

## Jerry and Jean Thomas



Photo by the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA)

### Thomas Farm

*Jerry Thomas grew up in the Los Angeles area and attended college at San Fernando Valley College (now California State University, Northridge), where he earned a master's degree in urban/economic geography. He is a fifth-generation Californian on his mother's side of the family. After a stint in the Peace Corps in Guyana, South America, Jerry and his wife, Jean (who also*

*grew up in LA), wanted to leave smoggy and congested Los Angeles. They moved to the Santa Cruz area in 1970, and became back-to-the-landers on five acres of land in the foothills of Aptos.*

*In this oral history, conducted by Ellen Farmer on March 20 and May 7, 2007, at Thomas Farms, the Thomases describe how what began as a large garden grew into Thomas Farms, now one of the oldest organic farms in California. Jerry was invited to participate in Rodale's organic certification program that pre-dated California Certified Organic Farmers, and was a founding member of California Certified Organic Farmers. He helped draft the first state organic legislation in 1979. Jerry has served as a County Farm Bureau director and as a member of the County Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee, and frequently speaks at the Ecological Farming Association's Eco-Farm conference. He has served on the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Market board of directors.*

*Jean helps run Thomas Farms, and also teaches adult education courses in writing, science and math. A watercolor and monoprint artist, Jean serves on the Pajaro Valley Arts Council; in 2007 she curated Market Motion, an art show about the farmers' markets in the Central Coast area.*

*The Thomases have represented the Community Alliance of Family Farmers (CAFF) as members of the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley Farmlands and Wetlands. They mentor younger organic farmers, and participate in many local farmers' markets, where their booths are distinguished by a dazzling plethora of colorful sunflowers, zinnias, irises, lilies and other cut flowers.*

**Additional Resources:**

California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF): <http://www.ccof.org/>

Community Alliance with Family Farmers: <http://www.caff.org/>

Reggie Knox, "Direct Marketing Blooms at Thomas Farms," Community Alliance with Family Farmers "Who's Your Farmer?" series, <http://www.caff.org/farmer/profiles/thomas.shtml>

Slideshow of CUESA's tour of Thomas Farm.  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/cuesa/sets/72157622572847420/>

**Farmer:** Today is Tuesday, March 20, 2007. I'm Ellen Farmer and this is Jerry Thomas of Thomas Farm in Aptos. I would like to get a little background and then talk about your philosophies and things you've learned about over time.

**Jerry Thomas:** Okay.

## **Beginnings**

**Farmer:** So first, where were you born and where did you grow up?

**Jerry Thomas:** I was born in Los Angeles and grew up in the West LA area, Westwood, and went to college in Southern California.

**Farmer:** Where did you go to college?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, then it was called San Fernando Valley State College. It's Cal State Northridge today.

**Farmer:** Can you describe your education and formative experiences?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, I didn't major in agriculture. I got a degree in political science and then a master's degree in urban geography/economic geography.

**Farmer:** And what do you consider early influences in your life?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, my grandmother who died shortly after I was born was a phenomenal gardener, and created magic on the residential lot that we had. My

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mother continued it. So one of my responsibilities as I was growing up was taking care of many of the foundation plants, and the rest of it.

**Farmer:** And was this for food?

**Jerry Thomas:** It was all floral. Apparently during the war they had a Victory Garden and they were able to produce a lot on the property, but after that it was strictly floral—roses and all sorts of annuals, and sub-tropicals and chrysanthemums, and on and on.

**Farmer:** So would you say your family was ever involved in farming, or was it mainly gardening?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, other parts of the family were involved in agriculture. The family on my mother's side came to California in 1850. So I'm fifth generation in California. My branch of that family primarily went into the professions, and into mining, and into water transfers in the Western Sierra. But they were also involved in sheep rearing. In fact, John Muir worked for the family as a shepherd, and the family owned the valley of the Hetch Hetchy and was involved in the sale of that to San Francisco. Apparently my great-grandfather and his twin brother are mentioned by John Muir in his writings. We have a photograph of Great-Grandfather with Mark Twain.

**Farmer:** So how did *you* get into farming?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, I spent two years in the Peace Corps. And after the Peace Corps, Jean (my wife) and myself wanted to leave the Southern California area and move to a more tranquil place with less traffic and less commotion, and had

moved up to Northern California. We were seeking at that time employment as teachers. Because in the Peace Corps I had worked for two years as a secondary-school teacher in Guyana, South America, and at that time the state of California gave you a lifetime credential for Peace Corps teaching experience. So I was able to get that. We initially tried to get, or I did, some positions in planning up in the Bay Area. But the job market was really tight at that time, both for teachers and for potential government employees in planning.

My mother, when she was young, their family actually lived part of the year—which was common for people who could actually afford it—from the hot, central part of the state to come for the summer into the cool, coastal regimes. She always spoke so highly of Santa Cruz. So we came to Santa Cruz and were sitting on the beach at Twin Lakes and said, “Well, if you can’t get a job in the Bay Area, an urban area, and you can’t get a job here, it would sure be a lot better living here than up in the Bay Area in all of the traffic and everything.”

**Farmer:** (laughter) Yes.

**Jerry Thomas:** So we just rented, and then eventually moved to where we are now.

### **Starting Thomas Farm**

**Farmer:** And was this already a farm when you came here?

**Jerry Thomas:** This had been a farm, but even at that time much of the land had been subdivided away, and divided off and sold, which was common. So we purchased this place with two and a half acres and the adjoining property with

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two and a half acres, and then have leased additional lands in the valley at different times.

**Farmer:** And you started with apples? Is that what you had at the time? Or did you plant them?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, we were what would be called back-to-the-landers. We wanted to have animals, so we had goats and chickens and ducks, and assorted other birds and things. Rabbits. And raised those just for ourselves and sold some. We were here in 1971, planted a large garden and began selling some of the excess produce to the small, organic retail produce stands that were much more common then than they are now.

**Farmer:** On the roadside? Is that where they were?

**Jerry Thomas:** Some were. Some were located at more established buildings. But there were a number of them all over the county.

**Farmer:** I wasn't here yet, so I missed that. The first thing I saw was Community Foods and some of the co-ops.

**Jerry Thomas:** Community Foods, yes. We sold to them. They were way down in Santa Cruz at that time.

**Farmer:** So people would come out here and find the organic stands.

**Jerry Thomas:** And there were other stands that weren't organic, that were just produce stands.

**Farmer:** They seem to have consolidated at this point. There're a few.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. There are a much few larger ones today. At that time, there were a lot of small ones.

**Farmer:** So did people specialize in certain crops?

**Jerry Thomas:** It was sort of a hit-and-miss type thing at that time. Because the organic movement really took off after the first Earth Day. *Silent Spring* had preceded that. Rodale was still publishing *Organic Gardening* magazine, and sales and expansion of their distribution increased dramatically during this time. They became increasingly more of a player, and people became more aware.

**Farmer:** And do you think that was word-of-mouth and the magazine —

**Jerry Thomas:** Probably the media and everything. Because there was definitely a major boom in 1971.

**Farmer:** And you felt it here with what you were doing?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes. We were just at the beginning, but established farmers who were maybe not quite ethical would sell (because there was no way to verify it) produce as being organic. That's how the first certifying body came into existence. Rodale realized that they had created this huge potential market and there was no one trying to regulate it.

## **Rodale and the Beginnings of Organic Certification**

**Farmer:** So what's the story about Rodale? They came here to Santa Cruz —

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, in 1971, summer 1971, or it could have been 1972. It could have been for two years. Rodale tried to certify organic growers who were calling themselves organic.

**Farmer:** And the standards that they used —

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, what they did was they came to the farm. I was actually here on the visit. At that time we didn't own the adjoining property. It was the Organic Home Nursery, and they were organic. They came, and there was one guy who jumped out of his car and identified himself as being from Rodale. I was here, and our neighbors weren't here. He said he was here to certify from Rodale, to check to see if it was organic. All he did was randomly take a couple of cuttings off of an apple tree and place them in a plastic bag and left. What they were going to do was test for residue on the material.

**Farmer:** To see if it had been sprayed, or whatever?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. That was the extent of it. But Rodale quickly realized that this was well beyond their capabilities, to certify not only the state, but I think they were making an effort to do other parts of the country as well.

**Farmer:** So did it become a local organization then, here?

### **California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]**

**Jerry Thomas:** No, the first CCOF, California Certified Organic Farmers, first came into existence probably in the winter of 1971, '72, because they needed some certifying body. At that time it was a statewide organization. The logistics



of meeting and communicating and coordinating were beyond the capabilities of a volunteer organization, and it only lasted for a relatively short period of time, maybe a couple of years. Barney Bricmont<sup>1</sup> was involved in that and can fill you in on all the specific details. The result was it collapsed and ceased to exist because people couldn't make the meetings. They would have to drive five hundred miles one way to a meeting and it was just beyond the ability— I mean, you couldn't run it like that. Well, the Monterey Bay area, particularly Santa Cruz County, had always been sort of a focal point for organic production, and it was decided to have a localized, sort of regional CCOF.

**Farmer:** How did that get decided?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, there was a group of people who were larger growers (I think that was in '74), who were growers who were attempting to market their products, people who had formerly been conventional growers and had moved into organics. And at that time many of the "back-to-the-landers," and people who had some ambitions to be farmers, the kinds of lands that they were able to purchase and operate were these dry-farmed orchards, apple orchards that are scattered all over the county. Santa Cruz at one time was a major apple growing area. Now there's just a remnant of it left. So they had tons of apples that were "organic" and they wanted to be able to sell them. Plus others who were in the produce business. But most of the early founders were in apples. So it came together. There was the first meeting out at the Kennedy Center on East Lake in Watsonville in 1974, and that's when the new organization came into existence.

**Farmer:** And so did you actually formalize it and elect officers?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it became a formal, a voluntary organization. The members themselves did the inspections, and it rotated so the same person wouldn't inspect the same place twice.

**Farmer:** So you did some inspections yourself?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes.

**Farmer:** And how was that? How was it working with other farmers?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, it seemed to work okay. That part of it worked okay. It gained some legitimacy. The CCOF label meant something because there was, and probably in varying degrees maybe still is, a certain element of fraud that's always been running right with the organic movement.

