Jeff Larkey

Photo by Carlie Arnold

Route One Farms

Jeff Larkey was born in Montreal, Canada, but his father's family has been in California since 1849. Larkey spent part of his childhood in the Carmel Valley of California, and in Davis, California, working summers in the fields and processing plants of the conventional agriculture world. He came to Santa Cruz in 1973 to enroll in Cabrillo College's solar technology program, where he also studied horticulture with Richard Merrill. In the late 1970s, Larkey moved onto a commune on Ivy Lane in Live Oak—an unincorporated, then still somewhat rural area of Santa Cruz County, where he and his fellow commune

members grew basil and garlic as well as other crops on four acres of land, and transported them via bicycle to sell at the Live Oak Farmers' market. These crop choices helped establish a taste among local community members for fresh pesto, creating a lasting legacy.

In 1981, Larkey left that commune to farm along the fertile floodplain of the San Lorenzo River on Ocean Street Extension in Santa Cruz. His farming operation was certified by CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] in 1985, and eventually became Route One Farms. Larkey originally ran the farm together with Jonathan Steinberg (known as 'Steiny'), but since 2002 has been the sole proprietor. Route One leases sixty-five acres of land in several locations in Santa Cruz County, including Rancho del Oso along Waddell Creek in Big Basin State Park. This oral history was conducted by Ellen Farmer on June 23, 2007, at the offices of Route One Farms in Santa Cruz, California.

Additional Resources:

Route One Farms: http://www.route1farms.com/Route_1_Farms/Home.html

Denise Vivar and Traci Hukill, "Tough Row to Hoe," *Metro Santa Cruz*, July 25-August 1, 2007, Vol. 14. No. 13.

Early Background

Farmer: This is Ellen Farmer, and I'm talking today with Jeff Larkey of Route One Farms. It is June 23, 2007, and we are in his office [in Santa Cruz, California]. First, I want to get some background about you. So can you talk about where you were born and where you grew up?

Larkey: Well, I was born in Montreal, Canada. My father was going to medical school in Montreal at McGill University. But I actually have pretty deep roots in California, going back to 1849 on my father's side. And on my mother's side, her parents came from Iowa, [and] moved first to Berkeley and then to Davis in the

mid-to-late 1920s. So although I was born in Montreal, I didn't spend much time there. We ended up living initially in Berkeley for a little bit, Orinda, and then my father joined the military right after he got out of medical school, and we ended up living in Germany for two years when I was four to six years old. We actually lived on a farm. We had German landlords who lived downstairs and we lived upstairs. We got to live off the base. It was an old-school farm. They spread night soil. The honey wagon would come out and spread manure and whatnot from the cow stalls. So I don't know if that had any early influence.

Farmer: Did you like it there?

Larkey: It was a great place to be a kid, out in the countryside. I didn't really get involved too much in the farming at that stage. (laughs) Then we lived a ways up Carmel Valley, pretty far up past the [Carmel Valley] village, for a bit. My dad was doing his residency at the county hospital in Salinas. For two years, I think, we lived there. And then moved to Davis, and that's where he started his practice. My mom was born in Davis, because my grandparents were from there. We lived there until I graduated from high school. I did some work on farms—summertime jobs a few times. Actually, I didn't even think of getting into agriculture. It was just something to do as a job at that point.

Farmer: What kind of farms were those?

Larkey: They were big operations. Mostly tomato, processing-tomato farms. Things like that. And corn. I was doing irrigation, and helping with the harvest,

driving Caterpillars. That kind of work. But it was pretty monotonous kind of work.

Farmer: Conventional agriculture?

Larkey: Conventional, yes. At that point in time organic was just a little blip on the horizon.

Farmer: Yes. What year did you graduate from high school?

Larkey: I graduated in 1973 from Davis High School. I spent two years at a junior college in Santa Rosa, and then ended up coming to the Santa Cruz area to go to Cabrillo College to get involved in the solar technology program that was springing up there, which was run by Richard Merrill, who also was developing the Horticulture Program at Cabrillo College.[1] It was pretty early on when that program was going. It was pretty rudimentary. I think Basic Organic Gardening was the class, telling you how to grow your own food, and that kind of stuff. The students had just had a revolt. They [the college] were going to make a big parking lot on the east side of campus. And some students had banded together and decided they wanted to do a big garden. So they got this faculty to do that. And they hired Richard Merrill, and this whole alternative energy program started up then in the mid-1970s. I showed up in 1976. It basically started flowering. The whole solar technology program was doing really well until 1980, when Ronald Reagan got elected and cut all the federal tax credits and funding for that. A lot of the companies that had sprung up to do alternative energy

installations sputtered at that point. A lot of them had sprung up, and lot of them went out of business. It was kind of a bleak time for solar after that.

The Live Oak Commune on Ivy Lane

I didn't automatically get into farming. I wasn't really sure what I was going to do. But I had moved onto this small little commune in the middle of Live Oak [near Santa Cruz], which is now Windmill Farms. I don't know if you are familiar with Ronald Donkervoort. He's farming there now. But we had this little commune going. We were growing all our own food and we had milking Jersey cows, and goats, and chickens.

Farmer: Really? In the Live Oak neighborhood.

Larkey: Yes, it was four acres in the middle of Live Oak. And right about that time was when the California Department of Food and Agriculture was developing this direct marketing program, and so a bunch of local farmers tapped into that. And we started a farmers' market. It happened to be two blocks away from where I lived, at the Live Oak School. That's where the first farmers' market started.[2]

Farmer: Talk about local.

Larkey: Yes, it was two blocks away. We were bike-carting everything over there at that point because we were so close. So that was, I guess, 1978, 1979.

Farmer: Where was the farmers' market?

Larkey: 17th and Capitola Road. There are still farmers around who were part of that. Thomas Farms.[3] Christine and Tony Shear were farmers in La Selva Beach. I guess they have both gone different ways. Nick Pasqual was part of that.[4]

I think it was there for only a couple of years—maybe two or three years. And what happened was the medfly [Mediterranean fruit fly] was a problem, and that particular market location was inside the quarantine zone. So any suspect fruit that came into that zone could not leave that zone. And anything that was grown in that zone, couldn't be taken out of that zone. This was 1981 when the medfly hit. At that point I'd moved from Ivy Lane [the commune]. That kind of fell apart, and I moved out to Ocean Street Extension and started farming out there.

Farming on Ocean Street Extension

There were five other people at that time, and we split up this piece of land that had been vacant for some time. And that was pretty much the beginning of growing for commercial purposes. Before, we were just selling our excess out of the garden.

Farmer: You were feeding yourselves.

Larkey: Yes.

Farmer: So if the farmers' market had to stop because of the medfly, who were your customers?

Larkey: Well, it didn't stop. It moved. It moved over to Cabrillo College [in Aptos]. It allowed people coming in from out of the area to not have to basically dump everything that they brought. They wouldn't be going through the quarantine zones.

Farmer: So Cabrillo started then.

Larkey: Cabrillo. That was the new location. It got moved because of the medfly, and it's been there ever since. That was almost thirty years ago. But we were still stuck, in terms of not being able to sell bell peppers and tomatoes. We still couldn't move those out of Santa Cruz, which kind of initiated a whole other project. There was a company called the Santa Cruz Juice Club back in those days, which was the predecessor to Odwalla. So there we had our market. We could process. We could sell them the bell peppers and the fruit that was quarantined because of the medfly. So that's where we ended up dumping all our excess whatnot that we couldn't market out of the area. That year happened to be a year I grew a whole lot of bell peppers. I was really like: do I really want to get into farming?

Farmer: So you found, luckily, the Juice Club.

