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Zea Sonnabend: Ecological Farming Association

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Zea Sonnabend



Ecological Farming Association

As with many members of the organic farming movement, Zea Sonnabend's passion for organic agriculture grew out of an early involvement in the back-to-the-land and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. Born in 1951 in Brookline, Massachusetts, Sonnabend dropped out of college in Philadelphia to work on a farm. But then her interests took a more technical, scientific turn, as she returned to school to earn a BS in plant science from the University of Massachusetts and a MA in plant breeding from Cornell University. After graduation, Sonnabend came to California, and worked for several years at the Isla Vista Food Co-op and the Mesa Project demonstration garden run by the Community Environmental Council in the Santa Barbara area. At the Mesa Project, Sonnabend was mentored by ecologist and horticulturalist Richard Merrill, and by organic activist and writer John Jeavons.

In the 1980s, Sonnabend farmed organic figs, peaches, and vegetables in Tehama County, California. This led to her involvement in the North Valley chapter of the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). She became an inspector for CCOF, and in 1985 began serving on the CCOF board that developed the first organic certification standards and materials list in California. She is a founder of the Organic Materials Review Institute, and worked as a contractor with the National Organic Standards Board and the USDA to develop federal organic standards. Sonnabend is also a lifetime member of the Seed Savers Exchange and teaches classes in Seed Saving at the UC Davis Student Farm and at the UCSC Farm and Garden. She works on diverse projects for the Ecological Farming Association, and until 2008 coordinated the Eco-Farm conference at Asilomar, an enormous task. Irene Reti conducted this oral history at the Ecological Farming Association's offices in downtown Watsonville, California, on April 23, 2007.

Additional Resources:

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

Ecological Farming Association: <http://eco-farm.org/>

Organic Materials Review Institute: <http://www.omri.org/>

Seed Savers Exchange: <http://www.seedsavers.org/>

Beginnings

Reti: Today is April 23, 2007, and I'm with Zea Sonnabend. We're in Watsonville, California, at the offices of the Ecological Farming Association. Today, Zea, let's start by talking about where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Sonnabend: I was born and raised outside of Boston, Massachusetts (Brookline, to be exact), a city kid. However, my grandfather had a farm about an hour away from Boston, a dairy farm. I can't say that's actually what got me interested in it, but I did have some exposure to farms then.

Reti: And when were you born?

Sonnabend: In 1951. In a few days [from today's date].

Reti: Okay. So what did get you interested in agriculture?

Sonnabend: I'm a product of the 1960s. I was very active against the Vietnam War and protesting the way things were. An outgrowth of that, I think, was the back-to-the-land movement. When I was just contemplating dropping out of college in the era of Kent State and all that, I came across a copy of the *Mother Earth News* newspaper, which was the beginning of the back-to-the-land movement, and that kind of started me. I'd have to say combined with that was the fact that I have extensive food allergies. In the old days, when I was a kid, it didn't matter so much; it was just peanuts and beans. But as they started putting more and more food additives in products, I started having to read labels on all foods, and then I discovered how much nasty stuff was in foods, and so I got interested in natural foods, which led me to organics.

Reti: In that era when organic food was just becoming more common.

Sonnabend: Right, was barely ever heard of, and just becoming known.

Reti: Were you in college back in the Boston area?

Sonnabend: No, in Philadelphia. Well, [that was] the first school that I went to during the Vietnam War.

Reti: So then did you end up going to be on a farm as part of the back-to-the-land movement?

Sonnabend: I dropped out of college, and I went to work on a farm for the summer. Then I drifted around for a while. [Laughs] It was really more of a large garden than a farm; you know, a little bit of a market garden. After a while I decided to go back and take some classes in horticulture, and ended up going back to the University of Massachusetts, where I graduated with a degree in plant science and then went on to Cornell [University] and got a master's degree in plant breeding.

Reti: Wow! The farm really took you in a new direction.

Sonnabend: Yes, I got absorbed by that time.

Reti: So then how did you get out here to California?

Sonnabend: Well, Massachusetts and New York don't have very long growing seasons. I had some friends out in California, and so as soon as I finished at Cornell I decided to pay them a visit, and headed west in 1977 and stayed ever since. First I went to Isla Vista, the Santa Barbara area—although I had friends in Davis too, and I went and visited them. But I was in the Santa Barbara area for several years. Worked first at the Isla Vista Food Co-op, and then got a job at something called the Community Environmental Council Mesa Project, which was a demonstration garden taking off from Alan Chadwick and similar to the UCSC Garden, but not affiliated with the University. It's still around, although the garden is scaled back now. They do recycling projects and green endeavors in Santa Barbara.