### *E. coli*

**Farmer:** So now they're talking about self-regulation for the *E. coli* thing in the industry. It's the big industry. And people in the state are saying, "No. Somebody else has to come in who doesn't have a vested interest." What do you think about that?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, it's sort of a mixed bag. I just received an e-mail alert about that yesterday. The Health Department is coming in to try to regulate production standards. One of the things that they're talking about eliminating is the hedgerows, which is something that the sustainable agriculture movement has always been trying to move towards—to provide not only a buffer strip to reduce erosional impacts on adjoining properties by having a siltation barrier,

but also habitat for beneficial insects that can help counter some of the insect infestations. You're planting a variety of pollinators that bloom at different times of the year in these hedgerows, and they are not only beneficial to the grower but also have a visual benefit. It looks nice to see these hedgerows.

We all have *E. coli* in our intestinal systems. The bacteria is everywhere. It's the mutated form that is causing the problems, that apparently is associated with grain-fed beef in feedlot situations. Their natural bacteria have mutated to counter an unnatural diet, and have mutated into this form that is extremely toxic to some mammals, not other mammals. And it can be carried, with apparently no deleterious effect, by other animals.

**Farmer:** How close by do we have feedlots here in this county?

**Jerry Thomas:** In this county presently there are none. There are some in Monterey County, way to the south.

**Farmer:** But not in the northern part of the county.

**Jerry Thomas:** No. There are some dairies, but that's—

**Farmer:** Big ones?

**Jerry Thomas:** There's one on Elkhorn Slough, and that's the only one, I believe now, in Monterey County. There used to be a lot of dairies in Monterey and Santa Cruz County. Now there's only one, and they're being forced, sort of through regulation or excessive regulation, out of the county, and they are in the process of moving. So there will be no dairies left in this county.

## Defining Sustainable Agriculture

**Farmer:** Well, I want to ask a big question, and answer it any way you feel moved to. What does sustainable agriculture itself mean to you?

**Jerry Thomas:** We came to sustainable agriculture from the organic perspective. So we're sort of biased in terms of producing both floral material—which we produce a lot of, and fruits and vegetables also—but producing these in a manner that probably primarily saves the productive asset, which is the soil and the ground, by not applying a variety of really harsh chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and to keep more of a natural environment on the farm. We have a huge quantity of birds. Probably at any one time there are hundreds on the property, sometimes probably closer to a thousand on the property. And we have a variety, because the way we grow and produce—we're more productive now than we were when we first started. The soil is probably in better shape now than when we began thirty-five years ago. I'm sure it is. Sustainable means going over time, so it will be as productive in a hundred years as it is today.

We have literally over a hundred varieties of different flowers, and if you include the colors it's probably a thousand different named cultivars. Plus vegetables and potatoes. We have fifty or sixty varieties of apples, and a dozen varieties of peaches, and five or six varieties of plums and avocados and citrus and everything else. Plus livestock. So we've got a really diverse — We're almost like gardening. We're farming in small sections. We take out a couple of beds and replant them. There's production going on year-round. We have cover crops. We cover-crop both in the summer and in the winter, but not everything. Because we

have to have something [in production]; my son has taken over the farm and they need a cash flow all year long, pretty much all year long. At the height of the season we sell at six farmers' markets. And then we do wholesale. We do a lot of weddings for flowers. And we do special events type of things.

**Farmer:** Do you work with particular florists?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, they have a route with some of the florists that are here in the county. They're local, so it's delivered directly from here. And then we ship a little. We provide flowers for Diamond Organics. And they ship. Most of those flowers go back east.

**Farmer:** Have you noticed an increase with this green weddings trend?

**Jerry Thomas:** I don't know. It seems like we're doing more weddings. Now, starting in the spring, is when they seem to pick up. It's the time. And through the summer it probably averages a couple a week.

**Farmer:** Is the demand for organic flowers increasing in certain areas because of certain green trends with younger people?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, I think there definitely is an increase. We just provide flowers. We're not involved in the set-up at all, because that takes a whole different personality to deal with the dynamics of the people. We just provide what we have available in the week that they're planning on getting married. That's what we can provide. Because with certain wedding parties it can become very difficult, the dynamics of dealing with the different personalities involved. We have sort of stayed away from that aspect of the business. There are other people

who do event planning and wedding planning. We sell to them also. But they do that part of the job.

## Skills in Organic Farming

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

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, it's probably wearing a number of hats simultaneously. To be successful for a small or a medium-sized, or even a large farm, but particularly for a small to medium-sized family-type operation, is having a diverse production or marketing strategy. Try to stay away from commodities or commodifying the product that you are producing. So for example if you are going to be a dairy, you don't want to compete with the large Holstein bulk milk guys that are milking three and four and five thousand cows, with a whole group of them. You want to be able to do something different with your product that allows you to differentiate yourself from the commodity aspect of it. Easier than trying to differentiate a commodity from other commodities, like milk from milk, is to grow things that really *are* different. So the greater the variety of stuff and the more diverse you can be up to a point, and still be able to manage it effectively, then you have a variety of options.

And then the marketing of it connects back to staying away from the commodity. Because you want to be able to tell a story about yourself or a story about what it is you're selling, or both, so that you are able to differentiate yourself from everyone else.

**Farmer:** Do you find the demand coming to you, say, from chefs or people like that? Or is it more that you need to educate the public about varieties that you have, or something that they might want to try?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, this area that we live in Santa Cruz County has an extremely sophisticated buying public who are frequently well aware of things that most people probably in other parts of the country in urban areas are totally oblivious of. I mean, examples would be: we're also involved in a large pig-rearing project, not on this location but at another site. Most people think a pig is a pig is a pig. But there are all sorts of breeds of pigs that actually have different culinary aspects about the meat that they produce. In this market the chefs actually know the difference. In other places, pork is pork, or a chicken is a chicken, and they can't tell the difference. So it's much easier for the grower here because the chefs are actually looking for things that are different. The florists want something different. They look for something different, so it's much easier to bring things to them. If they're halfway good, then you can establish a market for the item, and for some items it can expand.

A good example for us would be sunflowers. We were one of the first growers to grow floral sunflowers for sale. The *San Jose Mercury News* did a big feature article on us on their garden page, and gradually sunflowers became more and more accepted as a cut flower. Today it is one of the biggest of the specialty cut flowers that are grown. Tens of millions of stems of them are being grown today—probably hundreds of millions of stems are being grown today—when twenty-five years ago there were virtually zero.

**Farmer:** So you started a trend, basically.

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, in part. There were others too. But we were one of the first to do it, and try to market sunflowers and now —

**Farmer:** As flowers. Because there were sunflower seeds back in the day. Weren't those in big fields, like monocrops?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, they still are, for sunflower oil production.

**Farmer:** But you're doing the flowers.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, the floral ones. It's an interesting story on the sunflowers that all the *Helianthus* are yellow. In the early 1920s a botanist whose name I can't remember was traveling in Eastern Colorado, driving along in his old Ford car on a dirt road, and there there're a number of *Helianthus* species. The multi-branching one is common throughout the High Plains as a summer annual. He was toodling along and he saw out in the field—he'd probably passed literally millions of these plants, and way out in the field somewhere there was one that was dark. The story goes that he slammed on his brakes and went out and either he collected seed from that time, or he marked the spot on the road somehow and came back and collected seed. And from that one plant all of the colored sunflowers have subsequently evolved.

**Farmer:** Wow.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it was a chance mutation, a freak mutation that occurred out of probably billions of sunflowers that had grown through time. Maybe other



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colored ones had popped up in the past, but this one was a dark, bronze-colored sunflower. The right person happened to see it and knew immediately what it was that he had there.

But that's not unusual. A lot of these plants, like the Stargazer Lily, it was a hybrid cross. We sell tens of millions of stems of them now.

**Farmer:** And do you work with heirloom seeds and heirloom varieties? Is that something you are interested in?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh yes. We do a number of them for ourselves, and then those that we sell. So we do a lot of the apples that we have. We are involved with Slow Food also, so we are working to get the Hauer apple, which is the only apple that was actually developed in Santa Cruz County and became commercially important. It's an extremely late-maturing apple. It doesn't mature really until December, so in many areas of the country it would be impossible to ripen it. This climate here, our coastal climate, is ideal because of the late, late cool fall. It's an extremely good apple if it's well grown, and was successfully marketed from this area as the Christmas apple in the Bay Area prior to the advent of cold storage and controlled-atmosphere storage techniques that can keep fall apples well into the following year.

**Farmer:** They were telling me at the farmers' market last weekend, some of them, that this was the last weekend for apples. Next weekend they are going to have strawberries.

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, other people will have apples. They'll have apples to sell. But at this time of the year, they're all coming out of storage that are grown in the Northern Hemisphere. There are no apple trees producing apples at this time of year. You see the trees and they are all dormant. Like across the road there, those are apple trees, and there's not a leaf on them. They're just starting to bud out now.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Farming on the Central Coast of California**

**Farmer:** Well, this might be a good time to ask what are the advantages and disadvantages of farming in this region?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, this is probably one of the most benign places on the planet to farm. We have this very unique climate. It's only found in five places on the planet. Coastal California, from where we are south and a little bit north, is the largest area. It's a Mediterranean climate, but the great bulk of the Mediterranean climatic areas are like the San Joaquin Valley, and, well, the Mediterranean itself, are characterized by a wet winter and hot summer. And we have a wet winter and a cool summer. It's ideal for growing almost anything. Because where we're located, we're actually at the northern end of the subtropical, and the southern end of the temperate. So it's warm enough to grow avocados, as evidenced by the tree in our front yard, and others that we have here, and it's cool enough to have the adequate chilling for deciduous trees like apples and peaches, plums, and a whole array of other deciduous fruit trees.

**Farmer:** Is it the roots that have to get a certain number of days with cold?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, it's the whole structure of the tree needs to — I don't know, I've never read a full description as to why it is, but it's a physiological fix that they have to go into a real dormancy to be able to kick back into growth. If they have inadequate chilling— In a severe case, for example, in the tropics, deciduous trees will die. They'll grow and then they will keep growing and then they'll gradually fade and cease. Roses and things like that.

**Farmer:** Because they don't get to rest.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, they have to go through a cycle, an annual cycle. That's how they've evolved. The chilling is what triggers it. And the number of hours that they have is critical for the success of the tree for the following year and subsequent years. So when there is inadequate chilling, you can tell because the trees will string out the bloom, and the growth rate will vary on the tree, and it won't all start to grow at the same time. It will be strung out over time. That's not good for the trees. This year we had more than adequate chilling.

**Farmer:** Yes, I remember January.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it was very cold. It was cold in December, and into February, and even in November. The chilling for deciduous trees is most important early. You want December, January, end of November to start to get cold at night.