Larkey: Yes, that really helped a lot. That only lasted for a year. It was only a problem for a year and they figured out ways to control [the medfly], and it ceased to be a problem after that. The most effective thing that they discovered was doing the sterile male release, and mating-disruption type things. And the Bt, of course, was something that really helped with that. *Bacillus thuringiensis* is

a bacterial insecticide that's specific to certain larvae. That's actually what they're using for this present light brown apple moth [infestation], which is, I guess, a pretty serious problem at this point. We don't really know how it's going to affect everybody yet, but it's going to be a similar thing, I'm sure. Some kind of quarantine thing is going on.[5]

Farmer: So people can sell within the county, I suppose, right now?

Larkey: Well, you can move it outside of the county unless they've found it on your produce. They're not cracking down so much on produce, as they are on nursery stock. That's where they're really limiting the movement, initially. I'm sure there will be other, further steps they're going to take further down the road.

Working with Richard Merrill at Cabrillo College

Farmer: Well, can we talk a little bit more about what you did at Cabrillo?

Larkey: At Cabrillo I got involved with the Horticulture Program as well as the alternative energy program. I actually became the teacher's assistant for a couple of years, to Richard Merrill. That program developed pretty rapidly. I basically took the class three years in a row, and every time I took it, of course it was developing and getting more applicable to what was going on locally, and changed its focus from just home gardening to more practical horticultural things. 1980 was my last year there. I learned a lot about what plants need to grow, and learned quite a bit about organic production, not necessarily large-scale production or anything like that, but you know, the basics. Richard Merrill

[is] a walking encyclopedia and he could direct you where to find whatever information you wanted to find that was available on the subject at the time. So that was a pretty good, timely thing to be involved in, for me. I didn't know it at the time. But definitely, it's had its positive influence over the years.

Farmer: Do you stay in touch with him?

Larkey: Somewhat. I don't see him too often. He's retired now. But over the years we've definitely been in contact. They shop at the farmers' market at Cabrillo College. That's usually where I see him.

[Later] the Horticulture Program evolved more into ornamental, nursery-type stuff, instead of row-crop agriculture. But for me, I already learned what I needed to learn at that level. And then pretty much everything else I learned was through farming and doing it, and learning from other farmers, more than anything else.

Networks between Farmers

Farmer: And how did you connect with other farmers?

Larkey: Well, through the local organic network, with CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers], but also the local conventional farmers. I learned a lot about, not necessarily pest control things (laughs), but farming techniques and about mechanical issues, I'd have to say through both the organic farmers and the local conventional farmers.

Farmer: Because the farmers' market is not restricted to organic farmers, right?

Larkey: No, the farmers' markets are not restricted, no. The new one on the Westside and downtown try to—that's the priority for that market. But the Cabrillo Market has always been a pretty even mix, actually.[6]

Farmer: And is that where you met most people?

Larkey: Well, no. Because I'm also farming up the coast here, and that's pretty much where I met most of the local North Coast growers, just from being around them. It's a small community, really. There's not that many of them. It's a little community somewhat.

Farmer: I always feel like farmers don't have much time.

Larkey: We don't. We really don't. I mean, that's why when we do get together, it's not just gibber-jabber. We're talking about serious stuff, usually.

Farmer: Have you gone to the Eco-Farm conferences?[7]

Larkey: Oh, yes. Probably every year since probably 1987, 1988. That's a bigger network, because that draws from all over the country. So you meet people out of your area that may be doing the same thing and dealing with a lot of the same issues. Everywhere you grow is going to have different influences, and variances, and variables, and climatological differences, and natural wildlife issues, and marketing issues. But there is a lot in common in what people do, who do what we're doing all over the country. That's a great time to network.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Farming on the Central Coast of California

Farmer: What would you say are the biggest challenges and the easiest things about farming in this region?

Larkey: The easiest things about farming in this region are the climate. This is an ideal climate to grow a wide variety of things. Within this area of Santa Cruz County there are so many microclimates. Just about anything can be grown if you find the right little spot.

And then, equally important is the clientele, the population, the consuming public here. Probably because of Cabrillo College and the university [UC Santa Cruz], there is a huge demand for products grown without toxic pesticides, and a community that wants to support farmers that use those techniques. There are nine natural food stores, and some not necessarily natural food stores, but outlets in the area. I mean, Shopper's Corner, for instance. I sell as much, or more, to them as I do to any of the natural food stores.

Farmer: Is it marked organic?

Larkey: They do mark it as organic. But they're not necessarily thought of as a natural food store.

Farmer: I thought it was a quality food store.

Larkey: It's a quality food store, and they do feature local farmers and local produce, and they have a very, very loyal clientele.

Farmer: Yes, they do. Are you looking forward to Whole Foods coming?[8]

Larkey: Well, yes and no. A lot of what I grow goes to Whole Foods—more than half, I'd say, of what I grow. Because now I'm eighty-five acres; I can't just supply the local farmers' markets and local food stores. I've got a lot more going. Every day we're picking eight to twelve pallets of stuff. So that gets shipped. A lot of it goes to Whole Foods. We do Whole Foods. We do Veritable Vegetable, a distributor in the Bay Area. And then Coke Farms, who brokers my produce—they're growers as well and have a cooler that everything gets shipped out of. They will broker some of it as well.[9]

Farmer: That's in—

Larkey: In San Juan Bautista. It's actually in San Benito County. It's right next to Highway 101, which is really easy for the big refrigerator semis to pull in and load up a few pallets and take it wherever it needs to go. So as far as what Whole Foods— I mean, they're a huge player in the flowering of organic farming and organic produce. They're a nationwide, becoming almost an international outfit. But they do their share as far as educating the public's awareness about regional produce, and allowing people to put their money where their mouth is in terms of supporting things like that. They potentially have the predatory instinct that any large corporation can have. Especially being a public company, they're beholden to shareholders. The bottom line is important. Not necessarily that something is wrong in terms of doing what they're doing. But when they move into someone else's market, there's a little friction going on. They tend to do that in places. So I'm sure I'll be selling to them, if not directly to the store, at least to

the regional outlet. But probably locally— I mean, I'll probably go directly to them. But I don't know if it's going to be at the cost of my other customers, or not. You know?

Farmer: Yes. I don't think people stop going to the farmers' markets. Because that's a social experience as well as—

Larkey: Well, even the people at Whole Foods actually came out and said that is their biggest competition, is farmers' markets. It's not so much other markets. Trader Joe's is a close second, I'm sure, to who they're trying to compete with.

Farmer: Yes, we have a special community, with all of these other small natural food stores.

Larkey: Exactly. I don't know if there's a need, but they seem to think that there is. They're basically looking at income brackets. They see a formula here. They don't necessarily care if someone else is here doing it already. But you know, there was an Albertson's there. Would it be better for there to be an Albertson's, or a Ralph's at 41st [Avenue]? I mean, that's what's going to be there instead. So why not have something that's maybe a little more upscale even than the New Leaf stores in terms of what they're doing?[10] People are going to probably pay a little more if they go in there. They might be bringing in a different crowd, to a certain extent. I think they're a little close to Staff of Life and Shopper's Corner. So I'm not sure what's going to happen there.

The Farmland

Farmer: Yes, it's interesting. So do you actually own acreage?

Larkey: No. I don't own any of the land I farm. I've always leased. The longest piece I've leased on Ocean Street Extension, I've been leasing on a year-to-year basis for twenty-six years, no longer than one year at a time as a lease. It's always under threat of getting sold or developed.

Farmer: Because of the value, right?

Larkey: Because of the value. It's a primo location, and it's right next to town.

Farmer: What's the soil like there? Have you been building it up over the years?

Larkey: Yes, but it's alluvial silt there. It's right on the San Lorenzo River, the ancient flood plain. It's twelve feet deep of silt, the most ideal soil you can imagine. To me, that's the value. The land is worth millions of dollars, I'm sure. It is an irreplaceable location because of the soil and the climate. It's one of those perfect places. There really are very few places like it on the planet.

