

Ira Wallace
Southern Exposure Seed Exchange – Mineral, Virginia

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[Begin Ira Wallace-March 7, 2013]

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Sara Wood: So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance and it's March 7, 2013 a day after a big old snow storm out here in Mineral, Virginia. And I'm sitting with Ira Wallace of the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. Ira, I'm hoping that you could just say hello and introduce yourself and tell us who you are and what you do?

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Ira Wallace: Okay; my name is Ira Wallace and I'm one of the worker/owners of the cooperatively managed Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. We shepherd about 700 varieties of heirloom and open pollinated seeds. We work with about 50 family farms, all over the region and a few beyond. And when I'm not busy with Southern Exposure I'm on the Board of the Organic Seed Alliance and the Virginia Association for Biological Farming and I – I just finished writing a book about gardening in the Southeast. And when I have time I blog. **[Laughs]**

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SW: When you have time? **[Laughs]** And for the record could you tell me your birth date?

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IW: I was born August 25, 1948 in Florida and I have been a lot of places since then. I moved up to Canada; I spent some time on a Kibbutz. I worked for half a year in the largest organic farm in Scandinavia when I was young. And – and then I settled in 1984 into the rolling hills of Virginia and that's what I call home.

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SW: Ira how did you get started with farming? I mean why – why farming and how?

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IW: Well I got started with gardening in college. And it was in those days when they didn't have that much vegetarian food at the dining hall and I was like you know all active in that kind of thing. And we started a school garden. Can you believe it? That was a long – that was in 1967; that was a long time ago at the college. And then for fun I took all of these taxonomy classes and stuff and so but I didn't think that was going to be my work. I thought that was my fun.

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And but you know it just kept bouncing back and you know being involved like I was a member of the Seed Savers – National Seed Savers Exchange when it first began and herbs were my thing at first. I – I worked with herbs, volunteered at a bunch of botanical gardens when I lived in North Carolina, and volunteered at the North Carolina Botanical Garden giving tours to school kids and showing them about native plants and things like that. But when I decided that I wanted to live in the country and do home study things the gardening bumped itself up into farming. And that was in 1974.

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In – outside of Chapel Hill, North Carolina in a little place called Cedar Grove and we had a 200-acre farm there with several other families and it was my first dipping into living cooperatively in a community and yeah. And I guess I've been at it ever since.

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SW: When you said – I want to go back to something you said; you said you thought it was just going to be your fun, it was going to be more of something you did to just enjoy it and not have to do it for work. I mean how did that – how did that cross over? I mean was – I’m wondering why you say that. Is it because it’s at first you thought maybe it wasn’t sustainable financially or – ?

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IW: Well you know the joke about a farmer what would you do if you won the lottery – keep farming until I use up the money, so I – I guess I didn’t think of farming as a way to make a living. And – and in some ways it’s difficult because you know I have – I personally have found over the years of doing farming that I – I have made more money teaching about farming and – and perhaps that’s ‘cause teaching was what I was going to do and so teaching about farming and doing workshops and things comes easy to me. And but you know we tried all these different things and they were hard. You worked harder than working in an office or in a professional job and you didn’t have as much money. And I think that you know I have come over the years to feel more strongly that it’s important for farmers to have a living wage. You know if food is so cheap in this country that farmers can’t make a living farming then how are we going to have good food? So you know I guess – the time when we ran into the Seed Company it was a good thing for us to try to figure out what that balance between having reasonable prices for customers and being able to have a living wage for the farmers that we work with and the people who are here I the co-op you know making sure that of quality control and selecting varieties and doing things so that you can have good seed.

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SW: And I also wanted to go back; you said you started with gardening. I mean does – is that something you just did by yourself or was there people – were there family members?

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IW: Well I grew up with gardening. My grandmother was a big gardener and we – I lived in Tampa, Florida most of the time when I was a young woman – well from when I was three until I went to college, and you know she had these crazy gardens. We have trees, soursops, and other things that you know I really haven't seen much since I've been in Florida and we had a mango tree and an avocado tree and a pecan tree. And our lot was actually three city lots, so we had this great big garden and we had chickens and all this stuff. And I – I just thought that was what you did in your spare time. And so that's how I thought it would be, you know and you certainly didn't get a college degree [*Laughs*] to farm – at least where I grew up, so – .

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But I discovered that people get PhDs and farm. [*Laughs*]

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SW: Where did you go to school and – and did – what did you study there? I mean when you found out that people actually do study this stuff, is that what you decided to do and – ?

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IW: Well actually by the time I found out people really studied this I was out of college, but when – I went to New College in Sarasota, Florida and which is like the honors – now the honors college of the University Florida system but it was a private school at that time, and I studied different things. You got to make up your major so this was cooperative education, 'cause you

know it was – it was a time of – of change. And so what I did in college is I took classes, enough of them concentrated so that it was okay with the school and I started a parent/child daycare center in the African American section of town in the housing project. And sort of you know had one of these moments of you get what you ask for and it turns out not to be what you want. And we wrote a big grant and – and successfully got it and – but we didn't realize that one of the stipulations was that you needed to have accredited teachers. So the parents could not teach officially anymore and – and that was a sad thing because when they had to they did and it meant that people learned a lot of stuff and that people saw themselves being able to get not only their child get an education but them get – get an education and – and there was less of that impetus when we had qualified teachers.

