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Interview with Ruth Smella

Jenny Lawton

Ruth Smella

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Researcher's name: Jenny Lawton

Event: Interview with Ruth Smella

Place: at her home in Walhonding

Ruth Smella: We came here about 40 years ago -- I grew up in Galleon, in Crawford County - west of Mansfield. We bought this and they said it was sheep country, and there were a lot of sheep. But, y=know, I=ve noticed there aren=t so many sheep any more -- there were.

[banter about sheep]

RS: Yes, it is a rural county.

Jenny Lawton: [banter about ELFS project]

RS: I=ve always worked in the garden -- even when I was a little kid, we had a big garden. We grew a lot of things. My father came from country stock, but my mother, they were business people. He tended to grow things too. But we=ve always, with the kids growing up, that was important. But we like the fresh vegetables -- and it=s so nice to go out and pick your own nice, fresh, crisp cucumber - instead of the ones at the store that sometimes look rubbery or something.

JL: What do you grow in your garden?

RS: Mostly we grow tomatoes, bell peppers, hot peppers, cucumbers, green beans, and the last few years I=ve been planting snow peas. Those go in really early - y=know, for the stir-fry, we like that. We had grown a few musk melons, but they take more work and they take a lot of room and they didn=t do as well. But my son has made all these boxes out there.

JL: I saw that -- they=re very nice.

RS: I tell you, that is great -- you don=t have to walk in the mud. Now we do have a little garden where we plant some of the things, and the green beans and cucumbers. But for the tomatoes and the peppers, we get a lot of peppers -- hot peppers and bell peppers both. I don=t do as much canning -- I do can tomatoes, that=s important to me. Always can tomatoes. And then with the peppers, I just got a recipe last year -- where you grind up the peppers and you mix your vinegar and sugar and mustard and some thickening in it. And you can either spread it in your sandwich as you would ketchup or mustard. Or I just put a couple of spoonfuls on my plate and just eat it with whatever else I=m eating.

JL: So the vegetables you grow in your garden, your family eats them?

RS: Yes, I have married kids and I often share things with them -- and they=re always happy to get some fresh things. They do a little gardening. My daughter will have maybe half a dozen tomato plants and she grows the smaller pickles - she doesn=t like the cucumbers -- she thinks these smaller ones, these pickles, have a better flavor. And my daughter-in-law, she has a nice little garden.

JL: So is it a family tradition or does everybody garden a little bit?

RS: Everybody in my family?

JL: Would you say it=s not uncommon for people to have small gardens in general or is it a family tradition?

RS: I think, in general, yes, people do grow some -- if they have room for a little garden. I think that most people do. Sometimes they don=t have room for much but they might put a couple tomato plants on the lawn around the house -- I=ve known them to do that.

JL: And is that mainly for fun of growing something or for the fresh tomatoes?

RS: Well, I think it=s mostly to have the fresh vegetables. But it is good therapy. Working in the garden, working with plants, in fact anything that you do with your hands, of course, is good

therapy. So it=s really good for you to be out in the fresh air and the sunshine. It=s just a good thing to do.

JL: So working with your hands is satisfying?

RS: It is.

JL: Even the weeding?

RS: Well, yes. You try to find ways so you don=t have so many weeds. Like putting in mulch or spreading newspapers down - or you can put on some mud or cut grass to hold the papers down - and it cuts down all the weeds, it keeps the weeds from growing.

JL: How do you learn how to keep the weeds out and the deer away?

RS: I=ll tell you, we can=t really keep the deer away -- although, with the dog, now I haven=t seen any deer right in the yard. There have been times when I look out and see them right here in our yard. Deer tend to eat some things and not others.

JL: They=re picky eaters.

RS: Yeah. I had transplanted hastas and the deer would go along nibbling on it and pull the whole plant out. I=d have to replant them. But a lot of things that I plant the deer don=t bother.

JL: So how do you learn different tricks of the trade?

RS: Well, of course I=m reading a lot - and some things you hear on television. Or just friends. Or like, I remember my nephew started that because my mom, she never did any kind of mulching. But my nephew, always, the grass clippings, he always put down, so his mom didn=t have to walk in the mud. So that is one way that my daughter-in-law, she uses the newspapers quite a bit. So that=s good, if you do the mulching. And, of course, that tends to keep the soil from drying out too, so it doesn=t need as much water.

JL: So you mentioned that there was a kind of melon that didn=t work last year. Do you find that you grow different things different years?

RS: Well, some -- some things you tend to grow... like radishes, it doesn=t matter. But, we don=t tend to have such good luck with radishes, I don=t know why. We tried putting them out real early too. But we tried to put muscola seeds in one of those molds for a tire, where they manufacture tires. And so my son cut them in half and then he filled them with dirt... but that didn=t work too. But he put fencing up so they could climb on the fencing. [mumbles] One year I had them just here in the garden, just running on the ground -- they did fair.