Farmer: How is it for insects?

Larkey: It's pretty good. Insects are not our biggest problem there. Wildlife is.

Farmer: What kind?

Larkey: Well, deer had been a problem until we fenced everything. Gophers are pretty bad there because the soil is so loose and they move in from other areas.

It's a riparian corridor. So we have birds, quail, robins, blue jays, gophers—all kinds of things.

Farmer: Do you have to trap them?

Larkey: We trap gophers. We fenced out the deer. We hung on as long as we could, but it was just getting too intense. We can't shoot the birds there because we're too close to people, but we do try to repel them with Mylar tape and things that freak them out, and get predatory birds to hang out as much as possible. When we trap gophers we put them up on posts and try to draw in the owls and the hawks.

California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF)

Farmer: You talked about being part of CCOF. I happen to have their directory, so I saw that you started there in 1988. Is that right?

Larkey: Well, that's when Route One Farms started. I was on my own before that, from 1980 until 1988, when I joined up with another person, Jonathan Steinberg. We formed Route One Farms in 1988. So that's why that shows up at that date. I don't think I actually got certified until 1985 or 1986. At that point in time you didn't have to be certified to be organic. Now if you call yourself organic, you have to have that certification. But I was small enough back then that I was selling just in the local area. I never even shipped out of the area. When I started doing that, I needed to have a certification because the customers didn't know who you were, and didn't know what your practices were.

Farmer: So in the beginning, then, when you were on your own and CCOF was around, there was a lot of activity, with them pulling themselves together and—

Larkey: Yes, they were still developing how they were going to go about certifying you, and what process that was going to take. They were still developing state laws and things like that at that point in time. All the tracking and all that stuff— I think they used us as a guinea pig for a lot of that, because this is where their statewide office was. They were trying to figure it out and we were a good guinea pig, I think, for that.

Farmer: So you were an early member, or just a participant?

Larkey: An early member, and a—I would have to say, guinea pig. (laughs) That's the best word to use.

Farmer: Yes. So were you part of the early farmers who were inspecting each other? That was in the seventies, I think.

Larkey: That was before it really got larger. Initially, it was just farmers. It was *just* a farmer's organization.

Farmer: Not even dues, I don't think.

Larkey: I don't know. Probably not. Because it started in the early seventies, I'm pretty sure. I'm not sure of the exact year, but it was probably the early seventies when the CCOF started.[11] It was a purely grower organization, and most of them were probably larger-size, commercial operations. I guess they did their own regulations. They were winging it on their own, too, saying this is okay and this

isn't. They kind of made it up as they went. Created the framework for what came later, for sure.

Farmer: Rodale apparently came out here in the early seventies, around '71, and they wanted to certify people. They pulled people together at that point. They couldn't run it from Pennsylvania. But that's one of the ways that people started identifying who else was trying to do things naturally or organically.[12]

Larkey: Right. They had a good eye for that. And they had their own definition. They basically coined the term "organic farming."

Farmer: Do you think so?

Larkey: Yes, Robert Rodale, Sr., I think coined that term. I'm not sure exactly what his definition was. Treating the soil as a living organism, feeding the soil and not the plant, that kind of thing.[13]

Farmer: Did you know Russel Wolter[14] is still around?

Larkey: Russel Wolter, yes. They were the really early organic farmers. I don't even know if they called themselves organic or not in the early days. The Down to Earth brand.

Farmer: Yes. So as far as CCOF involvement goes, were you ever on the board?

Larkey: I wasn't. My partner, Jon, was on the board. He was part of the certification committee. He was a lot more meeting-oriented than I was. I'm more farming-oriented. (laughs) I just like getting out and doing it.

Skills Needed in Farming

Farmer: What do you think are the most important skills in running a farm?

Larkey: Well, there're a lot of them. To be a farmer is to be a lot of different things. You have to be a good manager. You have to deal with people. The most important thing that has kept me in business is being consistent about what you do. You almost have to be driven, because it's not always easy. I'd say one out of every six years is a losing year, for one reason or another. Being consistent in your planting, in your methods. I'm not a tree-fruit farmer or a perennial farmer of any kind. I do mostly row crops. Do some fruit trees and perennials. But for the most part, what I'm doing is successive, basically weekly plantings. Everything I grow pretty much gets planted every week, so I have a continual supply through the season. Your customers demand consistency. If you run out of something they're going to go to someone else, and they may not get you back. That was a really hard lesson to learn early on. You plant something and think they're going to keep taking it. But if you miss a couple of weeks, they start getting it from someone else. And if that person stays consistent, they just keep getting it from them. So consistency is a really key thing.

Good people skills, because if you're employing people you want to be respected, and you want to be respectful of your workers. They're pretty much what keeps your business going.

Farmer: It sounds like you speak Spanish.

Larkey: You have to speak Spanish. Because there aren't too many people who want to do this kind of work day in and day out for long periods of time. Most of my workers are professional farm workers. They have to be, because I grow so many different things and everything takes a different pack. You have to know how to do that. You can't just come and work on this farm for like a month or two at a time. It's not that kind of operation. It's got to be someone who really wants to do that kind of work, and is willing to work ten hours a day, six days a week. That's just the way it is. You pretty much have to speak Spanish if you have a number of employees harvesting all the time. So your people skills are important.

Being open to new things is pretty darn important. Because no matter what you do, no matter how good you think you are at it, eventually it's going to change. The nature of nature is change. What works this year isn't necessarily going to always work. So you have to be open to that. You've got to be up on changes in the natural environment, and educate yourself about the options that you have.

Farmer: Yes, so do you do rotations, and cover cropping, and have everything fallow at times?

Larkey: Oh, yes. Definitely. Because as an organic farmer, you're limited in what type of options you're going to do. If you have a soil disease, if you're an organic farmer it's really difficult to get rid of once you get that disease. A lot of what you do is preventative. So trying to maintain a very healthy soil, which in turn creates a healthy plant—it's a complicated thing to do. I can't go out and fumigate my soil if I get a bad soil-borne disease—a bacteria or a fungus or

something like that. It's really difficult to deal with. So you are dealing with things on a microbial level, in a way. And the health of that microcosm. I mean, that's basically what organic farming is. You want to create beneficial microbes, is what you're doing. (laughs) So in a way, you're kind of a microbiologist. You may not be super educated about those things, but in a certain way you have to pay attention to them.

Farmer: So what do you put in your soil? You don't have animals, do you?

Larkey: I don't have animals on my farm, no. Most of my compost is imported. I get it mostly from New Era, Grover. There's manure in the compost, as well as green waste materials. I haven't found too many really super-good quality compost companies. That's why I'm limited to just the companies I'm dealing with now, New Era and Grover, and sometimes Cranford over in Spreckels. But like I say, you're trying to breed beneficial microbes, and to the extent that that compost has those beneficial microbes in it, it's not just rotten manure. They inoculate their compost, and basically are trying to rapidly breed beneficial microbes. That's basically what the compost is doing, creating— It's fertilizer as well, but just as important is what kind of microbe you are putting in your ground, and what those microbes are going to be doing once they're there.

Farmer: You have to irrigate where you are.

Larkey: Oh, yes. California doesn't get any rain for six to eight months out of the year.

Farmer: That must be expensive.

Larkey: Well, the three W's of farming, the holy trinity of farming is: work, will, and water. Those are the three W's of farming. I think it was Wicks, an early 1900s horticulturalist, who coined that. It's true. In California, if you don't have water you're going to be hard-pressed to grow most items. For me, water has always been an issue here. Even though I'm along the river, and our wells down there are pretty shallow and there've been times when we're basically pumping those wells dry, and there isn't enough coming into them.