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You know if we had written it in that a part of their job was to work with the parents and have them be co-teachers or something maybe it would have been different but it never occurred to me it wouldn't be like that 'cause that's how it was with us volunteers. So – so that was interesting. And yeah; they were – were just starting an environmental studies institute at New College, but it wasn't like something you could major in, so I took classes for fun and you know plant identification and taxonomy and stuff, but it wasn't actually a farmer – it was more of a conservation-related thing. And you know I – I don't know; I just saw it was important but I didn't know how people made livings doing things like that at the time.

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And yeah; and I still – I still don't know. You know it's like we do this and it's worked out but we – we took over Southern Exposure from Jeff McCormick who started it and we supported Southern Exposure for three years. And if we hadn't been committed to it even if we weren't making money it wouldn't still be here, you know. but over that time our interest in – in

cooperation you know caused us to work with more farmers and – and in some ways trying to figure out how to make it be a cooperative venture and actually saying I have to pay the farmers a living wage and looking at that and saying that actually only means 25-cents difference in the pack of seeds – made it a more viable business. And so that – that was a – a good learning experience for me and – and certainly made me interested in other organizations that support organic seeds and heirloom seeds to try to have that be true not just at Southern Exposure but throughout the industry. And we've found great partnerships you know in working you know with ECHO Seeds and Maine and really trying to you know change the terms of engagement for the farmers who are growing seeds.

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SW: I'm wondering if you could kind of talk about I mean you know you're very – you're – you're – I don't know what the technical name for it is so if you can explain what your interest is or where your interest started in seeds per se. I think that when people just talk about farming they just think about the crops, but sometimes it's hard for people who aren't familiar or that close to it to think about the whole process of the – you know the seeds. And can you – can you talk about what you do with seeds and – and what your expertise is for people who may not be able to wrap their heads around it?

00:11:48

IW: Well we – we specialize in heirloom and open pollinated seeds. And why we – I mean I'm not totally against hybrid seeds; you know I think there's some people making organic hybrids with integrity but – you can't save your own seeds from that. And I came to this seed business first and foremost as a – a seed saver and as a person you know personally interested in

preserving the – the variation and the genetics of all of these varieties for future generation. I mean we don't know what we need; we don't know what's important. You know the people in the time of the Irish potato famine were getting great yields and so forth but they had every single variety that was commercially being grown at that time and had the same genetics and be susceptible to the same diseases. And so it's important that you maintain those genetics for those more practical reasons but the other reason is the amazing flavors, the colors, you know the beauty of the varieties that are there and then there's regional adaptability, something that does well when it's rainy at the beginning of the season and dry at the end, whereas another one will do well and tolerate a bit of dryness at the beginning of the season but they need a lot of rain, you know when the crop is maturing. And you, you know if there are a lot of different varieties around and ones that you do well in your area then you can select ones that will prosper in the conditions you have available locally. And it's that part of the seed equation that for me has been very important is to have a lot of things that have regional adaptability to give customers information, because a lot of our customers are Southern expatriates living in the cold north land or in the Pacific Northwest and they still want the food that they grew up with. And so you know there will be somebody like Carol Deppe [scientist and gardener] who will develop select out of one of our traditional lady peas, Fast Lady, Southern – Northern/Southern Pea, a Southern Pea that will grow in those cool Pacific Northwest conditions.

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So we you know we concentrate on things that do well in our region but we also try to offer the amazing diversity of varieties that we have in our regions to people and home gardeners in particular in other regions for whom it's important.

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SW: Uh-hm; and you talked about how you've been all over the place. You've been to Canada and Israel and I'm wondering did you – when you got out of school were you interested in the seed process or did that come – was that always a part of what you do or did that come a little later when you got involved with Southern Exposure?

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IW: Yes and no; I was, as I said, this whole gardening thing has been a hobby since I left home, since I was 17. And I guess I thought of seed-saving as kind of not exactly like I do now – more as a cross-cultural activity, things – seeds of things that aren't commonly available that you – if you want to have it you have to save the seeds and but as a hobby, you know not like something somebody would actually do and sell. And I wanted to see the world. I grew up in a kind of closed African American community and my grandmother who raised me died the year I went to college. And I guess I just decided I didn't exactly – I couldn't go back home in the way it had been – that I wanted to see the world and I – I already had this interest in this homesteading and stuff going on. And so you know when I traveled I wanted to see you know places that were different like the Kibbutz because they were doing you know those kinds of experiments.