Reti: So was Chadwick an influence on you?

Sonnabend: Yes, although not directly. I never studied with him directly, but through my work at the Mesa Project I got exposed to a lot of people who had worked with him, and to John Jeavons¹, and to Richard Merrill², and to lots of people who were prominent in the organic gardening field at that time.

Farming in Tehama County, California

So then right about the time the funding ran out on my job up there—it was grant funded, a nonprofit—some friends of mine were going to look for farmland near Chico [California]. I had no definite plans, but I jumped in the car with them

to go look. We ended up moving to Tehama County, which is north of Chico, and I had an organic farm up there for most of the eighties. I moved up in '82.

Reti: So was this an organic farm that you were making a living off of?

Sonnabend: We were trying to. It wasn't that much of a living, but we certainly had a good lifestyle up there. Very harsh climate and a long way from markets, but that's really where I got my feet wet in commercial-scale farming, although we only had twelve acres planted. But we had fairly high-value crops: figs and peaches and a diverse assortment of vegetable crops.

California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]

Reti: And you were growing organically.

Sonnabend: Yes, and in 1982 we joined CCOF, California Certified Organic Farmers, which was just starting a chapter in that area for the first time. [When] CCOF started it was a combination of Sy Weisman, who was on the North Coast, and Barney Bricmont, who was down here in Santa Cruz.³

Reti: We've been interviewing Barney.

Sonnabend: Barney. Barney's entertaining. I haven't seen him in many years. But anyway, it did start between the Central Coast and the North Coast (and that

was the late seventies, I think), and moved up to the North Valley in 1982. We were certified by CCOF.

Reti: And were you also active in the organization?

Sonnabend: We were in our chapter. CCOF is organized by chapters, so we had chapter meetings three or four times a year. We got to know the other organic growers. Because there was no cooperative extension for organics, our main source of information was the other organic growers.

[In] 1984, I [was] in Santa Barbara. I have an aunt in Mill Valley, California [in Marin County], and I was going to visit her [on the way home] before going back to Tehama County. A person I knew in Santa Barbara asked for a ride to Marin County. I said, "Sure, I'm going that way." She [was going to] a statewide CCOF meeting, because they had just started a chapter of CCOF in Santa Barbara County in 1984.

We got there, [to the statewide CCOF meeting in Marin County] and my friend Wendy Krupnick⁴ said to me, "Well, why don't you come in? [to the meeting] (because I didn't have to be at my aunt's till later in the afternoon). "Why don't you come in and see, because you're a member of CCOF." I said, "Okay." And so I got into the room, and the board seat by the North Valley Chapter (which was the name of our chapter) was unoccupied. Our representative, Joe, was not able to come. I mentioned to Barney that I was there, and he said, "Why don't you sit up here for the meeting?"

Reti: [Laughs.]

Sonnabend: And I ended up on the board. It was the worst meeting I've ever been to since—before or since—because they spent eight hours talking about the bylaws. [Laughs.]

Reti: Wow! An eight-hour meeting?

Sonnabend: Something like that. Maybe not quite eight, but it was really long, and it was really boring. But I ended up going on to participate in CCOF from then on.

Reti: And what kinds of things did you do with CCOF?

Developing Organic Certification Standards

Sonnabend: I was on the board, and we realized pretty much in conjunction with the bylaws that there were really no standards. The page of rules of what you had to do to be organic was one page, I think. And so they started up the certification standards committee to help write the standards. So me and two other people at that time became the certification committee. Over the course of the next year and a half, two years, we added two or three more people, and we wrote the first handbook, which were the first rules for CCOF.

Then we realized as part of the handbook we needed the list of what materials you could use or not use for organic farming, and we started down that road. I think the first handbook came out in either '85 or '86. The materials list came a year later. We created the first materials list by writing down everything we could think of that we thought might be used by an organic farmer, and sending out the survey to all the CCOF members, which at the time was two hundred or so, and said, "Do you use this or not?" We tabulated the results, and that's how we came to the first list.

Reti: That's really thorough.

Sonnabend: It was, but compared to the efforts that it's turned into now, it was nothing. Because at that time we didn't distinguish between a generic product like calcium sulfate—versus a brand-name formulation, which might have a lot of things in it. The list was just a mish-mash of all kinds of things, and now it's turned into the federal rules, essentially. It's come a long way.

Reti: Was there a lot of controversy around what you were doing at that time?

Sonnabend: Not at first, because there wasn't really a big enough network. Certainly, once the list got out there, there started to be controversy. But most of the controversy surrounded the fact that we didn't really know what was in some things, or what the repercussions of using those things were. So some people would say, "Oh, this stuff is bad for you," but they wouldn't have any evidence. Other things that we thought might be bad really were natural. But we

had no way of knowing if something was natural or synthetic, for instance, in some things at the beginning.