This year looks pretty tight. It's going to definitely limit us by the end of August, I would think. In Waddell, we're pumping surface water. We're using Waddell Creek. And you can only pump a certain percentage of that water because there are steelhead, and once in a while a few Coho salmon go up there. So you can't pump that creek dry. So yes, it's kind of looking like we're going to have to restrict fifty percent of our water use up there by late August, I would think.

Farmer: Have you tried dry farming methods?

Larkey: I do some dry farming. I do some tomatoes dry-farmed. I have done potatoes and winter squash. But lots of things I grow, you cannot really dry farm them. Lettuce and spinach and cilantro, and parsley, and things like that need regular water, weekly water.

Farmer: What makes it easy to farm here and what are the challenges?

Competition in the Organic Market

Larkey: Well, the easy part is the climate, and the clientele, and the nearness to the markets. Now the challenges are more becoming competition. Since the only part of agriculture that is actually growing is the organic industry, a lot of conventional farmers are converting. You see pretty intense competition in our local area, because this is where a high percentage of those growers are concentrated. The Pajaro Valley and the Salinas Valley—that's where a lot of it is happening.

There are the natural-world challenges, like weather, and water, and nature, and insects, and things like that. I think I can control most of those things pretty well. I've kind of got those down. Once in a while you'll lose a crop planting here and there. But I'm pretty diverse. I grow a lot of different things. I'm planting every week. I have a very, very wide diversity of different plants and flowers. But I think the competition is probably the thing that's going to be my biggest limiting factor.

Farmer: How do you gauge that?

Larkey: Well, I don't make a point of driving around to see the competition. But I pretty much assume it's happening more every year. And it is.

Farmer: Are they going to have lower prices, do you think?

Larkey: Well, that's the end result if there's a glut. There've been gluts in the past. A really horrible glut was in the year 2000. There was something like thirty-

five percent more acreage of organic production than the year before. All of a sudden in one year, there's thirty-five percent more production. It was just a few farms, but they were huge operations that came on line that year. We were selling stuff cheaper than the going rate for conventional produce for certain items that year. Some of it we just couldn't sell. There was too much of it, because the market hadn't grown that fast in one year. It was like this leapfrog effect, where the supply that year outstripped the demand. Even though the demand is growing every year, and the supply is growing every year, sometimes the supply will grow faster than the demand. So that's what we've seen happening occasionally.

Marketing and Distribution

Farmer: I wanted to ask you about marketing: two different parts to it. One would be, in general, do you have a role in getting people more interested in organic healthy food, people who might not have paid attention to it before? And then, your own strategies for marketing locally. I'm thinking about your reputation. It must be pretty strong.

Larkey: Yes. Well, the farmers' markets are really good for that because you're dealing directly with people. I don't always make it myself, but at least it's that direct interaction where people can ask you about stuff. You get people coming in new who have just come to a farmers' market for the first time. You have a little more time to talk to people than in a store. It's just a produce worker in a store, whereas at the farmers' market a lot of people are coming by your stand. There's that interaction.

But also, I've been doing the farm dinners with Outstanding in the Field.[15] There're not necessarily a lot of people at those. The publicity that it generates is actually more important.

Farmer: Who do you do that with?

Larkey: Outstanding in the Field is Jim Denevan. Actually, we've done it with other outfits too, but they're the ones who really got it going. He was a chef at Gabriella's. And now he's, I don't know, he's a rock star now. He's got a nationwide bus tour and (laughs) he's got his Lexus sponsorship or whatever it is.

Farmer: Like a sports hero. So we were talking about marketing. You said Coke Farms has a cooler.

Larkey: Coke Farms has a cooler, and they not only broker, they allow me to sell produce out of their cooler.

Farmer: Are you selling to the university at all?

Larkey: No.

Farmer: There was that consortium of farmers that was providing food to the dining halls at UCSC.

Larkey: They were coming to the farmers' market and making orders last year, but I haven't heard from them this year.

Farmer: Coke Farms was part of that. And Swanton [Berry Farms].

Larkey: They might be doing it then. They might be doing the selling to them, because they broker some of my stuff. They like to have a variety of things, so they have other farmers bring stuff into their cooler that they can sell as well.

Farmer: So you don't necessarily know where all your produce—

Larkey: I don't know where it all goes. No. They have all that information. I don't *want* to know it all. (laughs) I just want the check.

Farmer: Timing. One of the things Russel Wolter talked about [in his oral history] was having to pay the distributor sometimes because the vegetables didn't sell.

Larkey: Oh, if a load gets dumped, yes. Especially if it gets shipped to the East Coast. You pay the freight. You pay the cooling. Loading, cooling, freight. And the dump fee.

Farmer: So you get a bill instead of a check.

Larkey: Yes. That happens. I try not to let it happen very often.

Farmer: So your biggest distributor is Veritable Vegetable?

Larkey: That's the biggest *local* distributor. Veritable actually picks up here two days a week, because they also deliver to the New Leaf stores. They deliver all around town. Veritable Vegetable is based in South San Francisco. They are a Bay Area distributor, but they also have been buying from local farms since 1974, and make a point of it. It works really well here because they can do their last drop

here at the New Leaf store, and then they can start filling up at the farms in this area, so the truck goes back full instead of empty.

Farmer: So when you were talking about marketing, you were saying there is competition now from some of the conventional farmers growing organic. I was thinking about your reputation. So isn't it some about relationships?

Larkey: Yes. But you've got to take care of your customers. If something goes wrong, you better make sure it gets changed pretty quick, because there is always someone there to step in in your place. I've felt pretty supported, and I feel like the people I deal with have been fairly loyal with me, because, like I said, I try to be fairly consistent in the quality and quantity, and be friendly, too. It's not just about business. You've got to try and have a little bit of fun with it, too.

Farmer: So they want to deal with you.

Larkey: Yes. We try to make it as fun as possible.

Farmer: It's a lot of work.

Larkey: It's just a lot of work. But Eco-Farm is a good time to get together and party. You know. (laughs)

Farmer: Yes. So do you have crops year round? Some crops. Or do you take off?

Larkey: I cover-crop probably a good eighty percent of my ground in the wintertime. I just take it out of production and cover-crop it. But I do grow for

the local area quite a few things all winter. Like chards go all winter. Parsley, leeks, carrots, beets, kale, collards—things like that can grow all winter long. So yes, I keep a little bit of production going all winter, and try to keep the farmers' market going all year round. If you stop coming, it takes a long time to get back up to speed if the customers aren't in the habit of buying from you every week.

Farmers' Markets

Farmer: The Cabrillo Farmers' market goes all year round. Does the downtown one too?

Larkey: Yes, the downtown one does too, goes all year and so does the Westside Market, which is just a year old.

Farmer: Which one did you say you were on the board of?

Larkey: Well, the downtown market includes the Westside Market and the Live Oak Market.[16] So I'm on the board of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets.

Farmer: And what is the work of a board member?

Larkey: The work of a board member is taking care of membership issues, commodity issues. We have a pretty good-sized budget for advertising. Dealing with our wording of our regulations has been a constantly changing thing. They are always updating that, our rules.

Farmer: Is it called a certified farmers' market?

Larkey: It is a certified farmers' market, which means nothing to do with being organic. It's certified by the state and the county, and you are only allowed to sell produce at those markets if you are a certified producer and grow that particular item which you're selling. The county will come around and inspect you and say: okay, you grow this and this. It's on your little sheet that you have to post at the market. That avoids middlemen selling at the farmers' markets, which is different from other farmers' markets in other areas of the country. This is a California direct marketing initiative that started back in the seventies.[17]

Farmer: Did it start in Santa Cruz County?