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And actually you know you get assigned a family and my Kibbutz mother is – was – she's a botanist and now she's world-famous which I didn't even know 'cause I hadn't – I hadn't really been keeping up with her, but she germinated a 2,000 year old date palm seed, called methuselah that was like in nature [*Laughs*] and I – I just found this out like last year when a mutual friend said oh, "Have you been in touch with Elaine Soloway? Did you see this?" And they sent me this article about the work that she had been doing and just in line with that, but at that time she was just collecting biblical plants and starting them and trying to – and research

them and stuff like that. So and since I had this interest in historic plants you know we had that as an interest over the years and you know she went on to get her PhD and do all these fancy studies about such things and she's been doing incredible work helping people in the third world based on varieties that do well in desert conditions.

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So yeah; I guess it was an interest but I – as I say it was a strong hobby interest. By the time that I went to Scandinavia I – I was at a community there called Swan Home and I was pretty sure I was interested in at least community-scale, like at Twin Oaks growing for 100 people, so working on their commercial organic farm was just kind of seeing what happens when you scale it up.

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SW: And can you talk a little bit more about the Kibbutz like what it is and – and what that was like for you to – to be there after you know being – ? I don't know if you went straight there from Florida but if you could just talk about what was going through your mind or just how – what you were thinking when you walked into a place like that?

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IW: Well when I went to Kibbutz it was sort of – I had gone to North Carolina and you know tried my first hand at starting a – a cooperative community and it didn't – hadn't worked out because many of us in that group were like – had sort of dropped – it was a stop on an educational path. And so we bought this farm and we paid for it and then people went to graduate school. And I was like, "I don't want to stay here by myself." So then we ended up selling the farm and giving part of the land to the Nature Conservancy. I got to be a lifetime member, yeah

[Laughs] from – from that little adventure and it was after that but I was still very interested in community. And I was sort of on my way to live in a community in Canada but there was an international communities gathering in Israel and I got invited to that and to stay on and – in Kibbutz. And Kibbutz is an income-sharing agricultural group in Israel but actually they do all kinds of things like now other – have other businesses and factories there. And so it was a chance to kind of see how they lived cooperatively and also to you know play a bit at farming and see how that was and – yeah.

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So I – I had a great time there; it was fun. I got to learn a little Hebrew. [Laughs]

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SW: Do you still know Hebrew, like can you still pull it out if you have to?

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IW: Uh; I can, yeah. [Speaking Hebrew] Yeah; so that – you know so that was a – a good opportunity and because I had this teaching children interest I had got to work with the children there and that was how I learned a bit of Hebrew ‘cause they didn’t care that I couldn’t speak. They just kept talking to me. And yeah; yeah and – and the Kibbutz, Ketura where Elaine Soloway lives in the desert they were doing some of the first experiments you know with organic gardening on Kibbutz and – and stuff like that, so it was an interesting time to be there.

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SW: So before we go I just want to make sure, where in North Carolina was the farm that you purchased?

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IW: It was outside of Chapel Hill, well just north of Hillsboro in a town called Cedar Grove, yeah.

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SW: And then after you left Israel what did you do and how did you take what you learned there and bringing it back here?

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IW: Well I left there and I went and lived in a community in Canada that my partner, Gordon Sproule but we weren't partners then yet had helped found called Dandelion and I went there and I was a garden manager of a two-acre garden. So I guess nowadays that would be a small farm, but at that time we thought it was a large garden and – and I had an interest in herbs and Richter's Herbs was not too far from us. And so I went to lots of workshops there and sold herbs at the farmers' market and did all these things and I started doing herbal workshops. This is when I told you I realized that teaching about what I had learned actually – and writing about it was easier to make a living at then actually selling product.

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And so you know over the time I lived there I did regular herb workshops and things like that which I continue to do at Twin Oaks at least once a year now just for the fun of it 'cause it's so fun to have people come who are all excited about what you're excited about and the nice thing about having these home workshops is they get to see your garden and they get all excited you know. I love making all – I like to cook too so I make all of these herbal treats and people

come and they come back and bring their friends. Some of them say just for the food – .

[Laughs] But hey that's why we grow these gardens is so we can have all of that flavor and aroma in our kitchen.

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SW: So Ira so how did you decide; I mean how did you – you settled on – you settled in Virginia but why – what was it about this place that made you come here and decide to settle here?

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IW: Well I came to Twin Oaks – I came to Virginia because of Twin Oaks. And what I liked about Twin Oaks before I moved here is like the climate, like you have four seasons. But it's actually pretty mild so you can do a lot of you know gardening things. And I like the people you know. I – I'm a people person so the – I had these ideas of homesteading but actually living with one person and kids in the country might not have suited me too well. [Laughs]

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SW: How come?

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IW: 'Cause I like to talk and do crazy projects and you know the thing about a community is you can enroll other people in your projects and make things happen in a way that is possible elsewhere, but not so easy. So you know I could be a bit of a butterfly gardening, but doing some workshops and you know I for many years, I did crafts. I made things out of recycled tin cans

and other things and I could do that and yeah. You know and somebody would water the garden while I was gone on the weekend and it wouldn't drop dead [*Laughs*] so it was good.

