trying to recognize that what they do is important and more importantly continue it into the future. So they seem to like me okay.

ER: How would you describe your relationship with other new farmers?

JS: I'm always terribly interested in what they're doing. We tend to do trade talk. We talk about things like fencing solutions or how you set your pens up inside of a barn, whether you grow your grass long enough into the season that you can avoid feeding hay. There's a lot of tip swapping. I really get a kick out of listening to new farmers I meet. It's interesting to me that there's a bunch of professionals who are essentially dropped out of professional life to try farming. I haven't abandoned my other career. I do editorial work and it's largely intellectual and writing also. I haven't totally abandoned it to farming, but I've tried to make a balance between that and my farming. It's very interesting to me that there is this need of people who were professionals removed from the land to put the land back into their life. I share that feeling with them so I consider them colleagues, but also people to learn from.

ER: Each situation is so unique, each person has a different story.

JS: Oh it's really interesting and what I find is that most of us are all of the same generation pretty much. When I think of the other new farmers I'm in relationships with, the Rickards or the Helts, we're all people from the 60's. Something carried through, we all went our professional way, but there was something about the idea of improving the world that is an old fashioned 60's idea that I think we're trying to play out.

ER: Do you feel it's possible to generalize new farmers? Or do you think that each situation is so unique that you can't clump them all together?

JS: Some new farmers are trying to something for a family. They're trying to have a home-based ecosystem that's separate, but better than what society offers. That would include people who are home schooling or people who are thinking of not just farming, but as recreating this little bubbled way of life. That's some of us. And there's others who are simply trying to maybe just connect with the natural world more and don't have a family agenda quite so much. I think there are different circumstances just as you say. Those are the difference that I see, those that are primarily trying to rebuild the family in a certain way meaning get their kids educated into farm life, and those who are simply building contact with the natural world. I'm kind of light in that regard, I don't home school but I do think it's important for our daughter to be active in farm chores and to appreciate livestock and she does. I guess I'm between those two camps.

ER: Have you ever felt like quitting?

JS: Every cold morning I feel like quitting! There are times when I entertain that because we like to travel and we like to get off the farm. I have a pretty hard core of cosmopolitanism in me that makes me need to go the city sometimes, but then I try to envision what our place would be like without the animals and it just makes me so sad. I can't actually envision that. It's like if you've had pets all your life, imagining not having your dog to greet you. I feel that way about my sheep and my ram and my goats. I feel that it would be a loss of vibrancy in my life not to have those things around me. So, when I feel like quitting is when things go bad as they do on the farm. If I have loss of lamb, if a lamb dies or if an animals is sick – it doesn't happen very often 'cos I take real good care of my animals. If that kind of thing happens or if I tried to breed an animal and it didn't take, and there was nothing I could do about it, it gets discouraging. The physical hard work of it can get discouraging if its August 20<sup>th</sup> and you need to clean out the barn and it's 98 degrees, but the barn needs to be cleaned I feel like quitting. But my older farmer friends say that it's all just part of it. And I wouldn't do it just yet.

ER: Well, I think you answered most of my questions.

JS: Is that about it?

ER: Yeah. This is Elena Rue interviewing Judy Sacks on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2001.