Larkey: No, it was a statewide thing. I don't know how many [markets] started back in the seventies. [Santa Cruz County] was an early one, though. It was definitely an early one—one of the earliest and most successful, for sure. But there are other ones that started about that same time in Southern California.

Farmer: And how long have you been on the board?

Larkey: Well, the downtown one I've just been on for a couple of years. I've been off and on it, though. It's a rotating thing. People go off and on depending on how much energy they have. I have been on the board of the Monterey Bay [Certified] Farmers' market group, which is the Cabrillo, Salinas, and Monterey markets.[18] But now I'm just on the downtown one. That's about all I can handle. I had more time when I had a partner to do stuff like that.

Farmer: Oh, you don't have a partner anymore?

Larkey: No, he quit after 2002. I basically bought him out and am soloing it.

Labor Issues

Farmer: How many employees do you have?

Larkey: It varies, but right now I've got close to thirty, I'd say.

Farmer: Do they work most of the year round?

Larkey: It's about eight to nine months for the majority of them, I'd say. A lot of them go back to Mexico in the winter. They've got their own little operations going back there.

Farmer: Farms?

Larkey: Farms or cattle or whatever. That's why they know what it's about. They don't have to be told how to work. (laughs)

Farmer: Do you have greenhouses or starts?

Larkey: I do some of my own transplants. I have a couple of greenhouses down on Ocean Street [Extension]. I also buy transplants that are grown by Headstart Nursery over in Gilroy. They grow organic transplants too, now.

Farmer: What's a typical day for your workers?

Larkey: Well, now it's a lot of harvest. We're usually harvesting until one o'clock, or sometimes later. We try to get that done as early as possible in the day. And

then the rest of the day they are spending moving irrigation pipe, or weeding. Weed control is the biggest thing for us.

Farmer: The most labor intensive?

Larkey: It's a lot of labor, because we don't use herbicides, and weeds are always a problem. We grow a lot of things that are growing really close together. We can't even get them with a hoe sometimes. You have to go in with your fingers and get things out. That's usually what the last few hours of the day is spent doing. Transplanting is usually one day a week.

Farmer: If you have too many weeds, does that sap some of the quality of the vegetables?

Larkey: Oh, yes. It's competition for the nutrients and air and space, and water. Ideally you'd like a weed-free situation. It's nice to have them around to cover up the ground if you're not planting it, at least temporarily. But you don't want to let them go to seed. Because the old saying is: "one year's seed is seven years weed." An amaranth plant can produce half a million seeds. One plant. So you're stuck for a few years if you let that thing go fully to seed. That's just something you try not to do. It happens, but—

Farmer: Yes, this brings up the GMO crops.

Larkey: The ones that are resistant to herbicides so you can add the herbicide right on your crop and it will kill everything except your crop?

Farmer: It's supposed to be banned in this county.

Larkey: Roundup Ready.

Farmer: I was wondering if you've had any experience with that?

Larkey: I don't. Of course I don't have any experience with it. There's always that threat of people spraying Roundup and whatnot. I'm fairly isolated. Most of my ground is fairly isolated. I do have somewhat of an interface around Davenport with some of the land I have. But it hasn't really been an issue. Like the Jacobs Farm here at Wilder Ranch where we used to farm, we used to grow there, it's becoming an issue.[19] It's wind-related because the wind is always blowing from the north, and no matter how they try, or say they try, there's going to be drift up there. So you need to be upwind from them. You have to pick your site well.

Food Safety Issues

Farmer: Well, have you had any dealings with the consumer food safety issues that have been going on lately?

Larkey: Yes.

Farmer: What's your opinion on that?

Larkey: I really am not doing anything different than I've ever done. If things are done right you're not going to have a problem. Although it could have happened to a smaller grower, I think the situation that happened was related to the type of agriculture that is being practiced: large-scale, industrial agriculture, and processing with water in a plant that may not have all those controls in place all

the time. Then you're putting something in a plastic bag, which is an incubator. So a small problem becomes a big problem, and it gets spread over a big area because it's shipped all over the country. Not to say that this problem can't happen on a smaller farm. It's just more likely to be a bigger problem with large-scale agriculture. It's not going to be as isolated. It's going to be a widespread issue when it happens.

Then there's the interface of the livestock with the vegetable crop farming, which seems to be part of the issue. If you're making compost and heating it up to 140 degrees, you're destroying the pathogens. If you're using raw manure on your fields, then you're just asking for problems. Raw manure is just something that real organic farming has always frowned upon. The funny thing is that it's not illegal to use raw manure if you're a conventional farmer. But it is if you're an organic grower. Yet, people have it in their head that it's organic farming that's the problem.

Farmer: So have you felt threatened by that, then? Have you lost business?

Larkey: Well, I lost spinach business for a while, because I was growing bunched spinach. I wasn't growing baby spinach. That market took a dive, but it's kind of rebounded. I'm not going to ever grow huge quantities of bunched spinach again, probably. (laughs) And then all the hoops we have to jump through now, too. We've got to do all this testing. It's not mandatory yet, but I can imagine that in the near future there's going to be mandatory regulations. They're going to make it very difficult for a smaller grower to meet those. Because the water testing alone, and having a well sealed to one hundred feet— Our wells aren't

even a hundred feet deep! We wouldn't even be able to use our wells if these were put in a regulatory situation.

Farmer: Is there anybody speaking up for small farmers on that issue?

Larkey: Well, I'm sure there will be lawsuits as soon as the law goes into effect, because you've got all this irrigation surface water that's being used. There're canals all over the state of California, reservoirs. You cannot eliminate one hundred percent of the *E. coli*. If you've got ducks or animals near your farm, or any kind of water source, you're going to have that introduction. If you're going to have a zero tolerance, you're going to be hard-pressed to have any water available for growing vegetables. But I don't think that's the issue, being zero tolerance. It's more of an issue of raw manure being used near vegetable farms, and doing things correctly and in a sanitary way, and making sure all your workers are using sanitary practices, and doing things that we've always been aware of and dealt with. In a way, it's been blown out of proportion, I think. But it's a serious issue that has to be dealt with one way or another. But we had our biggest farmers' market sales right after that *E. coli* outbreak. It was unbelievable! Because people wanted to go to the source. They wanted to know where everything was coming from.

Farmer: It raised people's awareness.

Larkey: It was probably a good thing that it happened. It put agriculture and where your food came from in everyone's consciousness, whereas it wasn't necessarily there before.

Farmer: Yes, food comes from the grocery store.

Larkey: Yes. It just comes from the store, right. Well, no, it doesn't. There're people handling it. And soil, dirt. (laughs)

The Pesto Craze

Farmer: Tell me more stories from your time at Ivy Lane.

Larkey: Well, I guess the pesto craze is one of those stories. In 1979, we'd take twenty bunches of basil to a farmers' market and bring ten of them home, because nobody knew what to do with basil in 1979. It was just one of those things where you saw something explode right before your eyes. Just in a matter of a few years, we were bringing fifteen *cases* of basil to the farmers' market, and selling them all in two hours. I think that was a farmers'-market phenomenon. It wasn't something that happened in the stores. It was something that happened in farmers' markets. People were exposed to something that they hadn't been exposed to before because of that small-scale agricultural situation. People were experimenting with things. On a small-scale, people could experiment and figure out what works well and what doesn't. And the customer doing the same thing: experimenting with what they're eating, and doing things that they normally weren't doing. They just happened to like pesto once they tried it. Not only did they like it, they liked it a lot! Then they told other people about it. It was an unbelievable explosion.

Farmer: That could have been right around when the Cuisanart was first out, too.

Larkey: Well, yes. Food processors. We were using blenders at the time. But the Cuisanart thing—

Farmer: Was garlic big too, then?

