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Interview with Tim Patrick

Tim Patrick

Leah Sokolofski

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16261 Sapps Run Rd. Danville, OH
Co-worker's present: none

LS: Leah Sokolofski
TP: Tim Patrick

LS: This is Leah Sokolofski talking here with Tim Patrick at his home in Danville. It is February 28th, 2001 and the accession number for this tape is ELFS-LKS-A022801.A. Okay, so I guess my first question is just, could you tell me a little bit about your farm and what you do here and what you produce?

TP: Mainly we produce vegetables. We also have sheep and chickens. Chickens mainly for eggs right now. Everything here is organic certified and has been for eight years. That's it in a nutshell I guess.

LS: And what goes into the production, I guess what are your inputs? I would assume like seeds?

TP: Yeah, probably seeds are one of the biggest expense. What are my inputs? The seeds, machinery costs, gasoline to run those machines, repair. Some organic fertilizers, some organic pesticides, those are less than 1% probably. But, I would say the major costs are seeds, labor, gas, and yeah, those are certainly the major ones.

LS: How does it fit into the economics, being organic versus being non-organic? Is it cheaper or more expensive? Obviously you don't use chemicals?

TP: Well, your production costs are going to be lower, but your yields are going to be sometimes lower. It depends. Organic in a general sense or organic in my sense is vastly different. You know, you take somebody like Rex Spray, his yields are much higher and his production costs are, I don't know what his production costs would be. Because, he's got to travel over the field more times to do more cultivation and things like that. But, he doesn't have to spend lots of money on nitrogen and pesticides and herbicides. So, something like that, that's economics with him. I mean, sometimes our, as vegetable farms go, our yields sometimes are probably lower, but sometimes probably higher. I don't know what it is, probably fifty-fifty. But our labor costs are going to be higher because we don't have any Mexicans up here. Because we can't, we're not big enough for Mexicans which other farms in Ohio do have. I'm just picking out Mexicans, I shouldn't pick on them. (chuckle) But immigrant laborers, of legal or illegal fashion, which is very prevalent even in Ohio. People don't realize that. So, it's economy of scale. We're small, so labor costs are much higher perhaps than other places. So, that's that.

LS: Do you think it would be…I guess one thing that you as organic seem to have sort of a niche in the market, but if you were non-organic and still just doing vegetables, on the scale that you're doing it, would there be any differences? Or does anyone else even just do produce if it's not organic on a small scale?

TP: Yeah, there are some people. Labor costs would be less because there are less weedings probably, half the labor. Two thirds of the labor that we do is probably attributed to weeds. So, you know, there are herbicides you can use on vegetables that control these problems. Not all, there are still even conventional guys have to do some weed control manually or mechanically. Hoeing or cultivation equipment or something like that. So, to answer your question, I don't know. I don't know if anybody exactly our size…

LS: Well, how did you get into organic or produce? Why is that an interest to you? Did you grow up on a farm?

TP: Yeah, I grew up here. Well, when I was ten we moved here. Ten or eleven, moved here from Cleveland. And my dad just kind of played around with it. We did a lot of things here. But, he also had a full-time job. So we earned some from the farm back then, but not as much as we do now. Why vegetables? Well, one of my things has been, you know, don't grow it if you can't eat it. You know, a lot of farmers they've got a couple hundred acres of whatever, typically around here it's gonna be either beans or corn, and you know, what are you gonna do with it? At least we got a lot of stuff around here that we can eat. And we cut down on some of those costs. Even if you can't sell it, you can still eat it. Self-sufficiency, I guess.

LS: Then where do you sell most of your produce or vegetables?

TP: Where?

LS: Yeah.

TP: We sell mostly to the North Market in Columbus….I would say probably about two-thirds are between the Gambier Market and the North Market. Pure retail. And then another third was wholesale- restaurants and small stores. Probably two-thirds of the wholesale is to small stores….That wasn't always, you top that out sometimes.

LS: In terms of labor is it easier to do the markets or to do wholesale?

TP: I don't know. I mean as far as, I don't know. I don't know how to respond to that. I don't see any difference. I was trying to think, you know, we pick a certain amount with the markets, or with the restaurants and the stores, the order is a certain amount so you go out and pick that amount. With the markets, you go out and pick usually just about everything that is ripe and/or what you think is going to sell, which is…vague. So it's kind of half a dozen and six on the other side from a later point of view.

LS: But then the time you invest in the markets?