**Farmer:** So the apple trees that you were talking about that are local, the Hauer? When were they first being grown here?

**Jerry Thomas:** At the turn of the past century (20<sup>th</sup>) is when they were first being grown here.

**Farmer:** Yes, and Martinelli's is pretty old.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, they were here in the 1860s, I believe.<sup>2</sup>

**Farmer:** So would they have been promoting that kind of apple?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, Martinelli's was always juice. In the apple trade, the lowest-quality fruit, or mostly the culls, will go for juice. In some cases, the apples will be grown, particularly if you're growing for hard cider, there you're blending like with grapes, so then you'll use good fruit if you're making an alcoholic type of a drink. But here in the United States, they just basically— Martinelli's makes an effort to try to blend the Newtown Pippin apple with other varieties. That's a tart apple together with a sweet apple to get a little bit better quality product. We don't sell any apples to juice makers anymore.

**Farmer:** You're selling whole fruit to everybody.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, whole fruit. In the past we've fed the culled fruit to the pigs. And we make juice ourselves here for us.

**Farmer:** What would you say are your greatest rewards and challenges in farming?

**Jerry Thomas:** Greatest rewards? I think one of the rewards is that our three children really had a positive experience growing up here on the farm. My oldest son is taking over the farm, and is really amping it up.

**Farmer:** Oh, great!

**Jerry Thomas:** Just the whole lifestyle of living here. I've really enjoyed being out here. The challenges? You have to have sort of a love to be able to put everything together. It looks like it's easy, but it's not. What I like to tell people is that (and it's probably true in any business, maybe a little bit more so in farming) you've got to link together a whole series of details, just one after another after another after another over time. Because you are dealing with an evolving product. It's not keeping a warehouse of widgets and selling them out. They are actually changing day to day as you are dealing with them.

**Farmer:** And part of sustainability is having something year round, you were saying, that you can sell.

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes, for us it was always — In fact, it was Russel Wolter who said, when we [Jean and I] were both working part time at the farm and our other things, and teaching almost full time and doing both, I remember Russel was saying that he was working full time [on the farm].<sup>3</sup> I said, "Russel, how can you work full time?" He said, "Oh, it's so much easier than to stop and start again." And it really is true, because we're able to keep at least one and sometimes two people working through the winter. You can have really good workers and good employees who know the system, and what you're doing and how you're going about doing it. If you can keep them on [through the winter], it's infinitely easier than spending all that time retraining people to do the job, particularly in what we're doing, which is much more complex than growing strawberries or something where we have the same crop all year long. They're

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putting strawberries in baskets and doing this, and watering. Nothing changes, basically. Here, what we're selling today—in three months we will not have a single thing that we're selling now that we'll be selling. Not one. Nothing. Zero. So it's a whole different process.

And the other challenge is planning. We're speaking now in March, and we're already getting the planting schedule for bulbs for next year. You have to get it in. You have to call it in to the broker who is going to make the order for you. You have to find out what the availability is there. They already know what their anticipated availabilities are going to be. You can start making your orders and the sooner you get in, then you get on the list. You will get your product, and someone that waits will be out of luck.

**Farmer:** So you already have relationships with a lot of customers who want certain things and that's how you gauge —

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, we grow what we want to grow, and then we sell it to the people. If somebody wants something, a special thing, then we'll make an effort to grow it. For example, we have a lot of tulips now. Some of the tulip varieties the florists know, but there are literally hundreds of them. And with lilies, the same thing. There are new tulips that are coming out every year. So there's new material and new forms and new colors. Same thing with dahlias. There are new ones every year.

**Farmer:** So the florists appreciate that you try the different varieties.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. Florists, and in this area the chefs and also the customers, are willing to try new things. I mean, if it's no good they're not going to come back again, but they have that spirit of adventure about them. (laughter)

**Farmer:** Do they communicate with you directly about what they like and don't like?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes. We grow some interesting potatoes that aren't widely available. One that we grow is really quite ugly. It's called Red Gold, but it's not red and it's not gold. The flesh is gold. It's a yellow-fleshed potato. It's sort of a dirty looking red color. Visually, it's not attractive at all. But it has just absolutely dynamite flavor. And people are hesitant, even these people were, I remember when we first put it out, to buy it, because they were so ugly looking. They looked dirty. The skin looked dirty. It wasn't clean looking. It wasn't because they weren't washed or clean. It's just that's what they looked like. But once they tried them, people repeatedly came back and said it was the best potato they'd ever eaten in their life and wanted them immediately. They wanted ugly potatoes.

### **Social Networks Among Farmers**

**Farmer:** (laughter) "Where's those ugly ones?" Well, do you find that there's a social network between farmers, and maybe some of these organizations that you're involved with, that enhances what you do?

**Jerry Thomas:** Most farmers are working in isolation, just by nature of the job. It's not like being an attorney, where you're communicating with other attorneys.

You're working on your place. You're not going over to Joe's place. It takes too much time to just do what you do. Yes, there is a lot of social contact time at other events or gatherings, and at the farmers' markets in particular, which is one of the few places that farmers (except for social-type events or an awards ceremony or something else, or a dinner or that sort of thing) actually come into contact with each other on a regular basis. So there's a lot of communication that occurs there, and there are friendships between different growers. Not so much between growers that are growing the same thing (laughs), but between people who aren't competitors.

**Farmer:** (laughter) Yes. So it is a competitive business in that sense.

**Jerry Thomas:** It's cutthroat.

**Farmer:** Yes? And this is between organic market farmers.

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It's cutthroat. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and you don't want to be covered with kibbles. (laughter)

**Farmer:** No. (laughter) And I'm telling you. It doesn't look like that to the consumer when you are walking around the beautiful farmers' market.

**Jerry Thomas:** That's always the illusion that you want to maintain. (laughs)

## **Slow Food**

**Farmer:** What about some of the organizations like Slow Food? How does that enhance your social network?



**Jerry Thomas:** Slow Food has been phenomenal in promoting novelty produce. They are involved in RAFT, Renewing America's Food Traditions—that whole effort to bring back different kinds of animal products and vegetable products because they just don't quite meet the production requirements of an industrialized agriculture but have qualities of taste and flavor. They've done a phenomenal job in promoting small farmers, particularly the ones that are operating here, the Monterey Bay Convivium<sup>4</sup>, and other ones around the United States and the world. [Slow Food's] identifications of fruits, and animal products, and vegetables for their Ark of Taste is really helpful in marketing.

**Farmer:** So they are doing some of that for you, actually.

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh yes. They do a lot of press releases, and they're gaining more and more recognition, and there are more and more conviviums being established around the country, and in different cities that formerly never had one. Like Monterey. It seems strange, but Carmel, Monterey, Pacific Grove didn't have a convivium. They haven't had one for years. And now they've got one. You would think that would be a logical place where one would be. One or two, maybe. We're mostly familiar, obviously, with the convivium that we are part of. But other conviviums are more foodies who go to a restaurant and will pre-arrange a date where they will prepare what they are most noted for and all the complimentary wines, and then they'll pay a set price for the number of people that are there, and have a phenomenal eating experience that they would otherwise not had if it had not been prearranged.

**Farmer:** Isn't there a huge gathering of Slow Food in San Francisco in a couple of years?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, originally it was supposed to be this year. But now we have discovered that it's going to be sometime in 2008, probably early summer about a year from now.<sup>5</sup> We've gotten some e-mail alerts about it. They're still planning it.

**Farmer:** And people from this area went to the one in Italy this year, right? You know people who went.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. Jim [Dunlop] and Becky [Rebecca Thistlethwaite] from TLC Ranch in North Monterey County were sponsored by our convivium to go, sponsored in part.<sup>6</sup> You'd have to talk to them directly, but just from my talking to them, [the impression I got] is that it was a little too big. There were over five thousand participants, and that didn't include the huge number of vendors and all the rest. It was gigantic. It was like a UN meeting where you had to have headphones on for the translations. And because it was so big, there weren't opportunities to really meet people. The food section, where they had all the different producers of different kinds of processed meat products, and cheeses, and the breads, and everything else, was phenomenal, they said. I think they enjoyed the traveling around the country, but it might be just a little bit big to be able to find and relate— The San Francisco one is going to be smaller, hopefully. But even at small gatherings—at the Eco-Farm conference, where there are only about one thousand people, or I just was at another conference where there were three hundred and fifty—there were people that I subsequently found out that I

knew that were there that I never saw! (laughs) It's just a logistics problem when you bring that many people together. But five thousand. That's the size of a small city.

### **Market Motion: Art of the Farmers' markets**

(sotto whisper) **Jean Thomas:** We're having a farmers' market show in the gallery. [Jean Thomas joined the interview at this point—Editor.]

**Farmer:** I was going to ask about that! I saw that in the paper. Do you want to say something about that?

**Jean Thomas:** This show runs until May 13 [2007]. It's called "Market Motion: Art of the Farmers' Markets." It's at the Pajaro Valley Arts Council Gallery in Watsonville. It's very exciting. We've got about thirty artists contributing two-dimensional and three-dimensional, so there's some glass and ceramics, and it's a beautiful show. It opens tomorrow. The reception is at 1:00 and we're going to have the Great Morgani play accordion.<sup>7</sup> He's going to be Insecto Man.

**Farmer:** Don't spray him!

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh! (laughter) I've got to bring my spray can.

**Jean Thomas:** (laughter) That's a great idea! I like that idea. A Vietnamese woman artist will do a carving of her fruits and vegetables. It's an art in Vietnam. You should see them.

**Farmer:** I think I've seen photographs of that.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes. She has some photos in the show. In the kitchen. You know Jerry was one of the people who helped start the farmers' market in Live Oak. Have you talked about that?

**Farmer:** No. What an entrée.

### **History of Farmers' Markets**

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, farmers' markets began— The first one in California of the new generation of farmers' markets was in 1976. And it was supposedly, in part, to celebrate the [U.S.] bicentennial. It was in Jerry Brown's administration. The key element that allowed it was a change in the administrative codes governing the movement of agricultural products. Previously, in order to sell something at retail you had to pack it in a standardized container for whatever that product required as being standardized. And there were a huge variety of standardized containers. It had to be labeled with the name of the producer, and the net weight, and the grade, if any.

**Farmer:** And was this for food safety reasons?

**Jerry Thomas:** No, just for a standardized container, so that when you said you had a box of zucchini squash to sell, the person at the other end knew what a box was. It was a specific size box with a specific— Depending on the grade you knew what was going to be in it.