JL: So your son has all of these different inventions.

RS: Yes, he=s real interested now. My husband, he didn=t care a lot about it. He would hoe around the tomato plants, once they were big enough to see them - or the pepper plants. But other than that, he was really never interested in the garden. But my son was interested in the garden -- and my son, he reads a lot too. But he=s the one that made all of these squares, these... I can=t think of the word now... I=ll think of it... most of them are square - but there are two real long flats. He used the planks, he put in the stakes to hold them.

JL: They say that there is a certain aesthetic to flower gardening -- do you think that=s true with vegetables?

RS: Yes, I think there is some -- because you enjoy seeing near-perfect things. Yeah, I do. I enjoy seeing them. I grow some flowers too, for fun, of course.

JL: Gardening isn=t a year-round activity, isn=t it?

RS: Not quite. But it=s time now that we=ll be putting... in fact, there=s two garden club ladies who put articles in the paper -- have you noticed that?

JL: I haven't.

RS: Well, I know one is the last Saturday of the month -- I'm not sure when the other one is. One is Joanne Graham, and both are in the same garden club I'm in. Joanne Graham and Rowina Workman. And Rowina was asking me, she said could I write up something about growing your own plants from seed, because she knows we have grow-lights in the basement. And so it's time to get this seed in and get these little plants started. So she is going to include that in one of her articles -- I don't know if that's this coming Saturday or not, but you might... so they both know what they're talking about. They're both good gardeners.

JL: Although a lot of it is dependent on the weather, do you feel like it's an art? Do you have to know certain things in order to be a good gardener?

RS: Well, I think that you learn by doing. And of course, you can always get some pointers from someone who has been growing things. Besides, like I say, rooting. When you put the seeds in, you have to learn when you plant seed to know what they look like when they grow up. And you need to know how far apart to put them so they'll have room to grow. Because, you know, if you put things too close together, they don't have room to spread out. Anyone can garden -- it's something that's attainable - anyone can do it.

JL: Do you garden specifically for food?

RS: I enjoy gardening, I do it because I like to -- but also to have the fresh produce. We need it, and it's pretty nice to have all that and not have to go out to the market. And plus it's so much better fresh from the garden than something that's been shipped in... have you ever read that book by Yule Givens, *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*?

JL: No.

RS: You'd ought to try to read it sometime. He tells in one chapter that some people look down their noses at some of these Italian women who go gather these grains. But they're getting them fresh. And these ones that are looking down their noses go to the store and get the ones that have been picked over and shipped in... I like that book.

JL: You also feel like it's more economical?

RS: It's economical.

JL: But it's also fresh.

RS: Well, it's partly economical and partly because I enjoy doing it. I don't think it would be for just for one reason. I would hate to have to do it if it were just for economy. That would be work. But if you like to do something, besides having the advantage of having the fresh produce, that's different.

JL: Tell me more about working with your hands.

RS: Well, I learned that anything you do working with your hands is good therapy. This one time I stopped at a day lily place out nearby Newark -- and that woman said that she got into growing these day lilies as therapy. I don't know if she'd had a nervous break-down or what. But that was therapy for her. She got interested in them, started growing them, and had a lot and sell them. But I know my son-and-law, who is a psychiatrist, says that anything you do with your hands is good therapy.

JL: Does it take a lot of time to grow each plant?

RS: Well, when you're growing from seed, you have to watch them everyday so they don't dry out. We used to put seeds in a row [mumbled] two little leaves, and we had to take them out and they're very fragile. And you had to very, touch the true leaf and get it put into a bigger pot. So

then we got so that in these sections, there is blue plastic so there will be like 4 sections - or, I don't know, it's black plastic. And they'll have like 6 sections. So if you only put 1 or 2 seeds in each section, then you don't have that transferring. Unless, and I mentioned this in that article, I don't know if it will be cut out or what -- but if you really want, say, half a dozen tomato plants, ok you could spend a lot more time with those. So you could take each one and put in into a bigger pot - and each day that it gets warm you can set it outside in the sun and it'll get really nice and stocky. But if you have a lot of them, of course you can't do that for all of them. But we do set them outside.

JL: Do you have a specialty?

RS: Like which plant? Well, I don't think I have a specialty -- but those are the main ones -- the tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers.

JL: Are there any recipes that you use those in?