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And I've just been very interested in you know alternative economic models. I – I feel like you know I mean as I've gotten into agriculture it becomes much more clear that what we want is for everyone who we depend on to provide the things we need to live to have you know a fair wage, a living wage. And I'm telling you minimum wage is not a living wage. Most of the people I know wouldn't want to live on that and I think the people who are providing you with sustenance should get to live what you consider a reasonable life as well. And yeah; so I got to do all of the above when I joined Twin Oaks and I – I loved it. And I would have continued there but there was a time when the community was full for like two years and so no one could join and so some of us you know made a proposal that we start another community nearby and that's when Acorn came into being. And we thought well if we're going to have a new place let's pick land that's good agricultural land, so maybe we can actually make a go of doing some agricultural thing and supporting ourselves. And so we did and we moved here and we had a CSA and but then we were you know maybe this – several winters after we had been here we saw an ad from Jeff who started Southern Exposure saying he needed some office help. And a couple of people, we were like, "Oh it would be fun to do that," but a couple of people who weren't actually doing other things said, "Yes!" including Cricket Rakita, who was the first manager of Southern Exposure after we bought it – went and worked for Jeff and then we grew seeds and that was kind of fun, too. And the next year I guess, two years later, the opportunity to buy the company and have it become a co-op came up so we did. And that was 1999 and what is it now – 2013; yeah. So we have been you know working together with our growers and you know we have loved Jeff. He's been such a mentor to us and we've you know gotten involved

more with the Seed Savers Exchange; this year we're going to have a regional Seed Saver – this exchange gathering as a part of the Heritage Harvest Festival. Oh my goodness; I forgot about that – that was a big thing.

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Like one – seven years ago, one summer I was talking with a friend about I had been to California to a Great Tomato Tasting and I said, “It would be so good to do this. You know and I know exactly where we should have it. We should have it at Monticello. It's so beautiful there.” And blah, blah, and we were like just doing this and writing some notes – for fun we wrote up a proposal about how this could be and how we would finance it and so forth, and I got on my town clothes and made an appointment with Peggy Cornett who was then the director of their Center for Historic Plants and suggested we have a festival at the center. And low and behold a week later she says yes. So we started doing that and that has become a really big event for us. It's great to be able to share all these tomato varieties and melons and peppers and – but not just that; it's like there is a whole community of people in the Charlottesville area who really want to make good food accessible to all. And the – the festival is an opportunity for that community to come out and celebrate together.

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So last year over 6,000 people participated in the two days of the festival and it's a chance to see it on the ground. This year it's going to be even more fun. Oh my goodness; we're going to have local cheeses and apples and other late summer fruit tasting, our usual tomato tasting. We like to have chefs you know come. Edna Lewis who – who lived in Orange [Virginia] when she wasn't in New York spreading good Southern food up there, her nephew is going to come and who is a chef. He was actually the executive chef for the House of Representatives

before he dropped out to be a farmer – yay. **[Laughs]** And he’s going to come and do a tasting for us and yeah it’s going to be fabulous.

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SW: Your excitement for all of this is very infectious. I mean I – I – when I was thinking of questions to ask you I thought wow; there’s so many things, but I didn’t realize how exciting it would be to listen to all this like you’re very – you’re a very good spokesperson for all this as well as a doer obviously. But you’re – you’re just so delightful to be around Ira. **[Laughs]**

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IW: **[Laughs]**

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SW: I just want to back up to make sure that I have the dates and everything. So what year did you leave Twin Oaks to start Acorn; what year was that?

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IW: Nineteen ninety-three is when we started Acorn.

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SW: Okay; and can you explain how it works for people who don’t really – who have never been part of a community like this before, like what is it like and how do you become involved?

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IW: Well it's easy to become involved. We have a visitor program. You come and visit for three weeks which takes – I mean you could come for a Saturday tour and look around. You could come for a conference and see even more, like – . But say you've gone through some of that and decided you want to try it out, you come for a visitor period as we say and it's like you come and drop in and live with the community for three weeks as if you were a new member, you know which is you know you – you help other people do this and that and the other and see what's going on and learn about the different areas. There are meetings to tell you about how the community is structured and so forth. And if you're interested at the end of that time you apply for membership and write a letter about why you want to come and then you go away. And people have a couple weeks to give input about how they experienced you and if they wanted to invite you back. And if you're invited back you have I guess six months to move back and you can extend that by coming back for another week if you're still tied up in whatever your life is about.

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Anyway and you come back and it's – we are income-sharing; we're not wealth-sharing or something so if you have assets or stuff before you can't use them while you're a member but you don't have to turn them over. You can do something with them. And but while you're a member you live on the income that we earn together and share equally. And so it's a little bit different that way; you know each person has their own individual room but you live in a group house. And you know our businesses are cooperatively owned and run. We have managers, so sometimes if you're a new person you think this is that person's business, but it's only their business to run as long as they have the consent of the group to be running it. So you have to treat people in a way that they want you to be [*Laughs*] you know taking on that coordinating role. And if you're – if you're not you'll get just kicked out of that job. [*Laughs*] And so no, no,

‘cause you have to you know – because you have to remember that no matter what a person does in the community that their voice is important. So yeah; so that’s what the story is.