**Farmer:** So that's a standardization for pricing and the simplicity of doing business.

**Jerry Thomas:** Exactly.

**Farmer:** Okay. And this is before the farmers' markets?

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. And in order to be able to move product to the farmers' markets, because you were going to be selling it at retail at the farmers' market, it wasn't practical to put everything into standardized containers. Because very likely that's not what you wanted to sell the product in. You wanted to display it like you would at a retail store, where it's almost never displayed in the container that it was delivered to the store in. That was fought tooth and nail by the Farm Bureau and a number of other farm organizations, because they felt it was going to diminish the quality of product, and erode the whole process that had developed. But anyway, it went through. That was the major element that allowed for certified farmers' markets. The other thing is, the certified part of it deals with the fact that the person who was selling or his agent, is the one who produced the product. So it's not being bought somewhere else and then being sold.

**Farmer:** So are all the farmers' markets in our area certified like that?

**Jerry Thomas:** It's the term *certified* that leads to a lot of confusion among the customers.<sup>8</sup> The customers see the term *certified* and believe that that refers to organic, and not to a certified farmers' market. There are all sorts of different rules that individual markets employ to regulate their own market. Like the market I'm somewhat familiar with in Ithaca, New York: they allow no farmer to sell at their market who lives or farms beyond a certain number of miles. I think it's fifty or sixty or whatever it is. So it precludes people coming in from a long—

A lot of the Eastern farmers' markets do that, because they have people coming in bringing product from the South up into New England, and selling.

**Farmer:** And what's the rule around the Cabrillo Farmers' market?

**Thomas:** There are people who come a lot from the [San Joaquin] Valley. I don't know if there are any markets in California that have a distance requirement. Because there are growers that bring their product some distance.

**Farmer:** So it's just certified that they grew their own product.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. And the individual county agricultural commissioner is the certifying body. They are the representative both of the county and of the state.

**Farmer:** I was at one in Redwood City and it said certified by the county, but it didn't say certified organic by the county. I looked at exactly that sign and was trying to figure out what it meant.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it's a certified farmers' market. And there's additional confusion. When I was serving on the board years ago we had a vacancy for the manager, the market manager. We were interviewing a number of people. And one of the applicants, she came in and she was doing this huge presentation. She started off doing this presentation of how to promote organic, not realizing that certified did not apply to the market as organic. It was a certified farmers' market. Until we corrected her. It was sort of embarrassing. She had misinterpreted the whole job definition. It's common even today that people are confused by that.

**Farmer:** I wonder how that will play out in the long run?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, eventually I think — Farmers' markets have become such an institution nationally that the national media can refer to them, and people know what they're talking about.

**Farmer:** I love the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, that's a Community Alliance of Family Farmers [CAFF] project. But it's a national program. They have the exact same logos all over the United States. They just change the picture depending on where they're located and what local is to that area. So we have ours for the Monterey Bay area, and San Benito County and southern Santa Clara County, basically the drainage of the Pajaro River and the Salinas River. It's not really defined with a line, I think.

**Farmer:** It's a region.

**Jerry Thomas:** It's a loose definition.

## **Urban Sprawl and Loss of Farmland**

**Farmer:** Well, I'm wondering, has suburbanization and urban sprawl affected your farm?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, Santa Cruz County is unique among counties. In 1978, Measure J was passed, which was a growth management initiative, and there was an agricultural element within that, where commercial agricultural lands were identified as having certain important properties for the economic development and sustainability of Santa Cruz County, and for its visual aspect.

So to really cut to the chase on it, in order to subdivide a piece of property that is commercial agriculture, you have to make findings that the smaller pieces will be economically more viable than the larger, whole piece was. Well, most farming parcels, or, for that matter, you can safely say all farming parcels in Santa Cruz County, are relatively small when compared to other parts of the country. A hundred acres is big here. A hundred acres in other parts of the country is a footnote. It's not even — You know, a thousand acres you're starting to talk a little big. And then combined with Prop 20, which was the initiative that allowed the state legislature to create the Coastal Commission and the Coastal Act and all that, puts even additional restraints on developing ag lands in the coastal zone. Which is not everything west of Highway One, but for our purposes that will serve. The line jigs and jags around a bit. So those two things have eliminated division of any commercial agricultural lands.

**Farmer:** So you feel like because those things passed, the land here and the farmers that you know around here feel pretty secure. They couldn't sell their property and have a housing development built right here.

**Jerry Thomas:** No. It would be virtually impossible politically. Because it would require — In the extreme case it would require a county-wide vote.

**Farmer:** I'm assuming that some of that building that went on in Watsonville must have been in city limits.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. That's the only way that — The city of Watsonville, which is making an effort to grow, if they acquire land that was formerly county land



that was under the auspices of Measure J, then if they meet all the requirements, they can subdivide it.

**Farmer:** Did you work on those measures, those political measures when they were—

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, Prop 20 I did. That was in 1972. And then also on the Measure J one in 1978.

### **Climate Change and Energy Issues**

**Farmer:** Do you think climate change is affecting your farm?

**Jerry Thomas:** I don't think it has here yet. I mean, it's definitely more erratic. It's difficult to say here as to whether— I think other parts of the country have experienced it. I'm also really interested in the Amish back East, and get one of their magazines. David Kline, who is the editor and who is an Amish guy who is an excellent writer, was commenting in the latest one of how there they have a lot of dairies where he lives in Ohio, and he was commenting that in the past they used to bring their cows in in early November because it got so cold. And now they've actually extended the time that they can be out by over a month, combining both the fall and the spring when they can let them out. He says this has really changed how they operate. Here I think it's less— We haven't really noticed it. We were noticing inadequate chilling in the winter. But now this winter, we got more than adequate chilling. So I don't know. I don't think it's really impacted us directly any more than just the irregular —

**Farmer:** — unpredictableness, yes. And do you think the changing sources of fuel will affect sustainable farming?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, there's a rule of thumb that farmers will pay anything for the fuel. They will pay for the fuel. People who drive cars and stuff won't. Farmers will pay for it. It's such a critical— If they don't have it, they don't have it. So they'll pay four or five, six, seven, eight dollars a gallon. But people maybe working, or commuting, or driving to the store won't. Or taking vacations and trips. So regardless of what it is, you're going to pay it.

**Farmer:** It's a cost of doing business.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. Yes, just tack it on. And it's such an insignificant cost for us. For extensive farmers, it's a major cost, where they are using the big equipment that's a lot of diesel. For us, we don't use that much diesel because we're on a smaller scale. We have smaller tractors that don't use so much diesel to do the work that we need them to do. They're not sucking it up.

## **Labor Issues**

**Farmer:** So do you have a lot of hand labor in the summer?

**Thomas:** Anything grown in the Monterey Bay area, if it's not hand-labor dominated, it's not grown here.

**Farmer:** So how many workers would you say you need to have in the high season?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, here this year we'll probably need four or five more. We have two now.

**Farmer:** Two that you try to keep year-round.

**Jerry Thomas:** One that we keep year-round, and another one, she's part time. She does the markets. But she'll have more work as the season progresses.

**Farmer:** And has that been an issue for you? Finding enough people to work and that kind of thing.

**Jerry Thomas:** No, we always have people applying, wanting to work. So it hasn't been a problem for us. It's working in these large commodified farms like strawberries, where they need a large number. When they're in high production they need one worker per acre. So if you have three hundred acres in strawberries you're talking about needing at least three hundred people working for you. So it's extremely labor intensive. Here we don't — We pretty much get one person, not quite that per acre, when we're really going. Now we're really going, but the labor requirement to harvest what we've got is a lot easier than later on. We can harvest it really fast now.

### **The Next Generation**

**Farmer:** So your son is already involved in the farm? Do you think his kids will be interested?

**Jerry Thomas:** I don't know if they'll stick with it or not. We won't be around to see that. I don't know. Or someone else will take it. There are a number of other

organizations, FarmLink and others, that are set up to facilitate generational transfers.<sup>9</sup> There are consultants that work on that issue also. If things stay as they are, and it's still a viable economic option for someone, if they can make a good middle-class type living and have an interest in doing it and a skill set to put it together—

**Farmer:** Your son is carrying on. Have your other kids stayed with farming, or are they doing something else?

**Jerry Thomas:** My daughter is a teacher. She's in Southern California. My younger son, he's in Australia now. He's going to be working on some farms there. He knows how to do a lot of this stuff, but he has a whole array of other skill sets. He has a master's degree in mechanical engineering and he knows how to do a lot of things.

**Farmer:** So the generalist part of working on a farm has rubbed off on him somewhat.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, I think he will probably be connected with agriculture, but I think he's going to be doing a lot of other things. He's really interested in alternative energy and efficient green construction, and all of this. He really likes Australia.

**Farmer:** Have you been to visit?

**Jerry Thomas:** We're going in a couple of months.

**Farmer:** And you're going to get away because your other son is going to run the farm. [I saw him] picking lilies.

**Jerry Thomas:** They have some special order they're getting together now for something. See, that's something. We lost most of those lilies. The freeze just fried them. So we had a lot of lilies and they look like hell. They still don't look that good. The plants survived but they were really set back.

### **The Freeze of 2007**

**Farmer:** Yes. That was quite a freeze.

**Jerry Thomas:** It was twenty-one [degrees] here. So it was pretty cool.

**Farmer:** At [the January 2007] Eco-Farm [conference] it [the Freeze] really was all people could talk about the first couple of days, as far as I remember.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, people lost a lot.

**Farmer:** Did you see that avocado orchard that somebody had tried to plant up on that hill over at Elkhorn Slough? It was all orange. It was up there dead.

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, they'll come back. Some of them might be killed. But others will survive. It will set them back a couple of years. We had fires burning under [our avocado tree] this year. We kept them going all night, big fires. We have a whole bunch of [avocado trees] up on the hill. They got— They were even covered. But they're coming back. They're starting to initiate growth.

**Farmer:** Will that actually help the fruit, do you think?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, it's going to set them back at least a year, maybe even longer. The Meyer lemons, a lot of ours survived. We put heat under them, though. They're pretty tough, the Meyer lemons. It happens about every ten years. That polar air comes down. It's all been well-documented. I'm sure there's some Internet site where you could— I know there are papers that have been written on it, that have documented all the ones through the twentieth century.

**Farmer:** So you can see the cycle.

**Jerry Thomas:** These major freezes that have come through. Yes, it has a definite impact, particularly on citrus growers. Deciduous tree growers love it because it makes for a really good summer crop.