Larkey: Yes, and the garlic was big. Well, that was the other thing. The first commercial crop I ever grew was garlic. That was the very first crop I ever sold at a farmers' market. We made garlic braids. We grew the dried flowers and we braided them into the braids.

Farmer: And where was that?

Larkey: That was on Ivy Lane. That was what got that whole thing going. We put a big rack of garlic braids up. We made what was for us a lot of money. It doesn't sound like a lot of money now. But back then we were paying sixty dollars a room to rent a room in this house. Now it's a little different. But in the seventies it was a different time. You didn't have to make as much money as you do now. Now you got a mortgage to pay or whatever. You got to be pulling in thirty-thousand-dollars-plus-a-year minimum just to break even.

Capital Needed for Farming

Farmer: You have to be smart with your farming practices to succeed.

Larkey: Yes, and you're gambling. I borrow $150,000. I go into debt $150,000 every spring. I spend a million dollars and I make a million dollars. That's what I tell everyone.

Farmer: So you can stay in business? Wow!

Larkey: That's what it costs to keep going. If you're spending that money and not making any money, you're going out of business pretty quick.

Farmer: So that's salaries—

Larkey: Salaries, fertilizers, seed, insurance, containers. Containers are the number-two expense next to labor. Container expense.

Farmer: Containers being—

Larkey: Boxes, cartons, and twist ties.

Farmer: And people just throw them away, or hopefully recycle them.

Larkey: Well, that's where the farmers' markets come in, and doing that thing, and recyclable containers. You can take stuff in a plastic tote instead of a box, or you can use that box four or five times. That was one of the things that the direct-marketing regulations allowed. You can bring things in non-standard containers, whereas before you had these marketing orders where you had to use a brand-new container, and it had to be a certain waxed box this size.

Farmer: What was that for? Cleanliness or just standardization?

Larkey: I think it was probably health regulations. And yes, standardization was a big thing because of the way things were marketed on this mass-market scale. You want to know what you're getting when you order a case of something so it's predictable.

More on Marketing and Distribution

So new items hitting the market. And then you've got Chez Panisse up in the Bay Area educating the public about what the best stuff is. And the best stuff is organic, and getting it as fresh as you can get it, grown as close to where you are as possible. It allowed people to experiment.

Farmer: Did Chez Panisse find you?

Larkey: I think we ended up going through a distributor in the Bay Area. We didn't drive it up there. Veritable Vegetable deals with them. And GreenLeaf Produce, another distributor up there. We do a lot of business with them, too. They basically cater to all the restaurants. So they knew about us. They knew about our label. And we got feedback from them, what they want, too. It's really nice to have someone ask *you* to grow something, instead of you trying to guess. Now I've gotten to the point where I don't plant anything unless I know where it's going to go, because the competition is so fierce. You don't want to take those chances.

Farmer: So is it a contract?

Larkey: I do contracts with Whole Foods. I do contracts with another outfit called Goodness Greenness. Veritable Vegetable—it's an unwritten contract, but it's almost a standing order with them now. It's almost predictable what they're going to take. I was at one point growing for Earthbound. I was growing radicchio for them for processing, and I was growing herbs for them for their processing. That was a contract. A certain amount every week. They'd take a

couple of hundred cases a week of cilantro. That was really good. That's something that a smaller grower loves, to have some kind of contract like that. The CSAs that a lot of these smaller operations are doing are really good because you are getting your money up front. You've already got a captive audience. You don't have to try and sell it later.

Farmer: Have you done CSAs?

Larkey: No. I've purposefully stayed away from that, because that's a whole other level of complexity that I don't really want to deal with. Can you imagine dealing with seven or eight hundred individual customers, what that takes? Unless you're geared just for doing that, it's really hard to do.

Farmer: Yes, because you already have several ways that you can market.

Larkey: I'm already doing the wholesale and farmers' markets and distribution locally. That's way beyond my capability. I would have to start up a whole other side business to do it.

Farmer: Yes. It's growing, though, because of the re-localization movement.

Larkey: It's huge, yes. I might, in the future, be tied into another CSA, because there are some CSA's that can't get enough stuff. Their customer base has gone into 1500 people. They can't supply, so they deal with other growers. We've actually done it spot, here and there. But it might become a regular contract kind of thing. That's cool. Then I don't have to deal with all the complexity of it.

Farmer: It's an order.

Larkey: It's an order.

Farmer: Because the one I'm in, they get stuff from Lakeside [Organic Gardens]. owned by Dick Peixoto.[20]

Larkey: Yes, you don't think Lakeside is going to deal with a CSA. They're huge. They're a big operation. They started small, but now they're big.

Farmer: Well, sometimes I think maybe some day everything will be that way eventually and that will just be where we get our vegetables.

Larkey: That's the goal, I think. Although, you know, here's my whole thing: I'm really energy conscious. Being a farmer, you want to be economical and efficient. It's a lot better for a farmer to bring a large quantity to where it's going to be consumed, than the consumer going to where the vegetables are being produced.

Farmer: You mean all in their different cars?

Larkey: Yes. Because even without the CSAs, they've had studies done [that show] that fifty percent of the energy in the food chain is between the supermarket and the home. And that's people going to their neighborhood supermarkets. So this whole thing about local isn't necessarily the most efficient thing. Because if you've got a lot of little farmers running around with a box here and a box there, and you've got another farmer that's coming in with a hundred boxes, even if it's grown fifty or sixty miles away, on the overall energy picture it's more efficient to do that. So in that respect, it puts a little bit of the responsibility on the consumer, too, to be involved in that whole energy food

chain. I know a lot of CSAs will pick a particular place to take everything. It would be almost like a farmers' market situation, just to reduce people running around as much.

Farmer: To have the local hubs.

Larkey: Local hubs, yes. So that works pretty well. Farmers' markets are great, though, because you can just come in with a truckload of stuff and be gone with it in a few hours. And one in every neighborhood. There's one in Live Oak; there's one downtown; there's one on the Westside; there's one in Felton.

Farmer: And then Watsonville.[21]

Larkey: Watsonville, Monterey. I mean, every town has got one. And sometimes there're multiple markets in a week.

Farmer: And they didn't use to at all. Like, Live Oak is pretty new.

Larkey: Live Oak is really new, yes. It's getting better every year.

Farmer: And if it's in the neighborhood then people can ride their bike or walk.

Larkey: Exactly. They can ride their bikes or walk. We're trying to encourage people to ride their bicycles. But it's not always what it seems to be, is what I'm trying to say, in terms of the efficiency factor.

Biofuels

Farmer: What do you do about the fuels that you have to use for your farm equipment? Are there ways to change that?

Larkey: Well, I've gone to a hundred percent biofuel, biodiesel. All my tractors are a hundred percent B-100. And my big trucks, my International ones that run to San Juan Bautista, are running on it too.

Farmer: Great. So where do you get the fuel?

Larkey: Pacific Biodiesel. They deliver. I get three hundred gallons at a time. They bring it to the farm. And it's actually cheaper, because for the farm use you get off-road credit. You don't pay road tax. I'm paying less than petrodiesel. And it's better for your engine. There's no carbon buildup. In the long run, it saves you maintenance on your vehicles. It's a good deal all the way around.

Farmer: Has anybody written an article about this yet, about your particular use?

Larkey: No. It's out there. I've put it out to my customers.

Farmer: Do you know what the fuel is made out of?

Larkey: It varies. Sometimes it's canola oil. Sometimes it's soybeans, safflower, grape. Wherever they can get it, basically.

Farmer: Is there any potential for growing fuel crops around here?