RS: Well, I don't can so many cucumbers anymore, but I do can tomatoes. And I just, I call it **A**open kettle, @ because that's the way I learned to do it, when I was in high school. You cook the tomatoes and you have your other can with your boiling water. You put your jars and your lids in those and you take one out and you fill it with these tomatoes that are cooking, and then put the lid on it and seal it. They almost always keep alright. But you know you can like **A**cold pack, @ where you pack things in jars and you have a big kettle and a wire frame in there and you put the lead on... I don't like to do that. But that one with the peppers, the spread, I just, y=know, got the recipe from. [shows jar of paste] Now, this is hot. We made some and used all hot peppers -- but we took the seeds out. Occasionally there would be a few seeds that would get in -- but mostly the seeds aren't in there because it would be really hot with the seeds. But that is hot. I can eat it, but it's hot -- now, it's not so hot that I=m like, hah! But then we made a batch where we took the ones that were not hot and maybe put only one hot one in a batch. And it's real good.

JL: [banter about men and hot peppers] So what kind of tomatoes do you grow? They all have such funny names.

RS: Oh, I'll tell you there are lots of different kinds of tomatoes. And they talk about Heritage tomatoes. Well, I had to try this one -- I wanted to try it -- we had about 5 different kinds last year. But we decided that we're going to stick with just maybe the 2 kinds. Now we used to grow a round one called Celebrity -- and it was good tomato. And then there's, y=know, big boy, better boy, super-big boy... all these different ones -- and the old beefsteak, and the improved beefsteak. Now my grandma used to grow a big tomato - it was a light yellow. And I like that cut up on a plate - just put salt and pepper on it. Not anymore. If you want to buy yellow tomatoes, what you get are these round ones that are more orange than yellow. So I don't know.

JL: I wonder what kind of tomato that was.

RS: I keep watching and I see in the catalogues - I look at the different kinds - and sometimes there will be an article about the different tomatoes. I don't see any listings... now there's one that they call it hillbilly tomato -- it's light with some red stripes.

JL: That's right.

RS: Have you have you heard of that? That might be the nearest thing to that. There's ones that are more square, and there's ones that are supposed to be ripe when they're still kind of green. And I like pink-skinned tomato. And there's the San Marzano one -- they use them to make the

tomato sauce. And last year my son said, **A**Mom, I want to get one of those big tomato plants from Glass Garden so we can have some really early tomatoes. **@** So what he got was a cherry tomato - are you familiar with those? And it just kept growing and growing and growing -- and we tied it up to stakes -- and it was like up here. And we could go out at any time and pick some ripe tomatoes and eat them. And it was fun for the kids. So if you buy cherry tomatoes, you only need one plant!

JL: Gosh, yeah -- it takes over your garden.

RS: This Amish lady gave me one plant, she didn't know the name of it, but she said, **A**it's different, you'll know when you see, **@** because I said, **A**I want a marker, **@** but she said, **A**you'll know it. **@** [more discussion of a mysterious tomato]

JL: So you really live right in the middle of Amish country.

RS: Oh yeah, they're really getting around us. They wanted to buy our place too but we weren't ready to sell. Yeah, there are more Amish right near Fredericktown and then there were these Amish over around Martinsburg and a few up here by the church. [more discussion of Amish migration/development into the area and limited interaction with Amish women through plant exchange] Well, she gave me that one tomato plant and I gave her a few ripe tomatoes, when the tomatoes were all ripe. We actually had a few to sell -- Fred put a table out there.

JL: Is that because you didn't know what to do?

RS: Right, because I kept canning and I said, **A**I don't need more, I don't need to can more! **@** I didn't want them to go to waste. My garden club was out here in May and they saw the tomato plants growing up and they were really interested.

JL: Tell me more about your garden club.

[quick discussion of Chicago]

RS: Our garden clubs are affiliated with the Ohio Association of Garden Clubs -- the state organization. OAGC. So it's divided into 7 regions, and we're in region 7 -- there are 8 counties but Marion doesn't have any garden clubs -- so the garden clubs then, we have the county organization -- so the clubs in the county belong to the county organization. I was president of a little one that's no longer out here. I've been president, secretary, treasurer of this one. I've been county president. I was regional director. And for 4 years I was state chairman of junior garden clubs. So I mean I've been it and done all it takes...

JL: Just about everything.

RS: Yeah.

JL: [verifies acronym]

RS: Here, some years ago, when Jackie Craigho was president, we'd do these tours, these nature tours. So spring and fall, and the first one was **A**The Dragon Hunt. **@** We had it over around Bladensburg, and we didn't find the green dragon, but we found modern dragons --- these are plants. [laughs] But I was still kind of timid then, so I had Arlene, who is older, I had her talk to the group -- so I know that they thought it was Arlene's tour. But we had **A**The Johnny Appleseed Jolt, **@** that was over around... oh because Johnny Appleseed supposedly planted an apple orchard on an island in the Mohican river. So even Helen Zolkowitz (she's pretty old), she even went on that tour. That was the biggest one. So what else did we have... one around Gambier... what was it called, but he had about 6 or 7 of them. But everybody's so busy anymore and there doesn't seem to be time for that. But, y=know, garden club people are interested in growing things - no just, they don't concentrate as much on the vegetables as they

do more really on the flowers -- but both. I got to be a judge -- I'm an accredited judge with the OAGC.