**Farmer:** Yes, that will offset it.

**Jerry Thomas:** The real thing this year is a lack of rain.

**Farmer:** I was so happy to see it drizzling this morning.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, this won't even register.

**Farmer:** This isn't enough.

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, no. We have way less than a third of last year's rain. We've only had about seventeen inches this year.

**Farmer:** Do you have to irrigate if that happens?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, we irrigate now.

**Farmer:** Yes. So that makes everything that much more expensive too.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it's the labor and the cost of water. You don't like to irrigate in the winter. This is when the rain is supposed to come.

### **Jean Thomas**

**Farmer:** Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2007, and this is Jean Thomas at Thomas Farm, and I'm going to follow up with you and ask you the questions I asked Jerry the last time, so we can get some background, and then talk to you specifically about your own experience.

**Jean Thomas:** Sounds good.

**Farmer:** All right. So can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

**Jean Thomas:** Sure. I was born in Santa Monica in '45 and grew up mainly in the West Los Angeles—well, actually, at my grandmother's house in Culver City, and then my mother and father liked the Pacific Palisades a lot, so I went there. Then we had a short stint in Hermosa Beach, in my high school days.

**Farmer:** Can you describe your education and formative experiences?

**Jean Thomas:** It was very conventional. [But] my grandfather was a real interesting character. Whenever he was over, we had these wonderful "discussions," quote-unquote. (laughter) It got sort of heated sometimes. He was a wealth of history for me. He was a hobo in Colorado. His mother left when he was seven, and his father raised him, but not very well. He wrote "Wabash Cannonball," which started out as "[Moffett] Cannonball," with a girlfriend of

his at the time, and they rode the rails. It's funny to see in Pete Seeger's songbook, it says, "a hobo song in origin," which is not far from the truth. They sold it for twenty dollars to some man who changed it to "Wabash." (laughter) He brought a lot of color into the family that pretty was very conventional growing up, going to the state beach during the summer and just hanging out.

My father was from a family of thirteen, and they were farmers back in Pennsylvania. His father had a really nice garden. And my grandmother was also from a family of thirteen, a farm family that moved from Gonzales, Texas, to Colorado and so on.

**Farmer:** So you *did* have a history of farming in your experience.

**Jean Thomas:** Well, it wasn't direct; it was indirect.

**Farmer:** Your family was in Los Angeles. So did you visit those farms or hang out there much, or did you just sort of know about them?

**Jean Thomas:** No, I just heard about them through stories. My grandmother used to talk about how the kids would adopt the runt of the pig litter and carry it around like a baby, or they'd stuff their mattresses each year with fresh corn husks, that sort of thing. There were so many kids that they had the whole top floor, and the girls slept on one side and the boys on the other. (laughter)

**Farmer:** So, big-family life.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes.



**Farmer:** Yes. So what would you consider the most important early influences in your life, besides education, besides family. Like, what made you who you are, do you think?

**Jean Thomas:** That's interesting. Well, I think some of my teachers had an influence on me early on in grade school. Lepski Feriziano was my fifth grade teacher, who was actually Henry Miller's second wife. They lived down the street, four doors down or whatever. She had us making powder horns and dying fabric and dipping candles. She was pretty radical at Marquez Knolls in the Palisades, and so I think she didn't really last very long there, but (laughter) she was great as far as, "Hey, you can do anything you want." And then later on, I really enjoyed going to Valley State, which is now Cal State, Northridge, and finally deciding that I wanted to be an English lit major, art minor. And then the art thing became pretty important.

**Farmer:** So did you go through your full education there, at Northridge?

**Jean Thomas:** Pretty much, yes, teaching credential.

**Farmer:** And we know from Jerry talking last time that the two of you moved up here together not knowing what was going to happen.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes, we were very footloose and fancy-free. It was great. (laughter) Didn't have jobs, sat on the beach and said, "Geez, it's awfully nice here." Yes, and so things just sort of evolved, which was I think an easier time for that to happen than now. Now there's just so much competition for this area. But it was

easy to get a job, and it was easy to find a place to live that wasn't really expensive.

**Farmer:** So did you start out teaching up here?

**Jean Thomas:** Yes. Jerry had mono[nucleosis] when we first moved here, so he was sort of lounging around in the sun, and I went into Pajaro Valley adult ed and got on two nights a week, teaching ESL [English as a Second Language], and then four nights a week because the other person that I was sharing the class with quit. We had our kids along the way, and it worked out really great because I'd have them in the day and he'd have them at night. I've always worked part time. I think the most I've worked at adult ed was teaching the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program, which was thirty-five hours a week when Patrick was about a year and a half. They [program participants] got paid for going to school and passing their GED [General Education Development]. We'd keep track of their hours. Three thirty-five an hour [laughs], I got paid.

**Farmer:** Oh, yes. Those were the days. It was easier to find workers for almost no money. They didn't have to be unpaid interns.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes, it was a good program. It turned into JTPA [Job Training Partnership Act]. When CETA, you know, the acronym gets negative connotations, the government changes it, another, different program.

**Farmer:** It doesn't exist anymore, does it?

**Jean Thomas:** No, with JTPA they didn't pay them to go to school.

## Starting to Farm in this Area

**Farmer:** So did you, yourself, ever consider farming as a full-time career?

**Jean Thomas:** Not really. At our first little house— It was really funny because Jerry had ducks in the backyard, and he'd supplement our diet by going out hunting and bringing home, you know, other things. We had rabbits also in the backyard. Then he started planting the front yard, which was very small, in squash and tomatoes, and we had a little front porch with glass, and we had tomatoes started there, too. Then he started planting the vacant lot next door. And the man who owned the vacant lot (laughter) got sort of upset and said, "What are you doing here?" At that point, Seacliff Beach was getting very touristy, with lots of radio noise and stuff at the Snow White Drive-in. So we happened to find this place and luck out. It came up for rent, and we got it. We were able to take all these tomatoes that were started in these coffee cans, cut out the bottom and have an instant garden out here. So that was fun.

**Farmer:** You must have moved in the summer.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes. I think that my end of the farming has always been attached to canning and dealing with the products, rather than starting them. I used to do some fruit drying, and do a lot of canning over the years. Now I just freeze the stuff and bring it out of the freezer when we need it, because sometimes canning is not energy efficient. I think I spent three days trying to make ketchup, you know? (laughter)

**Farmer:** And all that heat and everything, yes.

**Jean Thomas:** Right. (laughter) So live and learn.

**Farmer:** Yes. So did you do a lot of the market sales, that kind of thing?

**Jean Thomas:** I did some, yes. I helped out. I used to go down to Monterey, I remember. We did that early on.

**Farmer:** This was the Monterey Peninsula College market?

**Jean Thomas:** Yes, the MPC one.

**Farmer:** Which is a certified farmers' market.

**Jean Thomas:** Right. And then I helped out at Cabrillo, too. I wasn't in on the whole forming of the Life Oak venture, which was the first farmers' market. I just sort of let Jerry go to those meetings.

**Farmer:** We'll talk more about that again.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes.

## **Agri-Tourism**

**Farmer:** So are there other agricultural organizations that you've been involved in?

**Jean Thomas:** Well, we used to go to CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] meetings, and I also went to a couple of workshops with CAFF [Community Alliance with Family Farmers] on agri-tourism. George Work and Elaine were there, and talked about their experience. I was curious about that

whole (and still am) ag-tourism thing. I'd like to actually travel at this point in my life and see how other people do it. I have been working at a friend's house, doing some driving and cooking to see how I like it, just to see if I'd want to do a similar thing here.

**Farmer:** So that's having tourists come because they want to see what a farm is like?

**Jean Thomas:** Yes, and then they stay overnight. You're allowed to have up to six people, or something, now with the new law that CAFF got through.

**Farmer:** Is that a bed-and-breakfast type law?

**Jean Thomas:** Combination, yes, right. Farm Stay is what it's called. Other countries have done it forever.

**Jerry Thomas:** It had to do with having a certified kitchen and not just a normal kitchen. It was a way to get away from that if you had a limited number of people. So you're not serving to the public. You don't have a sign out and people are dropping by to eat dinner.

**Jean Thomas:** I think that sort of thing would be very interesting and fun if we had the whole farm and our kids weren't living here. I'm waiting to see what they're going to do. They plan to stay another two years and then find a place of their own.

**Farmer:** One of your sons and his wife are planning to carry on the farming that you've been doing, right?

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**Jean Thomas:** Right. The markets—this year—it's totally on their shoulders, yes.

**Farmer:** Is this their first year that way?

**Jean Thomas:** Last year was a transition. But the beautiful thing about the farm is that people have a very secure base, with food, et cetera. It's like your Social Security. But you can find something related to it where your imagination and your interests can take off. For many years, I was a potter over there, and then turned to painting and wreath making, which is what I do now. So there are all these possible interests that are provided by farming. I had my gas kiln over there, and there weren't that many regulations as there are in the city. Yes, you're freer to do, and have people out and so forth. It's really fun when I do the wreathing because people come out to make wreaths. And then Lucy's there. She gets right in, and she helps me.

**Farmer:** And how old is she now?

**Jean Thomas:** Three. She's got all sorts of interests. She's a very interested little person. (laughter)

**Farmer:** Yes. She's got a lot of stimulation.

**Jean Thomas:** Right.

**Farmer:** Yes, I think that's part of what they're trying to preserve with family farms is that you don't sit in front of TV all day. You actually live your life.

**Jean Thomas:** Right. You have to collect the eggs. (laughter)

**Farmer:** Well, can you say a little bit more about the farmers' market art show that you curated?

### **Market Motion (part two)**

**Jean Thomas:** Oh, sure. "Market Motion," yes. Michele Hausman and I were in one of Dave McGuire's early watercolor classes together at Cabrillo many years ago. I think it was '92 or so. Then I was down at the government building, and I saw some of her paintings there, and I thought, well, gee, she's doing market scenes now. And it's thirty years that the market's been in existence. It would be really neat to do a show. So two years ago we talked about it and started planning for it. PVAC [Pajaro Valley Arts Council] with Carol Trengrove as executive director plans ahead. [Laughs.] It turned out really well. We got thirty artists together, and Bob Newick is a very wonderful community resource. He's a great guy. I did some work with the kids in Watsonville, doing some drawings, and he came down on the bus and sat there, and they watched him. And then we had a little kids' exhibit. It was unfortunately Good Friday and really windy, and not too many people were there. But anyway, it was fun. So that was part of the exhibit, along with [an exhibit at] the satellite campus of Cabrillo College in Watsonville. We hung some things in their display cases. Some of those paintings are at Capitola Book Café now, and they'll be there a little bit past the show. We got thirty artists and ten of them were three-dimensional. It was fun going around to the studios of the three-dimensional ones. The two-dimensional, we just juried by slides.