Larkey: Not for me, because my land is so expensive and you need cheaper land to grow it. But Pacific Biodiesel is actually organizing growers to grow it. They are going into production. They're going to start making their own biodiesel in Moss Landing. They're getting the run-around, of course, from the regulators. Which is a top-down thing from— You know there's back door stuff going on there, with the oil companies. Lobbyists are pushing for this and that. And that's why this whole ethanol thing is a joke. If you're using corn for ethanol, it is such an incredible waste. It is the worst energy conversion crop you can imagine. You put one unit of energy in and you get 1.5 units of energy out. Switchgrass, something that is really easy to grow and has no pests, is at eight to one.

Farmer: But with the Farm Bill right now the corn farmers are looking for subsidies.

Larkey: It's subsidies. It's all about being able to use it for different things, too. Because it's used for corn syrup, animal feed. This whole pyramid of mechanized agriculture has developed to feed this system. It's not the most efficient, best thing for the planet to do, but it's hard to change gears. And you've got these interests that are lobbying against changing gears.

Farmer: Is there any benefit to them making biofuels and using them in the equipment they're using on these huge industrial farms, just for the environment?

Larkey: That's the way the diesel engine was envisioned originally. The guy that invented the diesel engine foresaw farmers having a fifth of their land dedicated to growing crops for diesel fuel.

Farmer: Makes sense.

The History of Pesticides in Agriculture

Larkey: But he got thrown off the boat. And then the petrodiesel people came on board. It's just like pesticides. Pesticides weren't around before World War II. All of a sudden, all this technology that was developed for warfare had to be used, because you had these people with these interests pulling the strings in the government. Top-down thing, you know. Same thing. Same exact thing.

Farmer: I was talking to Jerry Thomas[22], and [he mentioned] this book from the forties by Louis Bromfield. It's called *Malabar Farm*.[23]

Larkey: I haven't read it, but I've heard of it.

Farmer: I'm reading it right now, and his worry at that time in the late forties was that people needed more food. There wasn't enough protein, for one thing. And he felt like the farms weren't being productive. He wasn't promoting chemical fertilizers, or anything like that. He was promoting soil. But there was no such thing as surpluses. I guess it was around World War II and the Depression. They really had a worry. So I don't think the chemicals were a hard sell.

Larkey: Yes, they increased the production so rapidly. Yes. They made it easy.

Farmer: They just weren't thinking about negative effects at the time.

Larkey: Right, it wasn't a long-term view, really.

Farmer: So he talks, on the one hand, about not having sufficient food for people, but on the other hand, trying to build soil, and how he was able to rebuild soil on these farms that people had just let go. They hadn't really nourished the soil at all.

Larkey: Yes, they didn't really understand how the health of the soil translates to the health of the plant. If you are looking at it from a purely chemical viewpoint, the soil is just a medium in which to transfer nutrients to the plant.

Farmer: Well, it's something for the plant to stand up in, I've heard. Instead of the microbes.

Larkey: Exactly. And then the water transports the water-soluble nutrients to the plant.

Farmer: But you can't think that way if you studied with Rich Merrill.

Larkey: No. Well, he's minor compared to some of these people. There's one lady up in Oregon, Dr. Elaine Ingham. The Soil Foodweb is her thing. She's so into it! She's in a microworld all the time. (laughs)

The Ecological Farming Conference [Eco-Farm]

Farmer: Has she been at Eco-Farm? Have you seen her talk?

Larkey: Yes, she's talked there. I mean, the closer you look, the more there is to see. There's a whole world that we need to look at. We're just hitting the tip of the iceberg. At the beginning of the organic movement it was— Well, we don't really know anything compared with what we need to know. There's still a lot of unknown, uncharted stuff that needs to get figured out. But I totally have confidence that it will be figured out, and it can be. We can be, in the long run, probably much more productive than conventional farms, just purely in what we can produce.

Farmer: Because you renew the soil.

Larkey: Yes, it's a renewal. We're not depleting it over time.

Farming on Ocean Street Extension

Farmer: Well, let's go back and talk about the historic progression for just a minute. So you were at Ivy Lane doing garlic braids. The farmers' market started. The commune broke up.

Larkey: Then on Ocean Street, the land that was out there, I think it was seven and a half acres initially, with five people. We each had an acre and a half, which was a lot more than we'd had on Ivy Lane. That was an acre and a half for the whole thing.

Farmer: So what did you call it? Was this a partnership?

Larkey: No, everyone had their own little plot. There were five different people. You could grow what you want. I was experimenting. I tried to grow garlic, but I

discovered nematodes. Really hard to deal with if you're an organic farmer. (laughs) Got out of that, and started growing other crops like potatoes. I did corn, potatoes—pretty standard things. But then I started growing basil, parsley, cilantro, zucchini. I started growing those little scaloppini squash for the specialty markets in San Francisco. I used to grow a lot on a really small area because they are very productive. Bell peppers. I discovered you could grow bell peppers around here. Most people think on the coast that it's not warm enough. Out there on Ocean Street [Extension] it is warm enough. You get a lot of sun out there. It's a perfect little climate. It doesn't get too hot or too cool. Cucumbers. Carrots, beets. I just started experimenting. Back in those days you could pretty much grow anything you wanted to grow, and sell it. It wasn't hard to market things then, because the demand at that point in time was way bigger than the supply. We could just sell it at the local natural food stores and farmers' markets, and that was it.

And then eventually people dropped out of farming. Out of those five people, there were just three of us left after the first couple of years. Then there were just two of us. And some other land opened up, people who had large backyards out there. Everyone has got a three-acre backyard along the river there. They wanted their land taken care of and farmed too, because it looked cool. We tried to make it look cool. We grew flowers. It looked like a big garden, basically. I still do it. Even on my eighty-five acres I try to have it that way. It just looks like a large garden, a very large-scale garden. So we basically got all the open land behind people's houses on Ocean Street.

Agricultural Land Use in Santa Cruz

At one point it was all farmed. Which was actually a throwback to the turn of the century when it was the Italian Gardens. I have pictures of Ocean Street Extension when it was a market garden, the whole thing. It looks kind of like it looked when we were farming out there.

Farmer: Did they have a stand?

Larkey: Well, they took it into town and sold it in town from their donkey carts or whatever. There were all these Genovese Italians out there that brought their peaches; they grew peaches, even. Nobody grew peaches around here. But out there you could. There were some orange orchards out there, and chestnuts, and plums, and cherries. For a while the whole valley, that whole Ocean Street little valley, there was cherries. And then the migrant Italian farm workers (it was before the Mexican migrant worker program), first they'd harvest near Stockton and Lodi, because that's where the cherries— It would be hotter; they'd come out first there. Then they'd go to the Santa Clara Valley and then they'd come out here. Old San Jose Road, Cherryvale Road—that was all cherries up there. Old San Jose Road and Ocean Street Extension was all cherries. So this would be the last place they'd come to harvest.

Farmer: That was very seasonal then, eating.

Larkey: It was really seasonal. And since these were all Italian [immigrant] farmers, they'd put the migrant workers up. They'd feed them and stuff.

Farmer: So they were migrant Italian farmworkers.

Larkey: Yes.

Farmer: I read Nick Pasqual's oral history, his story. He was part of a group of Filipino migrant workers.

Larkey: Yes. That was a little bit after that. A lot of the strawberry fields and even up Swanton Road—there was a Filipino camp up there, up Swanton Road, where the Swanton Pacific Ranch is now. You can still see remnants of that whole community. It was a big community, the Filipino community. In Watsonville, too. There are still remnants of that in Hawaii.

Farmer: Nick is still bringing vegetables to the farmers' market?

Larkey: He still comes to the Cabrillo Farmers' market. He tried to get his kids involved in it, and they were for a while, but they all kind of drifted off. So I don't really know who is running that now. He had the farm stand over there in Aptos.

Farmer: Yes, Village Fair.

Larkey: Yes, he had his little farm stand there. Before the farmers' market that's where he was selling most of his stuff.