TP: That's true, the time you spend at the market, it seems it would be a lot better moving towards certain wholesale markets. To a certain extent, as long as prices remain adequate.

LS: What is the price competition? If you are selling to a wholesaler or even retail, are you competing against other organic prices or other just produce prices in general?

TP: Yeah. (Laughs)

LS: Both?

TP: Yeah, both sometimes. It depends on where you're selling. If you're selling to like a store that only buys organic, organic or natural or local stuff, I mean of course you're just going to be competing with that stuff. But still, I mean what your competing against in the organic market a lot is California. Year-round really, so even in the summer. At the farmers markets you get some vegetable people…

LS: Do they ship stuff in from California to be sold at those organic markets?

TP: No. Not at the farmers markets, just stores.

LS: Are there stores around here that sell organic specifically? Well, I guess you have to label it as organic. Is there a big interest in that here, in the community?

TP: There's some. I wouldn't say 'big.' (Laughs) There's some. Statistically the organic is 10% of the population or something is like very interested or somewhat interested in organic. So I'd say it pretty much holds true for Knox County. Around 10% I'd say cares about it. Just a wild guess.

LS: Okay, this is sort of my big economic question. What are the economic pressures of being a farmer? I guess what's hard and what are the benefits of it?

TP: What are the economic benefits of being a farmer?

LS: Or what are the economic pressures? I was just thinking of farming as opposed to whether it be owning a store or selling the feed. I was thinking more in terms of other food oriented jobs in the county, but also maybe just in terms of other occupations.

TP: Well, I guess there's a lot of risks involved in it. If you raise animals, some might die and you lost that. If you're raising crops, the weather might wipe the crops out. Then on the other hand, depending on what happened. You know, you hear all the time, when they're having a good year, the farmer's getting screwed. Because, everyone has a good year. And that means the prices are going down the tubes. So that's just as bad in some ways. It's funny, but you hear about the poor crop of potatoes in Canada and hopefully that will improve the prices in the United States. Things like that. And now they're

saying, I just saw in the paper, I think the Mount Vernon paper, something about the Argentina, they're predicting rain now. Which they were getting dry weather, so now their soybean crop looks pretty good. So, soybeans just dropped. So, it's a global economy. I mean, even here in Knox County. Especially with the bigger farmers, they're getting pushed around by the big suppliers in Argentina. They're that big they don't care. So there's a lot of economic pressures. When you're a shop owner or a grocery store, you just, depending on what you're looking for you can look to buy the cheapest stuff, if you want to, if you don't care. If that's the kind of market you're after. Or you can buy decent stuff, or any range, or high end stuff. It depends who you're selling it to. But typically, there's somebody out there selling it, some supplier or farmer or whatever. So, farmers are like, you know, that's the way it is. Especially when you're raising animals, you're buying feed for them, not raising your own. Like we were raising chickens,…it gets to the point where your just moving money around it seems like. Your buying the feed, you go up to the feed place to buy the feed, bring it back and so many die or something like that. Or, suddenly it gets too hot and so many die off, and you take 'em in and you sell the chickens. And, you gave the feed guy so many hundred dollars and you get so many hundred dollars back, and you made five dollars an hour, if you're lucky, off your labor. And that's not counting selling 'em and taking 'em to the butcher and refrigeration costs. You know puttin' 'em in the freezer or whatever. So a lot of times it's just moving money around, and that's what I've tried to stay away from. A lot of times, it's getting into things like that.

LS: How do you see the flow of money circulating in Knox County in general, with relation to food? Does most of it go out, a lot of it stay in?

TP: Well, I imagine most of it goes out from an agricultural standpoint. Sure. I mean, look around, what's 99% of the farms around here. You could ask an extension agent to get those figures for you probably. But you know, most of it's going to be corn, soybeans, beef cattle, or something like that. Hay. That's probably over 90% of the farmable land in this county right there. Most of that, I don't know where it's going, but a lot of it's going out I'm sure. But it's not all going to Big Bear or Kroger or places like that. Those are the places that, they must be making a lot of money to have those two big stores in Mount Vernon. Plus there's Neff's and then there's another grocery store, and then there are a couple other smaller grocery stores. They seem to be doing okay, I guess. Kroger's has built a new store, so there must be a market here, and they're not buying locally. They might be buying some meat locally. You know most of the products and the money is, fruit and vegetables, I'm sure 99, almost 100% of the vegetables…less than one-tenth. I knew somebody that was selling hydroponics tomatoes and that was the only, you know we tried to sell to Kroger's years ago and stuff like that. So, it must be going out, it must be going out to the Big Bear company somewhere…I don't know. You can maybe find out, I don't know if they'd release that information, the profits, what the store's profitability is, they might because it's a public company.