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And with Acorn you know Twin Oaks supported the formation of Acorn which is the home of Southern Exposure by lending us \$250,000 to buy a farm and get started. You know and they did that because when Twin Oaks was formed someone lent the community enough money to buy land and on reasonably favorable terms and so forth. So it was like passing that favor forward.

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SW: And when you first came out here and Acorn was formed or Acorn was formed and you guys came out here how many people were part of Acorn at the time and how many people do you have now? I mean has it – has it increased?

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IW: When we first started there were 10 people. When we came and you know some Twin Oakers helped us out and stuff like that. And it took us a while to grow but now we’re 30 members and in the summer we’re more ‘cause we have interns that come for anywhere from one to four months. And so yeah; so we’re a big group. And that’s you know we’re starting to have – I mean my children are gone – are grown but young people are starting to have children so we have a new generation of little babies floating around babies to be [*Laughs*] floating around in their moms. So yeah; so we’re growing and we’re building a great new office, which is such a crazy building. It’s a combination of traditional building techniques with some of the latest energy efficiency things so like you know it has a timber frame and it has some straw bale

walls on the north side but then the roof is some high-tech very energy-efficient panels which I forget the name of, so it's going to be fun when it's done to show it off.

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SW: I'm wondering also you know you said in 1999 Jeff sold Southern Exposure and so had you been – I mean had you been a part of it somehow before he sold it or was it new to you?

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IW: Just well we – we had been involved two years. We had – some people had worked those two winters for Jeff in the office. He actually offered it to one of those members and he said, “You know that's not how it is here. We're a group and how do you feel about the group taking that on?” And we had been growing seed for Jeff, so we knew a little bit about both ends of the deal, but a part of what made it attractive is Jeff offered to offer support and people who had been his employees offered to continue to work for the company the first year and train people just in all the office details and so forth.

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So it – it seemed like something you know that we could do. And we did, but we discovered that to be able to do it efficiently and well it took a while [*Laughs*] and so we were just treading water for those first couple years.

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SW: And for you I mean does – how does – how is growing – you said growing for seed and I'm not really sure how – how is that different? Can you explain with the difference is? I mean

are there differences in growing for seed and growing food? Like how – how did that change for you or maybe that's something you were already doing and I'm just curious.

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IW: Well we were doing a bit of it. I mean as I said, I have this herb hobby, so I had been saving seeds of herbs for – off and again for years, but not saving a lot of seed. There's a difference between doing a little bit of something and doing a lot of it. And the other thing is seed crops are in the ground a lot longer than vegetable crops for the most part. There are a few things like tomatoes, you know or winter squash where there's a little bit of a difference but not much. But most of the dry seeded crops you know they're in the ground and then they're in the ground for six weeks to six months longer in order to get seeds. And so you for one thing you get exposed to diseases that you never knew existed. If you only eat the leaves of it, so you'd have to pay a lot of attention. For example, lettuce, you know you have that lettuce at a foot apart. When you're growing that lettuce for seed you need to have it be at least two feet and sometimes three feet apart and you have to stake it, because that big old flower sack will fall over and you know other detailed things like that – that make a difference.

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And really we only get good lettuce seed either in a high tunnel or by making a little roof over the lettuce 'cause it's out there so long that you know it'll get beat down before the seed is – is ripe. And you know learning to carry things over the winter and stuff like that – . [*Cell Phone Rings*]

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SW: Do you need to get – ?

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IW: So you know so it's a bit of a different thing and it's a different emphasis. You also have to pay attention to isolation distances. You know some things that are like tomatoes and beans that people traditionally grow quite a bit of don't require such a big isolation distance. So you can you know grow – we can grow five or six varieties and spread them out by say 180 feet, which is not that much on a farm. In a small garden it would be a lot. Or, if you're just saving seed for yourself you can actually isolate them by what they call "bagging," covering them with some material. We often use floating row cover pieces to do that so that you don't have accidental cross-pollination. But you know learning about those things or learning about isolation distances and learning about how long it takes for it to be ready, learning about things that – beans you could let them dry on the plant and people out West do but we usually don't. We let them – as soon as they're fully ripe we harvest them and let them finish drying inside, because it rains a lot as you're going into the fall here and it's getting – things will get moldy if you leave them out in the field. And so –

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So there was a big learning curve about growing a little bit of something for seed and growing a lot of it.

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SW: And at the time that you guys – at the time that Acorn took over Southern Exposure I mean how many – how many clients were there and – and how has that changed up to now and how has that changed what you guys do if it has?

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IW: [*Laughs*] Well, well, well; you know it's good that we have a bunch of over-educated people here because we have taken a lot of advantage of technology for just keeping track of orders and keeping track of inventory and seed lots and such things because we had I think we gave out 10,000 catalogs or maybe 15,000 the first year that we had Southern Exposure and now last year we gave out 90,000. And this year we actually have might end up giving 110,000 catalogs.