The Future

Farmer: So speaking of his kids, do you have kids?

Larkey: No.

Farmer: So what do you think about passing on farms? Do you think there's hope for that?

Larkey: I think so. This is a business. I took it over from my partner. People took over some of the land that we farmed. The Jacobses were expanding and they took that over. If I leave, I'd probably pass it on to somebody. They would want the markets that I have. I would think that somebody would want to continue doing it. I would hope so. But it has to be someone who is driven. They have to know. I mean, a lot of people think they want to do this. But I wouldn't just sell it to anybody. I'd have to have the feeling that they would put in the necessary time and energy and consistency and being *committed* to it. Because it really takes that.

And it's almost hard for your offspring. Because when the offspring thing was happening, where people were passing it on to their kids—you're not dealing with the strategic decisions that have to be made now. It's really hard to pass that kind of drive onto somebody, because it is still in a transitional phase. Our agriculture is in a horrendous situation right now. I really don't know what's going to happen. I'm worried about shortages because of the fuel thing, and all the regulations. Are we just going to be left with these huge corporate farms? It's really difficult for a small farming operation to operate. There's not a lot of incentive to pass on a small organic farm to somebody. They really have to have it in them to want to do it. It's not a cut-and-dried thing. And you got to be changing it all the time.

Farmer: Do you ever get to take a vacation?

Larkey: Oh, yes.

Farmer: In the winter?

Larkey: Yes, mostly. But I'll take off for four or five days in the middle of the season too.

Farmer: Because you have good managers?

Larkey: I have good people that— I won't want to go any longer than that this time of the year.

Farmer: And do you have any managers that you would train to take over the farm, or does that happen?

Larkey: If they wanted to. (laughs) I don't know if they would want to do it.

Farmer: They see what it's like.

Larkey: They see what it's like. They'd rather get paid, know they're going to get paid. But Jon [Steinberg], I've talked to him. I might be leaving some day soon. And he wants to get back into farming. He'd be a good candidate because he's farmed in the past. He knows what it's about. He's gone bankrupt. He knows.

Farmer: Oof. Are there special banks that do those loans, the crop loans?

Larkey: I don't do those funny kinds of loans. I've just been winging it. When I owned a house, I was using my home equity, which is kind of a no-no. But I'm

divorced now, so basically I use my own cash at this point. I'm not able to use that borrowing capital this year, because I don't own a piece of property.

Farmer: So you've really got to have something to leverage?

Larkey: You've got to have something. You've got to have some stash. I probably could go get a loan. It might be a little bit more difficult because I don't own a home right now.

Farmer: I've heard that there are certain banks that are there for farmers. They are willing to take that kind of risk. They probably charge more interest.

Larkey: Yes. I don't really want to jump through any of those hoops either. Something always is attached to that. They want to look at your business really closely. I don't have the time for that. I would do it if I had to. But I like my independence. I don't like someone else telling me what to do.

Farmer: Absolutely. So you started out with Ocean Street, and then moving out to property north of here that you've been leasing. And the rest is history. That's been very successful.

Larkey: Yes, Waddell, Rancho del Oso, was one of those really weird things. I used to mountain-bike up there. They used to just grow hay up there, just bale hay. I thought, wow, man, that would be such a good place to grow, such an ideal location. And one day the phone rang. It was one of the family up there. They were worried the state parks was going to take the rest of their family's land away, or whatever. So they wanted a viable farm going on, and they heard I

was a good farmer. It was a word-of-mouth thing, I guess. Things open up. If you're doing the right thing and open to new stuff like that, I think things open up. There're always opportunities.

Farmer: Well, everybody I talked to said, "You have to talk to Jeff Larkey." You've embraced the spirit of it.

Larkey: Well, I've been lucky. I do have these pretty killer locations. It's my life, for sure. It's been something that I do because I love to do it. You kind of have to do that. You can't be what I consider to be an organic farmer and just do it for the money. Because you're not going to be doing it right, for one thing. You have to immerse yourself in it. You have to become part of that web.

Farmer: That's great. Thank you, Jeff.

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[1] See the oral history with Richard Merrill in this series.

[2] See the oral histories with Robbie Jaffe for more on this farmers' market.

[3] See the oral history with Jerry and Jean Thomas of Thomas Farms in this series.

[4] See the excerpt of an oral history with Nick Pasqual reprinted in this series.

[5] During the time this interview was conducted, Santa Cruz County and other counties in California were embroiled in a controversy about how to control the light brown apple moth (*Epiphyas postvittana*). For one perspective see http://www.panna.org/resources/lbam

[6] See the oral histories with Catherine Barr and Nesh Dhillon in this series.

[7] The annual conference of the Ecological Farming Association. See the oral histories with Amigo Bob Cantisano, Zea Sonnabend, and others in this series for more on Eco-Farm.

[8] At the time this interview was conducted Whole Foods was in the process of opening two stores in Santa Cruz County.

[9] See the oral history with Dale Coke in this series.

[10] See the oral history with Scott Roseman, owner of New Leaf, in this series.

[11] CCOF was formed in 1973.

[12] See Robert Steffen, Floyd Allen, and James Foote, eds. *Organic Farming: Methods and Markets*. (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1972)

[13] On December 1, 1972, at a public hearing in New York City, Robert Rodale defined organic food as: "Food grown without pesticides; grown without artificial fertilizers; grown in soil whose humus content is increased by the additions of organic matter, grown in soil whose mineral content is increased by the application of natural mineral fertilizers; has not been treated with preservatives, hormones, antibiotics, etc."

[14] See the oral history with Russel and Karen Wolter in this series.

[15]According to their website, Outstanding in the Field's "Chef Jim Denevan began staging Outstanding in the Field dinners at organic farms around his hometown of Santa Cruz, California back in 1999. The idea: To dine at the source on the very soil that nourished the bounty on the plate, in the company of the farmers who cultivated it." The company is now staging dinners at farms across North America and has plans for an international tour in 2008. http://www.outstandinginthefield.com/history.html

[16] The Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets have since added locations in Felton and Scotts Valley.

[17] In 1977, the California Department of Food and Agriculture established a set of regulations for farmers' markets, allowing county agricultural commissioners to approve Certified Farmers Markets.

[18] See the oral history with Catherine Barr, manager of the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets, in this series.

[19] In December 2006 Larry Jacobs of Jacobs Farm, during a routine crop inspection, discovered organophosphates on the culinary herbs he was growing on land at Wilder Ranch State Park north of Santa Cruz. This resulted in a $500,000 loss for Jacobs Farm, as the residue is not allowed on culinary herbs, whether they are sold as organic or conventional crops. Another loss was recorded the following spring. The pesticides were applied properly but had combined with the fog and drifted onto Jacobs' field. Jacobs Farm filed a lawsuit against Western Farm Services, the pesticide application company. In May 2007 a Santa Cruz Superior Court judge issued an injunction against Western Farm Services to stop spraying the farmland (where Brussels sprouts are grown) near Jacobs Farm. In September 2008 a Santa Cruz jury awarded $1 million to Jacobs farm in this case, ruling that pesticide applications by Western Farm Service resulted in trespass of the pesticides onto Jacobs Farm and were legally determined to be a nuisance depriving Jacobs Farm of the right to use and enjoy the land, caused by negligence on the part of Western Farm Services. Western Farm Services said they planned to appeal the case. See the oral history with Larry Jacobs in this series for more details on this case.

[20] See the oral history with Dick Peixoto of Lakeside Organic Gardens in this series.

[21] See the oral history with Nancy Gammons, manager of the Watsonville Farmers' Market in this series.

[22] See the oral history with Jerry and Jean Thomas in this series.

[23] Louis Bromfield, *Malabar Farm*, (New York: Harper, 1948).