LS: Do you sense that that's changed since you grew up? When you were growing up here, well I don't know if that's something you would even recognize or think about.

TP: I don't know. Then there's the whole aspect of restaurants and things like that. All those restaurants. In that respect, more people are eating out, I'm sure, since I was young. So, we've always had a big dinner with produce….But the restaurant trade, fast food, the Bob Evans chain type things, Ponderosa, those are a lot more prevalent. Someone must be paying for those. So, that's a huge market too. That's a huge amount of money that's leaving. It gives jobs, I guess, but not quality jobs. So it keeps some locally. So you know, it's certainly not produced here, let's put it that way, in Knox County.

LS: You mentioned hydroponics tomatoes and I've heard that word a few times before, but I've never found out what exactly it means.

TP: Hydroponics is things grown in a water solution. You just have the roots in, I don't know if it's a sponge or some sort of pebbles, media that there's a water, like a fertilizer mixture that runs, circulates through there and feeds the plants. In a greenhouse. They grow 'em up, start 'em in the wintertime and then have tomatoes starting, probably this time of year. They grow for months really and they also keep growing. They don't get diseased. There's a guy, probably less than a mile from here, who grows them. At least he was. You can grow lettuce hydroponically, cucumbers. Typically lettuce and tomatoes are the big ones in the United States…

LS: Is that organic or the chemicals are?

TP: No, it's just a chemical fertilizer mix. I don't know whether you could use an organic fertilizer and solution or not. I don't know.

LS: That's interesting.

TP: Yeah, it's an interesting idea.

LS: I've just heard that word and now that I'm taking this class, I'm starting to learn a lot more about farming and organic and all these new things are coming up and Half the time I don't know what they mean. Well, I guess talking about the flow of money in Knox County going out so much, how do you see your business playing into what's going on in the county? Or do you even see it in that realm?

TP: To be honest with you, at this point, I don't really care. To tell you the truth, I've been doing this for 8 years and I don't care where my money comes from, whatever. So as far as having local customers or wherever now. I mean, it would be nice, but. I was talking with this guy the other day and he was saying, you know, the bigger places get, the more concentrated they get. Other stores, smaller stores are being forced out of business. And that does open up room at the bottom. Because of stores limited in their selection really, in some ways. So that's possible I guess, that the niche is gonna get bigger at the bottom as this more concentration comes around. There's less product choice, ingredients and different things like that. You know, everything, not just finished product, but ingredients.

LS: You mentioned that you eat a lot of your food…Have you tried new things? Do you grow a lot of what you want to eat?…How do you choose what you grow?

TP: Yeah, well, we started growing a lot, I like a lot of different things. A lot of different vegetables, everything you know. So we started out growing a lot of different, unusual things and those sometimes have a much lower customer acceptance. So, I've come around now to grow more vanilla-type stuff in some ways. Except…like okra or something like that. It was a hit or miss thing. But I had never had it until like probably 12 years ago. But it's an interesting vegetable, I like it, but I never sold a lot of it. So it's not growing now. But I did get some seed this year because at the restaurant we sell to everyone's asking about it. And I know how to grow it, so that's a bonus. Having grown it before. Because it does take a little special care.

LS: Do consumers buy things based on, like if there's something new that they haven't tried before will they try it or do they tend to buy things that they know how to cook, or based on taste? Do you have any sense of that?

TP: Yeah, well most people buy what they know. Green beans, red tomatoes, things like that. Unless something has been in the news recently, or something like that. It's hard to get somebody to try something new, but a lot of times they like it, if you can get them to try it. Overall, most people just buy the regular stuff, what they knew.

LS: What do you grow most of? Are there certain products that you grow a lot of and then other products that you grow a little of?

TP: Tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, and other greens. Arugulas and mustard greens, endive. Those are probably the top, greens attribute for quite a bit of the sales. Summer squash is easy to grow. Beets are easy to grow, but hard to pick. We grow some of those. And you know, it depends on, I mean, peas would be nice, but typically I just grow snow peas because they're easiest to pick. And they grow the best. And we like them. So those are our big crops. We do grow other things. Winter squash is a big crop.

LS: Do you pick everything yourself, or do you have other labor that?

TP: We have hired like high school kids sometimes. My wife helps. It's kind of like a…

LS: Do you have a green house, or is it just mainly warmer weather…

TP: I just got a small greenhouse to start my transplants in a place like that.