**Farmer:** So when you say you worked with kids, do you mean at the Watsonville Farmers' Market?

**Jean Thomas:** Yes. I went for two Fridays before the exhibit and took some painting supplies. They came up to the table and they sat down, and they painted oranges, and I made a little still life. Or else they paint people in their stalls, or flowers or whatever. Then I had them laminated, and we hung them the last day. That was over three Fridays.

**Farmer:** And do you think a lot of those families ended up coming to the show?

**Jean Thomas:** I think so, as a result. We were passing out the cards. This Saturday I'm doing a Mother's Day thing at the Live Oak Senior Center. They have a Mother's Day sale the Saturday before Mother's Day, so that'll be fun.

**Farmer:** Very active. All right. Well, I just have two more questions for you, and then, Jerry, I've got a list of follow-up questions from our last interview, and I'm sure you've thought of things, too, that we forgot to talk about. But one last question for you, Jean, is: Do you see your farm as being part of a community of sustainable farmers in a food system in this region?

## **The Farming Community**

**Jean Thomas:** Oh, boy, do I! I am so pleased to know who I know and have the connections that we have, both through Slow Food and our own farming history. It's really good to see a lot of young people jump into it, too, people like Jim [Dunlop] and Becky [Thistlethwaite] and Justin with the meats. And Brandon. All those young people, and Josh, our own — It's just really, really positive



because if you look country-wide, I think the average age of the farmer is, like, sixty-seven or something. That's got to change [laughter] if it's going to stay alive, basically.

**Farmer:** Do you find that there are social networks between farmers?

**Jean Thomas:** Yes. I think that there definitely is, but it's through the structure of marketing. I think there's a lot of networking that goes on at the farmers' markets, not only between the vendors and the farmers, themselves, but the customers too. It's really a social gathering place. It's quite a phenomenon, when you think about it. Families and friends come to meet. I think that when the farmers' markets continue on like this, that there's a lot of bonding and closeness that develops between the farmers that are at those particular markets. And then sometimes there are birthday parties or whatever afterwards, or meetings that they have at Loudon Nelson Community Center or whatever. You get to socialize with everybody there, not just the people who are next to you at the stands.

And then CAFF functions. [Nita Gizdich] has one every December, and that's really fun, where not just farmers get together but everybody—you know, the alphabet soup, ALBA [Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association], and the Wild Farm Alliance, and all the other organizations that are associated with farming.<sup>10</sup> So that's fun. That's gone on for a while.

**Farmer:** Yes. Well, let's go on to Jerry with the follow-up questions. Thank you, Jean.

So, Jerry, I want to bring up really specific follow-up questions first, and then I have some other, general ones. Please tell me more about the first regional CCOF meeting that happened on East Lake [Avenue, in Santa Cruz]. What was that meeting like and do you remember individuals who were there?

### **Early CCOF (part two)**

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it was well attended. It was at the Kennedy Center out there on East Lake. It must have been advertised in the media. There was a lot of interest in organics at the time. There were a large number of small, independent retail outlets scattered about the county, more than there are now, and there was certainly an awareness of it, because it was just a few years after the first Earth Day that was in 1970. So Jack Momii was there, and George Ivankovic and the other George—it was—God, I can't remember his last name. He had taken the initial lead and then left. There were a number of people that were affiliated with the cooperative up on Branciforte [Drive], where Bill Denevan is, Happy Valley. There's a group of, I think it was twenty people, bought what had formerly been really quite a large dry-farmed apple and pear orchard.

**Farmer:** And they made it organic, or was it already organic?

**Jerry Thomas:** It became an organic operation. It was probably, at the time, the largest organic orchard in the county. Probably had over a hundred acres there. Russel [Wolter] was there, and there were a lot—

**Jean Thomas:** Was Barney [Bricmont] there?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, yes, I'm sure he was there. There were a large number of people that had been involved with the original statewide organization that collapsed. The logistics of it. They just couldn't pull it together, and there weren't enough people in the state to make these meetings. It was like a weekend obligation, or a two-day obligation to go to these meetings.

**Farmer:** So how big was the region that this meeting covered?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, it was the Central Coast. It included Monterey and Santa Cruz [Counties]. Generally speaking, it seems like the area has always been San Benito County, Monterey County, Santa Cruz County, and the southern part of Santa Clara County, the Gilroy area. So it's basically the drainage areas of the Salinas River and the Pajaro River. And then the North Coast. There were some people down on Big Sur that were really involved, too. Not really as commercial, more—that had very small little farms down there. I think Janet Brians<sup>11</sup> might have been there, too. Or maybe that was a little too early. She's been very politically active in San Benito County, and her son, Grant, has taken over the farm. It's another story. He's farming a lot. And I haven't heard from him for years.

**Farmer:** So as far as some of your involvement with some of these organizations, does that keep people contacting each other?

**Jerry Thomas:** Initially, when CCOF [began] there was no paid staff. The inspections were done by the membership. You would inspect some other farm and fill out the paperwork, and then someone else would inspect yours, and then

it would be mixed. We would set it up so that the same person would not come back to you; it would always be someone different.

**Farmer:** So were you on the leadership team at the beginning, after this meeting?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, I was one of the original members right at the beginning.

**Farmer:** So did they have a board or steering committee, or something that you were on? Do you remember?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, we had officers. It was pretty loosely structured. We had a number of informative meetings. We would meet once a month, usually at the Ag Extension auditorium on Freedom Boulevard. And frequently, very frequently we would have either representatives in private business or people from Extension, although there weren't that many people at that time. It was still the old guard that was in ag. The new generation didn't have too much sensitivity towards a change (laughs) in outlook and production approach.

**Farmer:** So would they have been recommending chemicals and that sort of thing?

**Jerry Thomas:** Well, no, they knew. [But] generally the first organic growers in Santa Cruz County and in CCOF here were dominated by apple growers. Russel was the only vegetable grower, and there were a few that were doing [vegetables]—well, Janet was one of the early members in the seventies. I don't believe they were there at the founding, though. But she could have been. I wouldn't have known her before that meeting. But it was set up with the emphasis on controlling codling moth for organic apple production, because a lot

of the people that became involved, including ourselves, in organic production, had purchased land in rural Santa Cruz County that had formerly been sustainable farms with apples as a major component. The other parts of those production systems, particularly apricots and chickens, had pretty much vanished from those systems. But the apple trees endured. So people would have purchased ten acres of apples in an apple orchard, and would have one hundred tons of apples to deal with in the fall, and what to do with them, and try to make some money, and try to get some more money with selling them as organic.

**Farmer:** So was Nick Pasqual part of that?<sup>12</sup> Was he an apple farmer?

**Jerry Thomas:** Nick was never really a member of the CCOF. No, he was a vegetable grower. He came to a few meetings after the founding. He might have been a member for a year or two, but he never really joined up; he had his own following at the time when they had the Village Fair stand [in Aptos] and he was selling a lot of his produce through there, plus what he was purchasing. So that worked out. It was the farmers' market where he really made the contribution, not so much in the organic, CCOF. He had come to organics primarily from health. He was getting really sick. He had been a manager. He took a very different path than most Filipinos, where he became an owner of the land, and he was a manager of large farms up in the Sacramento Valley. And then he bought a farm and was self-employed as a farmer. There were a few others that did that, but the great majority of the Filipinos remained, until they were into their seventies and probably even eighties, working field work, and never bought anything. And that's a whole other story.

**Jean Thomas:** He also managed to get produce at the flea market, and went from the Village Fair to the flea market, to farmers' markets. That was the process that he ventured out into.

**Farmer:** Okay, so CCOF people are getting together and there's no real Ag Extension support or anything like that. It's a self-help group, in a way.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right, and then there are the private companies that have various things that they're— You know, seaweeds and fertilizers and magic songs that you play on tapes.

**Farmer:** (chuckles)

**Jerry Thomas:** I mean, a lot of it was so bizarre it's hard to believe that it actually happened. (laughter) You know, that the plants would respond to certain music.

**Jean Thomas:** Happy plants.

**Jerry Thomas:** And then planting by the moon. Just a whole slew of things.

**Farmer:** So were people from UCSC getting involved in these meetings, from the Garden?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh yes. And Rich Merrill had a real organic bent, so he was participating in some of the early meetings, and provided for the first organic codes that California passed to define what organic was.<sup>13</sup> He provided information for that. Yes, so you had Rich Merrill at Cabrillo College—

### **Early Farmers' markets (part two)**

**Jean Thomas:** Christine Scherer and Jerry Kay were going to get a paper together regarding the origins of the first farmers' market for this exhibit, but they never did.<sup>14</sup> [Colleen, another early farmers' market organizer] was [visiting] here from Florida, and she told me the story of the first farmers' market. They were all taking a class in San Jose, and there was this peach grower over there who was fined, had to actually pay money for storing his peaches. He got so upset that he took all his peaches out of storage and put a big ad in the paper that he'd be at a certain place to bring bags and he would sell peaches for, I don't know how much, a quarter pound or something, ten cents a pound, something like that. And all these people converged (laughs), and he was, like, the first farmers' market. So then Colleen Murphy came over here and got together with Rachel Spencer and Christine Scherer and Jerry Kay, and they worked with [California Secretary of Agriculture (and later California State Supreme Court Chief Justice)] Rose Bird, who was under [then-Governor] Jerry Brown in Sacramento, to get all the rules passed so that farmers could sell at markets and not have uniform containers.<sup>15</sup>

**Farmer:** That was the big policy issue.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, the federal change that occurred in '76. It all triggered around the bicentennial, because the first farmers' market that they started was in '76 over in San Jose. Colleen and Rachel, I think, probably got some grant money to start it up. It was down in that redevelopment area in downtown San Jose. At the time that the market was first put on, we went and sold there once. We took a whole truckload of apples and sold them all. Yes, that was the first one. It was just like a bombed-out area. There were no buildings. They had all been leveled.

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The new downtown civic center area in San Jose occupies that site. But it was a combined effort to try to start getting people downtown.