JL: Oh!

RS: And Joanne is one also.

JL: So what kinds of things do you look for? I talked with some girls in 4-H...

RS: I have judged 4-H... well it depends on what your schedule is. But if it's... regardless of whether it's a specimen or it's an arrangement, you look for things in good condition. Fresh and good condition. There are some other things in a different range but there's a lot of other things. But when they judge specimens, they look for **A**near perfect. @

JL: But you don't get to taste any of these specimens? Isn't that the best judge?

RS: [laughs] Well, it's true you don't get to taste them there, but then it would spoil -- they wouldn't last for the 2 days of the show.

JL: In your own garden, what's the most important part of growing -- how it tastes? How it looks? The activity?

RS: The most important... I'm not sure what to say is the most important.

JL: There must be many things.

RS: It's important just seeing it developing right, good -- and you're anxiously awaiting the fruiting... when you can eat some of that.

[side B]

RS: You shouldn't plant more than you can take care of. I have 4 rows of green beans and I'll tell ya; 2 rows and your back is killing you.

JL: No!

RS: So it's nice if you can plant 2 rows and wait about two weeks and then plant 2 more. But you really don't have that much time and room. So I usually just plant 4 rows. I manage, I'll pick a row or two -- sometimes 1 row will make enough for a meal, of the green beans, for us.

JL: Do you save the food from your garden for special occasions or do you use it everyday?

RS: Just everyday. We canned a lot of hot peppers -- and I've been telling Fred, I says, **A**you aren't eating any of these hot peppers -- you need to be eating these! @ I keep them all summer - - because, you know, you'll have to start with fresh ones again.

JL: When things are canned, do they taste different? They must, because they've been cooked...

RS: Well, for instance, the tomatoes -- you know that you're not eating a fresh tomato, but I always put a little salt in it with them when I cook them. I like to eat them like that. Now I don't bother making the juice because for me it's quicker just to get them canned. Then, like just a few days ago, I opened a can of tomatoes and I put it through a sieve. So I have the tomato juice - it's actually a little bit thicker than tomato juice, because it's got everything but the seeds in it. And it tastes good -- I like that. And we always used to have a dish of these cold tomatoes, with macaroni and cheese. They just seemed to go well with it.

JL: [banter about the combination]

[quick discussion of Amish]

JL: They say that during the summer, everybody can talk about their plants -- because the weather effects everybody's plants. Do you think that it's something that everyone can talk about, gardening?

RS: Yeah. Pretty much so. If it=s someone who doesn=t garden at all, I guess they wouldn=t have that much to talk about. But I think that most people have some knowledge of gardening.

JL: [banter about uses of tomato]

RS: Yeah, I use my tomatoes when I make chili and chili soup.

JL: [banter] Can you think of anything else that I should know about gardening in Knox County?

RS: Well, you would, people need to know, and I think most people have an idea, of when you can plant things out. Usually you figure about the 12th or middle of May -- then you don=t have to worry about the frost. If you plant out something before that, you might have to go out and cover it sometimes -- there will be a late frost. So you kind of need to have some idea of that. But I think that once it gets to be nice weather, most people are anxious to do something in the garden -- put in a few things. Y=know, they say to plant peas of St. Patrick=s Day, which is the 17th of March.

JL: That=s coming up!

RS: That=s pretty early -- but I did put the snow peas in a day or two after that, and they did alright.

JL: So a lot of it=s timing.

RS: Because peas are cold weather plant - they need cold weather -- so that=s why you=d get those started early.

JL: The timing and weather is everything.

RS: Yeah. Because if it=s going to be too dry, you=ll have to water. So you=ll have to have some idea of how to water -- because if you just poured water on, it runs off, so it=s not going to help. So for some things you need to make a little ditch or a little something to put water in. Of course, another thing, if you did more gardening, is a soaker hose -- that would just soak in. Most people don=t have a soaker hose - I don=t either. But it=s nice out here -- my son stretches the hose out so he can reach all those boxes. And I get my husband to sit -- we bring the hose to him and the fertilizer -- and a scoop of that little fertilizer in each sprinkling can, and so then he put the water in and Fred would go... [laughs] I didn=t have to do that. But, I always did kind of watch for weeds, and I would pull out the weeds.

JL: It sounds like an art -- very complicated.

RS: But anybody can do it. It=s like anything else. If you=re really interested, you absorb it. You learn - so it=s just how much interest you have. You know, if you=re not interested in something at all, you don=t get how to do it. That=s all.

[discussion of son -- permission to contact for an interview -- see: ELFS-JCL-A022401.B]

[discussion of family illness]

[end of interview]