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And in the course of that time the majority of our orders are placed online. And you would think that we wouldn't need to give catalogs, but let me tell you something; you don't send people their catalog they will call you up and tell you how bad you are, because it's one thing to place an order online. It's another thing to fondle that catalog, to sit in a nice comfy chair and flip through it and look at the illustrations and stuff. That's what you need to do before you're ready to go online and place that order. So we learned that to our customers that the paper catalogue is a resource that they use throughout the year.

00:43:17

SW: And do the – do your – do the catalogues go like all over the country? Is it worldwide? How does it work?

00:43:24

IW: We – okay; the majority of our customers are in the Southeast, like three-quarters, but we have other customers all over the US and Canada and a few customers abroad and we sell them – we're not willing to deal with a whole lot of trouble to ship to them. If they figure out what the

rules are and tell us and send us the money to pay for it whatever it is, and it's not too much trouble, we will ship to them. But many of those customers who are abroad actually you know are expats and they have family here or something who will get their little order of seeds and arrange for it to be shipped to them, which we like just fine 'cause it's a lot of – it's complicated shipping abroad and you know the focus of our business is this kind of region but as I say, we want people to be able to have these varieties because you know what? Many of the things that we think of as our own came to us from Africa or you know the Middle East or somewhere, so you know – why are we going to deny that to future generations?

00:44:40

SW: And who buys seeds? I mean is it – is it all kinds of people? Are there farmers that buy from you guys or you like you mentioned people who miss certain things that they grew up with in terms of food?

00:44:51

IW: Well our biggest client base is home gardeners; that's who we cater to. But with the rise of small market farms, people who are growing on four or less acres, we have more and more customers who are like that. They want to have unique regional varieties to offer at the farmers' market and such. And many of them you know make special deals with us. They'll tell us what they want ahead of time and we'll get the farmers growing it to grow extra and then even though we don't offer pounds normally of the thing in the catalogue for that customer who has told us in advance so that we can actually have the seed we'll fix them up in the fall and send them their stuff and they can offer greasy beans to their customers. **[Laughs]**

00:45:49

SW: And Ira when did you start – at what point – I’m wondering and maybe this has been all along but at what point did you start doing a lot more teaching and you know you’re writing a book and I know that you blog and – and you do all sorts of things outside as well; when did that start? When did you start doing that? Has that been all along?

00:46:06

IW: Well you know I started doing herb – I started doing workshops actually when I was in college. [*Laughs*] You know they were you know it was a big do it yourself kind of thing, so we had this student garden, so I started having classes for the other students about how to work in the garden and so forth. And then when I moved to the farm in North Carolina one of the things I did was volunteer at the North Carolina Botanical Gardens in their herb garden and also they had a program for tours for school children. And so in both of those cases you know I was doing workshops and then when I moved to Canada and I started doing well mostly wildflower and native herb walks, regularly. And then a couple of times a year I did a weekend herb retreat and we would you know cook and go on walks and look at our herb gardens at the farm we had there. And so yeah; it just kind of – .

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So it – it was I didn’t do that much of it when we – the first two years we had Southern Exposure I didn’t do that much but one day Tony Cleese from Carolina Farm Stewardship Association sent a letter and saying, “We’re doing this big Southeastern Seed Saving – we’re putting in a grant for this project. Would Southern Exposure sign on as one of you know the – I forget what the word is – you know co-originaors of these things and help with some of the education?” And I’m like, “Oh, I’ll do that; that would be fun.” And so that was the Saving Our

Seed Project and we created from that a number of seed-saving guides for the Southeast and actually got Jeff back into the arena to share all his years of knowledge and Cricket Rakita who had been the first manager here had left and he took a job coordinating the information. And that's when I started doing workshops a lot about seed saving and so forth is in that – . We organized the one here; we had it at Twin Oaks 'cause there wasn't enough room here at Acorn to have all these people and I guess we over that three years we did a number of workshops with each of the different – as we created the pamphlets and stuff.

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And from then on I've been off and running [*Laughs*]; yeah.

00:49:03

SW: And your book is going to be published soon – ?

00:49:04

IW: It's going to be published by Timber Press in December of 2013.

00:49:10

SW: And what is the book about?

00:49:11

IW: It's the Timber Press Guide to Year – well Year-Round Vegetable Gardening in the Southeast – is the working title. It's going to be something in that neighborhood [*Laughs*] and they are doing several regional guides and they asked me to do the Southeast and right now I'm actually doing my final round of editing, well actually I'll get a last chance actually after it's laid

out but this is the last chance to do any substantial changes. So and that's been really fun and also scary 'cause it's one thing to write an article you know. The first time I wrote an article for *Fine Gardening* I thought I was really something. [Laughs] But you know I – but this book sort of forces you to, you know put it together and have things relate to each other and try to not repeat yourself too much. [Laughs] But it's been – it's been great and lots of friends have you know been willing to read through and give me constructive feedback and in – in anticipation my friend Pam Dowling just finished her Sustainable Market Gardening book and I wrote a chapter for her book to practice. [Laughs] So that was good.