**Farmer:** Well, it sounds like they had a lot of customers.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, it was well attended. The market was relatively small by today's standards. It was the size the Live Oak market is today. There were only, like, maybe fifteen, sixteen of us sold there. Because a lot of growers weren't accustomed to selling at retail. It was not uncommon for growers to never have sold something, had a face-to-face contact with a person who's going to consume the product they had produced. The farmers' markets definitely changed that.

**Farmer:** Yes, there must have been a big gap between original farming farm stands and this, where the industry came in and wanted things standardized. That had been the norm for a while, it sounds like.<sup>16</sup>

**Jean Thomas:** That was quite a barrier to break down, when you think about it.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, the Farm Bureau was— They're a little embarrassed by that now, because so many members of the Farm Bureau participate in farmers' markets, but they were one of the staunchest opposition to farmers' markets at the initial stages. They might have made it initially here, before they made it at the state level—the local chapter, the Santa Cruz Farm Bureau. Each county has their own Farm Bureau.

**Farmer:** And up to a certain level make their own rules, I suppose.



**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, they make their own decisions. I'm not sure how that's all organized.

### **The Medfly Controversy of 1981-82**

**Farmer:** Okay. Well, speaking of farmers' markets, you had talked about being on the board at one point, and interviewing market managers and that sort of thing. I just wonder how involved you were in the development. And were you around for the medfly [Mediterranean fruit fly] incident, where they had to move it?

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. Yes, the medfly thing was sort of the unhappy consequence— In terms of its impact for Santa Cruz County, it's the unhappy consequences of the apple growers here locally never have been able to successfully work together to market this product. I think a lot of that animosity was based on the frictions between the Portuguese and the Slovenian, mostly Croatian, apple growers. Because they made up a very significant portion of the large apple growers in this area, and they didn't trust each other. So there was friction there.

Initially, when the apple maggot thing— I don't know if you're going to pursue that. It's a whole separate issue that Jerry Brown will still not talk about.

**Farmer:** Really!

**Jerry Thomas:** The whole thing that people are not sure of is that when they dropped the sterile males, they weren't sterile.

**Farmer:** Ooh!

**Jerry Thomas:** And that there was a conspiracy to politically destroy Jerry Brown because he didn't want to spray. They wanted to try to control them without spraying the malathion. You know, up in San Jose, once they started to spray, they would have three or four bombers flying all together in a formation, spraying the entire city.

**Farmer:** So I hear, yes.

**Jerry Thomas:** At night. And they would be linked. They'd cover this whole pattern and then come back and then redo the whole pattern again. I mean, in terms of even national politics that became a major issue. The market had been at the Live Oak School. Because they never found any medflies down here they made the cutoff at 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue initially. Live Oak School was on the Santa Cruz side, so it was in the quarantine area. So you could not take apples and any other potentially host products and sell them there. So we moved the market to the Catholic church in Seacliff, in their little parking lot. And that was probably the worst market ever.

**Farmer:** Oh, because people couldn't find it, or what happened?

**Jean Thomas:** It was hard to move it. It was moved in midterm, and we couldn't get the word out to people. It required major media play.

**Jerry Thomas:** Whenever you move like that, even today, there's definitely a build-up time. And then the ban included the entire county, so it became immaterial. And then the requirement for the farmers' markets, if you were

going to sell anything outside, you had to sell it inside of sealed plastic bags with no vent holes. So any produce that you put in there in the outdoors, even in the fall, it would start to sweat and get all— So we stopped. We had flowers at the time, and we still sold flowers. The apples were done. We had beautiful apples that year, too. I was able to get storage at Tony and Christine Scherer's, and then mice got into the boxes because the storage wasn't totally sealed.

**Jean Thomas:** Not a good year.

**Jerry Thomas:** It wasn't good.

**Farmer:** Was there one medfly year?

**Jerry Thomas:** One big year. They required all these orchards to— If you didn't spray with a malathion spray, which— The way they sprayed it, it was a bait spray; it wasn't a contact spray, so it the malathion was incorporated into some sort of a sugared, oil-based formulation. So when they sprayed it from the airplanes, it would come out as droplets that would drop all over everything as little quarter-inch, eighth-of-an-inch diameter little droplets, or maybe sixteenth-of-an-inch droplets, and scatter them all over. It totally disrupted a lot of other life forms because this was a broad-spectrum insecticide. But the theory behind it, and I guess it ultimately worked, because they eliminated the population— They might have overdone it. But if you didn't do that, you had to certify that your apples were stored at a certain minimum temperature for a certain number of days, both of which I've forgotten now, in a cold storage before they could be sold anywhere at retail.

**Farmer:** And that was to kill any bugs that were in there.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, the medflies were cold sensitive. So the theory was that at that temperature over that length of time, any eggs or any mature adults that were able to get into the boxes, or bins or containers, or whatever you had, would be killed by that treatment.

**Farmer:** It just doesn't seem like anything like that has come up [recently] with farmers' markets.

### **The Light Brown Apple Moth**

**Jerry Thomas:** It's come up right now. We're in it right now.

**Farmer:** What's that? Oh, the [light brown] apple moths?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. They're not supposed to be able to sell flowers out of the county now.

**Farmer:** And how do these things get regulated? Who enforces them?

**Jerry Thomas:** There's a whole front-page story in the paper a couple of days ago. The ag commissioner, they interviewed him, and he was really sort of dumbfounded.<sup>17</sup> They were trying to make sense out of what the regulations mean, and how they can be enforced, and what they have to do. Because the moth doesn't feed on fruit; it only feeds on leaves. So the primary concern with it is for the nursery business. It's not going to be a problem with fruit growers.

**Farmer:** But something is going to have to kill it.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. It's here in Santa Cruz County, but I don't think it's down here [in Aptos]. Most of these things fly in— It's around the airports, where you have an international airport, where you have flights coming in from abroad. Somebody brings in fruit or something, and it's in, and they get away.

**Farmer:** Yes, but have they talked about closing the farmers' markets or anything?

**Jerry Thomas:** No. This is just evolving right as we speak.

**Farmer:** Well, we'll have to see what happens. We may have a whole other history from this year.

**Jean Thomas:** Right (laughter)

**Farmer:** Yes.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, the medfly had some profound influence on a lot of people. Most people just endured and went on.

## **Community Foods**

**Farmer:** So one thing that I know we didn't follow up on was Community Foods going out of business. Do you remember how that all happened?

**Jerry Thomas:** There were two things that happened sort of simultaneously that weren't really connected. There was one where they had hired [a woman who was fat] and she couldn't negotiate the aisles. I don't know whether you went to the old Community Foods.

**Farmer:** It was pretty narrow, yes.

**Jerry Thomas:** She couldn't fit through them without knocking things over. They let her go because she couldn't perform the task, and she sued.<sup>18</sup> I don't remember what the outcome was, but just the fact that they had to go through that whole thing was really sort of intolerable.

And then the other thing was, is that I think they developed resentment among the (and I had this expressed to me by people who had worked there for years), is that after a period of time, people, you know, they had lives and they wanted to make a decent living. They didn't want to volunteer forever. You know, there was no one else going to take care of them. They had this equal pay scale, or almost equal pay scale for everyone from entry level to the senior staff.

**Farmer:** And they didn't have a way to move beyond that, it sounds like.

**Jean Thomas:** Yes.

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes, structurally they apparently didn't. That along with the suit and dealing with that, from the employee suit, was I think just too much for them all to take and deal with. Because ideally they should have, what I had always tried to get them to do, in talking to Heidi [Skolnik] and others, is to expand to another [location.] The size was too small.<sup>19</sup>

**Farmer:** For the number of products they were getting in.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right, and then there was a whole array of product that they couldn't sell there, like toilet paper, and paper products, and other stuff that

people when they go shopping like to buy, in a one-stop sort of—which New Leaf and Whole Foods certainly and Trader—well, Trader Joe’s, to a lesser degree.

**Jean Thomas:** So in Santa Cruz County, was there a lag between when Community Foods went out of business and then New Leaf picked up the slack? Or was there some sort of a retail thing waiting for that, or pushing toward that opportunity?

**Jerry Thomas:** I don’t remember.

**Jean Thomas:** That would be interesting to find out.

**Jerry Thomas:** Because when they stopped, we had pretty much stopped.

**Jean Thomas:** I think there was a lag.

**Jerry Thomas:** There was the Food Bin. We sold to the Staff of Life and the Food Bin, and there probably were still some other small operations around. But by that time, the farmers’ markets had become so successful that we weren’t selling to stores anymore. I don’t think Trader Joe’s buys locally because they’re set up totally differently. New Leaf, we’ve sold to those folks, like, peaches and stuff, but—

**Farmer:** How does that work? Do they just have buyers that suddenly realize they’re going to need more peaches and they start calling? Or do you call them? How does that go?

**Jerry Thomas:** We were selling them to the different ones. Just for peaches—the New Leaf in Felton. They saw them (we were selling them) and then asked if they could buy them. We would just drop them. Route 1 Farms<sup>20</sup> — A lot of growers have CSAs [community supported agriculture]— some of the big guys down here, like, our nephew Steve [Pedersen], and Andy [Griffin]<sup>21</sup>, and then Tom Broz [of Live Earth Farm]. I don't think Steve has ever sold a single box wholesale or to a retail outlet. The whole dynamic has changed. You don't have to deal with the retail buyers. There was a lot of difficulty dealing with them. I remember one in particular. It was classic. It was that the plums were big and had too much water and didn't have good flavor. The other time was, the plums were too small and didn't have the size, even though they had good flavor. So they wanted to take you down either way. Either way, either way, however you did it, they wanted to force you down. It was so nice dealing with direct customers, who rave about your product rather than going to someone who is always trying to downgrade it. But that's a classic. That's the whole way that works with buyers that are buying.

### **Open Space Alliance**

**Farmer:** Well, let's see, I had two more areas to talk about. On the Open Space Alliance, I was reading that newsletter over again, and it sounds like it's becoming a more national organization or affiliated?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, no.

**Farmer:** It's not?



**Jerry Thomas:** We've worked with TPL, [the] Trust for Public Land, which is a national land trust, and is able to get financing and able to draw on national sources of revenue for large projects that they view as being critical. There are a couple here that would meet those requirements if we could negotiate or get — Because land trusts need to have a willing seller, someone who wants to work with a potential buyer. But so far, on the one that we've been working on with the Nisene to Sea piece, what's called the [Koch] Carmichael property that adjoins Cabrillo College and Nisene Marks. It's a big, 160-acre—

**Farmer:** And you'd rather not have that developed into housing. That's the idea, is to preserve it as open space or farmland?