END SIDE 1.
SIDE 2.

LS: So, this time of year are you doing transplant stuff?

TP: I've got some stuff started. I got some onions and celery started. The celery just started up two weeks ago. The onions…Probably next week I'll start some peppers and tomatoes after that. Eggplant somewhere in there.

LS: And then the stuff starts coming up when? June? May?

TP: Yeah, usually by, we could probably, see we've never really had much stuff early because we never had enough. To go to the market you need a certain mix of stuff. A critical mass of stuff to take to the market, so we've usually shot for like late June or something like that. You can have peas, beets…It would be possible to move it up, get a little bit of lettuce that we could sell to some restaurants.

LS: Are there regulations with the markets? In terms of, I don't know, cost to sell things there, or do you have to bring a certain amount?

TP: No, well, there's regulations such as, like in Gambier, there's no regulations…Other places there's regulations, like in the North Market, there was only so many people that could sell flowers. And you were supposed to sell just what you grew. You couldn't sell baked goods or jams or jellies, or any sort of prepared food. A friend had an orchard, he was selling apples and apple dumplings and he couldn't do that. So, no prepared foods. Just basically whatever you grow. And it has to be in raw form pretty much. I was selling dried tomatoes, those are okay because there aren't any regulations on it. But there will be someday. Just like eggs now, there's, have you heard about that?

LS: About the Buckeye Egg Farm and that?

TP: No, there's some sort of, I heard it about two or three months ago. There's some sort of thing, well before you had to keep the eggs in a cooler, okay. Which makes sense, if you're selling a farmers market. That's okay. But now, there's some talk that there's egg regulations going into effect that if you have so many chickens, you can only sell off your farm. It's like if somebody drove up here, that's okay. But you can't take 'em anywhere. So if you want to take 'em somewhere, it has to be like in a refrigerated unit. You can take them if they're not in a cooler, or something like that I heard. I don't know, they're supposed to come out here pretty soon, next month or so. These new regulations. 'Cause the government don't have anything better to do. Because all these people are dropping dead on these farm fresh eggs evidently. (Laughter) So I don't know, I don't know what the problem is. Like, there was something about maple syrup too. Couple weeks ago there was something and I think they backed down on that. I heard Fred Dailey said that 'we're not trying regulate it out of existence.' You know, there's never been a problem with maple syrup production. As far as I know. They said they were going to not have dirt floors in there, or something like that. In most of them, I guess they have an evaporator, just up there on a cement foundation and just put a shed over it. In the woods. So if you was it out at the beginning of the year and make sure it's clean, it's no big deal. But, there's never been a problem with maple syrup, as far as I know. No contamination. So, there's always some regulations…Who's this tape going out to anyways?

LS: Well, it's not going out to anyone. It will be put in the Rural Life Center in catalogs. But, I have a release form, so if you don't want certain people to see it, we can arrange that.

TP: Yeah, well, I won't say.

LS: So, increased regulations obviously make it a little more difficult. Economically, do they have that much of an impact?

TP: No, I mean not on us, not yet. It might someday regulate how you wash your lettuce. We were going to do sprouts. We got this cabinet that sprays water onto trays. Like buckwheat sprouts, alfalfa sprouts, clover sprouts, broccoli sprouts, those type of things. We bought that like three or four years ago. It's a cabinet. It's about seven feet high and holds twenty trays, that are about two feet square. We tried it and we had it right here as a matter of fact, right here.

LS: Wow.

TP: In the house because, we didn't have any other place for it. We wanted to build that building over there, for part of that use, for putting it over there. And we tried it somewhat in here. It worked for pretty nice. We were selling to a wholesaler in Columbus, an organic and natural food wholesaler we were selling around Ohio and really the Midwest, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas around there.

LS: And they're called FORK?