00:50:37

SW: Ira I just have a few more questions for you. Do you have a little more time? I'm just keeping an eye on the time here. I'm wondering if you we could just back up a little bit more and talk about – I mean how did – why did Jeff start the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange?

00:50:51

IW: Oh I can tell you. Well Jeff was on the original board of the National Seed Savers Exchange and that is a membership group where members grew seeds and you could you know exchange things for each other and it had a – it still has a great annual directory. There's thousands of varieties that you can ask from members. You send them money that covers if you're – if you also list things you send them just enough to cover postage. And if you're a member but you're not contributing any seeds then you pay a little more. That sort of helps out.

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And he said if we really want a lot of people to know about this we need to have an edition, a catalogue that people can just buy from without feeling guilty if they don't contribute

seeds back. And furthermore then I think that – that could you know help support the work of maintaining all those varieties. At that time the other board members of Seed Savers Exchange didn't agree. So Jeff started this little virtually mimeographed catalogue the first year. And it – it got a good response. And many garden writers you know talked about it and so that's why he started it 'cause he thought that – that we want to have a lot of people growing heirloom seeds.

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And a few years after that Seed Savers decided that they would start a catalogue, too. But in a way he showed them that it was possible to do it and not go broke, but he kind of joked about I like what happened when we moved the company here that it took him three years before he made more than he was spending. *[Laughs]*

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SW: And where was he? Was he in Twin Oaks?

00:52:49

IW: No; he wasn't. He lived in the Charlottesville area, Earlysville and North Garden and various places near there. He was a graduate student and then teaching at UVA [University of Virginia] at the time when Southern Exposure was started and so – . And he still lives in the Charlottesville area and continues to do things. His latest book was on Bush Medicine of the Bahamas 'cause he's – he really is interested these days in herbs and native medicinals and he's also involved with United Plant Savers working with native plants. So and I think one reason that Southern Exposure was successful is Jeff you know his PhD is in pollination ecology so he knew a lot about the issues of isolation distances and things like that which were a problem early on in

people volunteering, like people weren't sure about why their things were crossing and wrote a lot of information about that which we were lucky enough to inherit. I appreciate that every day.

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And but he also had computer skills. He was like – we were kind of joking; half of the people I went to college with actually ended up being software engineers of one sort or another, not because they were software people exactly but because they were at the time any business you went in if you were bright and good at the computer end you often got pushed in that end of your industry until they started actually teaching it in schools, so – . **[Laughs]**

00:54:47

SW: And so out here when – do you guys – you know how does it work; do people with Southern Exposure are you growing like when you send the catalogue out are you – do you grow what you grow in terms of you know the seeds and then people pick from what you have or do you get requests from people? I mean how – how does that work? I mean –

00:55:07

IW: Well it's a little bit of all of the above, okay. We have our collection of seeds that we have gotten and many of them we got from what we call "seed shares." Someone sends us in a little something that they think would be good and we trial it and then either we grow it or get another farmer to grow more the next year and offer it in the catalogue.

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But we also you know we go to all kinds of seed saving events and stuff and trade and meet people and get things in those ways. And so yeah; so it happens that way – that we slowly build up the collection and sometimes the person who sends it to us ends up being someone who

can grow a bunch of it every week – you know every year and offer it for sale. But sometimes not; sometimes all they're interested in is having you know the seed go on like there's one of our varieties, Grandma Nellie's Mushroom Bean; this came with no return address in the mail. It – it said, "Grandma Nellie used to always grow this but nobody in the family wants to grow it now. I hope you will want to grow it. And it – we think that if you get it when it's the beans are just beginning to form in the pod and cook it lightly that it has a texture like mushrooms." We were like, "Okay; let's try it."

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And it's become you know one of our favorites with customers. But then sometimes somebody like Artie Schrantz who is an extension agent down in Georgia sent us his daddy's Schrantz's Deep Black Peanut and he sent us photos and recipes and about his daddy and who his daddy got it from and everything you wanted to know – it's great. So it just varies how it happens.

00:57:15

SW: You – it sounds like you're in a – you're almost like a historian too. I mean not only are you traveling around and teaching and doing the work here on the farm, but you're also collecting these bits of history as well.

00:57:28

IW: Well that's the thing with heirlooms; it's not just the seeds that you know is – is important. It's the stories and the places that they came from. These are like little time capsules you know traveling into the future, bringing a piece of the life of a different time and place to people right now. And if you don't save that story a lot of that is lost.

00:57:59

SW: Do you think in your work I mean you hear – we – and I know that there is something with Monsanto but I mean in an age where everything seems industrial and there's all these hybrid seeds and there's a lot of controversy surrounding that is there more of a desire for this – for these seeds like for this type of food for this type of process as opposed to something that's large and industrial and there's not really any life blood in it at all?