**Jerry Thomas:** Oh, it's never been farmland. So it would be open space and a coastal prairie. That particular piece of property has historically been a traditional western—or northern or however you want to look at it—entrance into Nisene Marks, and there's a well-established trail that people have developed over the decades that leads right to Nisene Marks from this end, so you don't have to go from Cabrillo. Hikers and mountain bikers have used it for many decades.

**Farmer:** Yes. Okay, so you're involved in that as the treasurer of Open Space Alliance.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right.

**Farmer:** And from the mission, I got the idea that that's partly farmland preservation, and partly just conservation in general.

**Jerry Thomas:** Our one really big project, other than ones that we've worked [on] in conjunction with others, the one we worked on on our own, was at High Ground Organics. In that case, [it] had historically been first a Grade B dairy, then a Grade A dairy, and then changes in the [Cardoza] family, where no one was maintaining the dairy as they leased the land out for strawberry production and for vegetable production. At the end, it was actually under Mission Organics. They were buying the product. So it was actually organic, but sort of industrial organic. But it was on the market, and no one was interested in it. This was ten years ago, or a little less than ten years ago.

There were monies available at that time to purchase and to protect farmland. It had been a million dollars; it had been whittled down, through administrative drains off of it, to \$900,000 that the county had been allocated from in one of those numbered bond issues that have been passed in either '90 or '88. I think it was '88, in one of those numbered ones. The County of Santa Cruz had never been able to find a property that they could successfully negotiate a deal with the property owner to establish an easement. That was the same time that the Coast Dairies was being in negotiation. So the end result is the great bulk of that money went to the Coast Dairies, and \$100,000 of it went to us, and then the Coastal Conservancy put up the rest of the monies. It gets a little complex. It's sort of a bridge loan so that OSA could purchase the property after negotiating with an appraisal and all this other stuff. We purchased the property and then encumbered it with an environmental easement and an ag easement, so there are actually two easements, and then put it on the market to sell it at a reduced price because the developmental values were subtracted off of what we paid for it

from the monies that were given from the Coastal Conservancy for the environmental part, and the ag part from the \$100,000 on that half of the property.

So the end result was that they were able to buy it for less than it had been sold, than we had bought it for, but it was also encumbered by these developmental easements that precluded any future subdividing or building. That was actually a property that Tai Associates— There are three other really large properties out there in the slough system, two of which are owned by the Tai Associates. They had these grandiose plans to develop really upscale residential—I mean, top-two-percent residential—and have a golf course all through the top of it, with these big McMansions around it. I don't know if I still have it or it's down at the office— We had all the plans that they had envisioned doing. What is now High Ground, formerly Cardoza, was included in that. Even though they didn't own it, they would have bought it.

**Jean Thomas:** But things didn't go that way, fortunately. It really worked out. I had to recuse myself from all the negotiations. Because there were a number of people—basically all of them, I knew (my nephew [chuckles] was one of them) who were interested in buying it, so I was totally out of all of those negotiations.

**Farmer:** Because of the conflict of interest.

**Jerry Thomas:** Right. Because I knew two of the major principals, two separate groups. I knew them, and had for a number of years. The other board made their decision. It's worked out really well. He's [Steve Pedersen] done just a

phenomenal job out there. He made it very productive, and he's done all sorts of beyond-the-call-of duty . . .

**Farmer:** Improving the soil and things like that?

**Jerry Thomas:** And also on the environmentally— Where there's going to be minimal return. If there is any return for them, it will be from livestock, because they're using grazing. It's going to be in our next newsletter. Laura [Kummerer] wrote a little article. She's managing the restoration effort. They're using goats and cattle to knock down a lot of the, particularly hemlock and thistle. There's Harding grass [*Phalaris aquatica*] and wild radish. And encourage the native bunch grasses. The remnant seed banks are still there, and the tarplant [*Hemizonia increscens ssp. Villosa*] that's endangered—Santa Cruz. They're changing, trying to give it a more attractive name. It's sort of a noxious thing. It's something that doesn't elicit a lot of excitement because it has these really sticky leaves. Tarplant benefits in overgrazed areas that have been really almost denuded. It will survive in those, because cattle and livestock and animals won't eat it. So that's going on with High Ground.

**Farmer:** So you've done a lot of negotiating with people who want to make megabucks on land with the value that we have in our county, just to keep it open space and to keep it environmentally—

**Jerry Thomas:** We don't. It's usually these intermediaries that do that. We try to make contact.

**Jean Thomas:** The Campaign to Save Farmlands and Wetlands is a whole separate thing. All those years when they went through the process of LAFCO [Local Agency Formation Commission] and trying to save the Manabe, which is now part of the general plan, Action Pajaro Valley, whatever it is now—has included that sixty-four acres that we fought so hard to leave as it is, because it's in the floodplain. But it would be really an interesting study to just look at what that group did over the years, too, the campaign. There was an MOU [memorandum of understanding], and Fred Keeley was very involved in it when the whole Tai thing came up, that the high school could go in on that land in exchange for the Tai not being developed. Right, Jerry?

**Jerry Thomas:** There was a lot more to it than that, but that was part of it.

**Farmer:** And isn't there American Farmland Trust?

**Jerry Thomas:** Yes. They're here too. They have an office I believe in Modesto out here. We've had some contact with them here in Santa Cruz County, but they're working on larger parcels over in the valley and also up in the foothills, big ranches, because there's a lot of still big properties, not so much in Santa Cruz County but in the state.

**Farmer:** Yes. And they would not be that concerned whether it's organic or not, do you think? Or do they care about that?

**Jerry Thomas:** From just reading between the lines, they're definitely for a sustainable—and they have a bias, certainly, for family farms. It seems like they're always interviewing families. A lot of it is dairies and fairly large farms

and cattle ranches that are in Colorado and Wyoming and Montana, that are very picturesque. They can get those really neat photographs of vast— Yes, tell a whole story with it. It's like The Nature Conservancy. They're interested in mega-projects. One of the big projects they're working on now is linking that whole area of New Mexico and Arizona and northern Mexico, an area of millions of acres, so that there can be movement of these prime species in there, the red wolf and the jaguar and mountain lions, and doing that kind of mega, I mean, just huge-scale projects. It's bigger than states. It's bigger than the one country. It's both Mexico and— So that's the kind of thing. They've been really active on the Big Sur coast because of its dramatic nature and have worked with the land trusts, on the Big Sur Land Trust.

**Farmer:** Well, thank you very much, Jerry and Jean.

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<sup>1</sup> See the oral history with Barney Bricmont in this series.

<sup>2</sup> S. Martinelli & Company was founded in the Pajaro Valley in 1868.

<sup>3</sup> See the oral history with Russel Wolter in this series.

<sup>4</sup> *Convivium* is Latin for a feast or banquet. It was adopted by the Slow Food movement to refer to local groups or chapter, usually named in the plural as *convivia*.

<sup>5</sup> Slow Food Nation took place May 1-4, 2008 at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco.

<sup>6</sup> See the oral history with Rebecca Thistlethwaite in this series.

<sup>7</sup> The Great Morgani is a local performing artist. See <http://www.thegreatmorgani.com/>

<sup>8</sup> See the oral histories with Nancy Gammons, manager of the Watsonville Farmers' Market, Nesh Dhillon, manager of the Santa Cruz Community Farmer's Markets, and Catherine Barr, manager of the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets, in this series.

<sup>9</sup> See the oral history with Reggie Knox in this series for more on California FarmLink.

<sup>10</sup> See the oral history with Sam Earnshaw and Jo Ann Baumgartner in this series for more on the Wild Farm Alliance, and the oral histories with Rebecca Thistlethwaite, former ALBA Program Director, as well as oral histories with ALBA farmers J.P Perez, Maria Inés Catalan, Florentino Collazo, and Maria Luz Reyes.

<sup>11</sup> See the oral history in this series with Janet Brians and Grant Brians in this series.

<sup>12</sup> See the excerpt of the oral history with Nick Pasqual reprinted as part of this project.

<sup>13</sup> See the oral history with Rich Merrill in this series.

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<sup>14</sup> See the oral histories with Robbie Jaffe and with Barney Bricmont for more on the early history of the Santa Cruz certified farmers' markets.

<sup>15</sup> Certified farmers' markets were established in the state in 1978, when then-governor Jerry Brown signed legislation known as the Direct Marketing Act. This enabled California farmers to sell their own produce directly to consumers at locations designated by the Department of Agriculture.

<sup>16</sup> According to an article by Cabrillo College professor of history emeritus Sandy Lydon, "The first producer-consumer market in the county was held on Santa Cruz's Front Street in April 1914. Known in those days as a 'free market' because no fees were charged to the sellers, the twice-weekly event was organized by the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. Sellers were restricted to offering produce grown in Santa Cruz County." The produce was carted to the market in horse-drawn wagons. In the winter of 1914 over sixty farmers sold at the market. That generation of farmers' markets appears to have died out after World War I, and was not revived until the mid-1970s. See Sandy Lydon, "Farmer's Market Sprouted Early On," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 17, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> See Tom Ragan, "Group Recommends War on Apple Moth," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 19, 2007, <http://www.scsextra.com/story.php?sid=48873>.

<sup>18</sup> *Cassista v. Community Foods, Inc.*, 856 P.2d 1143, 1144 (CA 1993). According to the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance: "In the fall of 1987, Toni Cassista applied for a job with Community Foods, a Santa Cruz, California health food store. Cassista went through the screening process, and though not hired, was told that she was the next in line for a position. When she saw another job advertised a month later, she called the personnel director to let the company know she was still interested in working for them. At that time, she was told that they thought she could not physically handle the work because of her weight. The jury in the Santa Cruz Superior Court trial ruled in favor of Community Foods. In July of 1992, the 6th District Court of Appeal ruled that the verdict may have been tainted due to the erroneous instructions from the judge, and that the burden of proving they had a legitimate motive for not hiring Cassista fell on Community Foods. The California Supreme Court heard arguments on this case in June 1993 regarding whether the burden of proof of discrimination should shift from the plaintiff to the defendant, and ruled in favor of Community Foods. In addition, the Court ruled that obesity is not a handicap under California's Fair Employment and Housing Act. 1993." <http://www.naafa.org/info/legal/court.html>

<sup>19</sup> See the oral history with Heidi Skolnik in this series.

<sup>20</sup> See the oral history with Jeff Larkey in this series.

<sup>21</sup> See the oral history with Andy Griffin in this series.