TP: Federation of Ohio Rivers Co-op. FORC. They sell to, they're a wholesaler. They'll sell to like a Wild Oats or something like that. Or the Kroger's too, if they want like a natural food line. Dried goods or vegetables. We're selling them sprouts, and then we were going to get back into it and fix that building up last year… And then we find out, like just a month before or after we were thinking about starting it up, there were regulations going into effect that you have to rinse your sprouts in chlorine before you sprout 'em. Which, is not allowed organically. You can actually rinse them in hydrogen peroxide organically, although, I don't know. I don't know if that was, as far as organic people were concerned, it's okay. But I don't know as far as those regulations, I think the regulations said you still had to use the chlorine, although it had the same effect. Hydrogen peroxide is a sterilizing media or formula, chemical. Also you have to have your water tested, your water that drains out of the device after you spray them and then it keeps them moist. You have to have that tested, like once a week or something like that. For E coli and salmonella, which is like a $50 or $75 test, or was it once every other day. I don't know, but it was a lot. You know where do you get a test like that around here. So, it just kinda squeezed all the little guys out of the business… The people that were, the stories you heard about the people that were selling the seeds, they were throwing them in the back of the truck that they just hauled pig manure from…the raw cloves in the back, tried to haul it. This other guy, he had a shallow well. This guy way up in Canada and he had his dairy cattle all along the shallow well, he sprayed the sprouts

with it… So you know, it's just a bunch of idiots really screwing up everything for the other people. You know, there's all sorts of stories like that. So that's one thing that turned us.

LS: Well, I think that's all the questions I have. But, is there anything else you would like to share with me? Or anything that I should really think about for my topic?

TP: Well, I think as far as what you should do. You know if you're doing Knox County, I'm a little tiny speck on the radar really. Not only because I'm organic, but because I do vegetables too. The people that are driving the agriculture economy are growing corn and soybeans. And you know, as you saw from that IFO (Innovative Farmers of Ohio) thing, the guy that was doing that. There's a tremendous amount of government aid that's being plowed into it. You know conventional growers and people that are growing standard crops. What does this mean for the future, it doesn't really help the small to medium sized farmer. If that's what any of this has to do with, which I think it does, the Rural Life thing and Howard Sacks' things. You know someday these people around here are just going to be working for a company. Tyson's or Dupont or whoever. Dupont, they're all vertically integrated into the biotech, 'cause that's the hottest thing. They have a whole biotech wing now at Dupont, because it started up over the past five or ten years. So that's what's gonna happen. These companies are just going to be owning the land and they're just going to be new employees. Something is not with subsistence and sustainable farming agriculture. And something just recently, yeah, not only chicken growers or something like that, but the Dupont tractor, the big guys. They have much higher heating costs this year. 50%-100% up and they can't renegotiate their contracts, they're set. So they're not getting nothing. And that's what's gonna happen, they don't care, these companies, they don't care. It's an employee, well, it's even worse, it's a contract. It's an outside contractor. So you're just running a contract and if they're coming up desperate, it looks good. You know, profit. They just keep squeezing 'em, they play them off against each other. 'Well, this guy's gonna give me this much.' And that's just what's gonna happen. Not so much around here, because maybe these farms are somewhat more broken, it's broken up a lot more than in western Ohio where there's big 1,000 acre fields that happen more so. But around here, this is just going to be a bunch of houses here.

LS: Well, here's a question. I don't know if you know the answer to this. But the people who do farm soy or corn or things that aren't necessarily things they can eat, do you get a sense that they have a small plot of land that they farm vegetables or things that they can eat?

TP: Yeah, a lot of people out here do have a family garden, if they have a family big enough to get around to it. I see people here with a big acre of sweet corn, and the family shares it. They freeze it or can it. Sweet corn's always popular. So you see a lot of that, and everyone, they do like gardening. But, I've heard farmer's say it takes a lot of time too.

LS: Okay, well, I guess that's about it for me. So, thanks so much. This has been great.

TP: Are you going to talk to some other people here?

LS: Yeah, I've talked to a few people. I would like to talk to more, but just because of time constraints we don't have that much time to talk to everyone. But I talked to Sam Gilardi over at Lannings, and I talked to Regina White who has a Taste of Country. It's a little store over in Fredericktown. They do mostly bulk foods. I guess it just opened up in December. And then, I talked to a guy at the Farmer's Co-op. That was my first thing and I realized that they deal with basically feed and not food so much.

TP: Yeah, but it all goes, you're feeding animals to eat, I suppose.

LS: Yeah, so it's sort of all connected. So I'm trying to get a picture. That's the interesting thing about my topic is that money really does connect a lot of things. And economics is in one sense, why people do what they do, because they have to. And I think just being an agriculturally based county, I guess that ties a lot of people together. I guess that's what I've learned.

TP: Well, there's a lot of money flown in from the government. These farmers would go out of business, ¾ of them tomorrow, if there wasn't crop supports and payments. And that's a whole other topic. You need some sort of support, but it just kind of trickled. Just giving them enough to keep them on life support. And the big guys have taken advantage of these kind of things, and structured their businesses to…

END OF TAPE.