00:58:29

IW: Well for certainly it seems like for an increasing number of people the whole – our work with regional seeds seems to go hand-in-hand with the desire for more local food, for you know and – and people are doing you know sort of scientific research and finding that for example in corns that there's 20-percent more protein in these older corn varieties than in more modern ones. So there's kind of modern science; you're – just the taste of it and the look of it that are kind of coming together to you know encourage people who want to have a more wholesome local diet to go back to some of these heirloom varieties, not exclusively but – but certainly many people do.

00:59:27

SW: Okay; and Ira just two more things. One is it just seems that along this process like your story is all about your desire for a certain lifestyle and to teach people about that as opposed to ever worrying about making a living off of it. Do you think that's true?

00:59:44

IW: Yeah; yeah. I think many people who are involved with this you know if they end up making a living it's not that – that's what they were going after. They were trying to do the right thing, live a life – a life that you can be proud you're living and sometimes it works out that you can make a living doing that. But that isn't the only reason. And you know we – we think that the majority of people who are saving seeds as have been for generations are actually people who are doing it more for – for their own self's sustenance and not necessarily to make a living.

01:00:40

But one of the things that we try to do when we work with farmers is help them find ways to make a living doing it. And you know like having them you know do value-added products; you get x-amount for corn. If you grind that same corn, if you have a little mill and you can grind it and bring ground corn to market you can get twice as much. But it doesn't take you twice as much time to do that. And so you know encouraging them, sharing the stories of successes with farmers in other regions that that's a part of making it possible for these varieties to go into the future.

01:01:25

SW: And because this project is all about women and – and work in food I'm wondering along the way did it seem – I mean were there any challenges presented to you being a woman in your work or is this – I'm just wondering if there is any – anything – ?

01:01:44

IW: Well I mean you know some – there are some people who you just kind of have to make them pay attention to you, you know. Sometimes – sometimes it's easier for them to talk about tractors or something with some guy. I mean tractors aren't really my biggest thing, personally

anyway. But you know some of the other women who are here who are more like I kind of joke, tractor girls – you know but when you um, I don't know – are assured about what you're doing you just step out into it and you know – since here at the community we're all about you know fighting sexism and stuff you get a lot of support for saying – you know for just if that guy at that tractor shop won't talk to you we won't deal with their company. And we'll tell them that that's what happened. And often times that is just some person working there and the person who owns does not like that and they will call you and apologize. *[Laughs]* And – and when you do that you make it more possible for other women to not have so many problems. *[Beeps]*

01:03:06

SW: And Ira I don't have any other questions for you. But is there anything else you want to add that you think is important?

01:03:14

IW: Oh well I – I think it's important you know how do you make people know about heirloom varieties? And I have seen that in addition to farmers that chefs have really made many of these varieties, the ones that we see in the Slow Food Ark of Taste or something well known and led back to farmers growing them and to people in farmers' markets and in communities all over doing it, so I – I really think it's important to have you know chefs and farmers and eaters working together to build this alternative food system.

01:04:04

SW: Well I want to thank you for doing this today. I know you're busy and you're getting ready to go to Asheville so thank you for doing this today.

01:04:12

IW: Well thanks for having me and I'm looking forward to somehow or another going when you're in Richmond for the symposium.

01:04:23

SW: Absolutely.

01:04:23

IW: Great.

01:04:24

SW: And just to – just for the record your partner Gordon what's his full name again?

01:04:28

IW: Sproule.

01:04:29

SW: Sproule; could you spell that?

01:04:31

IW: S-p-r-o-u-l-e. [*Laughs*]

01:04:33

SW: And how long have you and Gordon been partners?

01:04:37

IW: Twenty years; we've known each other for forty years but he was you know – we were just friends for a long time.

01:04:48

SW: When did – when did that go – when did that change and how? Where were you guys?

01:04:54

IW: We were at Twin Oaks and his daughter and I have always – who is 30 now – have always been special friends. And I don't know; maybe we were just spending more time together and then we got to be special friends. [*Laughs*]

01:05:15

SW: Does he live here?

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IW: He lives at Twin Oaks. And when we first started he came over here but he has his work there and I have my work here. I'm actually still officially a member at Twin Oaks and I spend a part of the year there, but not so much as I used to since most of my work is here.

01:05:38

SW: I mean you're – you're the go-to person for Southern Exposure then?

01:05:42

IW: Well in – in some ways. I do outreach and – and things like that but there are other people who you know take responsibility like Ken Bazilla for the inventory and you know there are younger members you know like Darla Eaton who does our Plant a Row for the Hungry Project, you know and Irena Hallowell takes care of our donation seed project and we work with Twin Oaks on our seed racks for stores you know and Megan takes care of that and so there – as we have grown more people take responsibility. I just sometimes think because I'm such a big mouth that I have become more of the face of Southern Exposure, but really we are – it takes a village to make this happen.

01:06:39

[End Ira Wallace-March 8, 2013]