Reti: Were there researchers at universities that were helpful at all in that process?

Sonnabend: Researchers are very specialized, and we had a very general list. So, for instance, Lou Falcon, who is the UC Berkeley researcher who invented granulosin virus for codling moth: he was helpful, but only on virus for codling moth. But when we had two hundred things that we would have needed more help on, we didn't have much help on that.

Reti: So you had to go out and do the research yourself, essentially?

Sonnabend: Yes and no. First we just took things at face value of what people were using, and then we refined the list each year as we got some feedback. We gradually tightened it up over time. 1991 was the first year that we separated brand names from generic materials. About 1990 we realized—and we had a firm committee at this point who reviewed things—we realized that we should be charging a fee for it because we were spending a lot of staff time, and in my case it was volunteer time. So we decided to start charging a fee. That was incredibly successful because it was worth it to the companies to be approved for use by organic growers. So we launched the brand-name product review through CCOF, and we separated out a brand-name list from the generic list in 1991.

Shortly after that we realized that the people in Oregon were doing the same thing, and we merged with Oregon Tilth. So then we had the California/Oregon review. Also around that same time, the national efforts got underway with the passage of the [Senator Patrick] Leahy bill, which created the Organic Food Production Act. And the Alar scare, which happened in 1989, is when we started participating on a national level.

We first merged with what's now the Organic Trade Association. At that time it was called OFPANA, which is Organic Food Production Association of North America. We discovered that they had been trying to survey all the certifiers in the country to see what materials they allowed and didn't allow. We joined with them, and OFPANA commissioned a small project to really get a list together. So we did that and then presented it in 1992 to the National Organic Standard[s] Board (which was newly appointed), as a starting place for them to use to create the national list.

Then they ended up bringing me and Lynn Coody (who's the Oregon person who I worked with at the time) to their early NOSB meetings to help them get started in the national list process. Working with the government was challenging, to say the least, but in the end they couldn't do it themselves, even with my and Lynn's free advice, so they hired me and another person as a contractor to help do the initial reviews to get things onto the national list. I did that from '94 to '96.

Reti: So that's when the National Organic Standards Board started?

Sonnabend: The National Organic Standards Board started in 1992. In early '93 was their second meeting, which is the one Lynn and I went to, to talk to them. It was sort of Materials 101, where we explained how you determine if something is synthetic or not synthetic, and the difference between a generic material and a formulated material, and what inert ingredients are. It's fairly complicated subject matter if you're a layperson.

Reti: I'm sure it is.

Sonnabend: [Chuckles.] So we introduced them to that. They proceeded to develop the organic rules. I helped them do that, but I was never a member of the NOSB, only a contractor.

Gender Issues

Reti: Was the fact that you were a woman—did it make it more difficult for you to be taken seriously in terms of these very technical kinds of questions?

Sonnabend: No, not in that arena. The fact that I was one of the very early women involved in agriculture in the modern era was more reflected in my work directly on farms or at Cornell. At Cornell, in the plant breeding department, I was the only woman, and I got introduced at events as "Here is our token woman in our plant breeding department." They had this [de facto] policy of one woman at a time was the token woman in the department, and the woman before me unfortunately had sort of given us all a bad name in that she wouldn't

go out in the field. I guess she had hay fever, but she just, like, wouldn't go out in the field. She only wanted to stay in the lab. So since a lot of the work is field work [laughs], that was, like, quite a challenge.

I should back up and add that I ended up leaving the farm. In 1989 we sold the farm. I actually left about a year earlier. Then I started working for CCOF as an inspector, and also working some on policy, although my policy work was mostly volunteer until much later in the scheme of things. But in the early days of farm inspection, I encountered quite a bit of resistance to women showing up as a farm inspector.

Reti: How would you deal with that?

Sonnabend: Really just convinced the farmer that they were stuck with me. [Laughter.] You know, you just deal with it. I didn't get someone who refused to talk to me. I just got people who just assumed I didn't know anything.

Reti: Were most of the farmers men?

Sonnabend: Oh, yes. Still are. There are certainly some women, but mostly men. I don't want to say it was universal or anything, because many farmers were very accepting. But I would occasionally get some old-time guy who just couldn't believe a woman would be out there. No, in the work with the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] I didn't really experience sexism. There are

some women who are fairly high up in the USDA, so some of these people even had bosses that were women. [Laughs.] Still do, in fact.

Moving to Santa Cruz

Reti: So did you come down here at that point?

Sonnabend: Oh, yes. In 1989 I moved down here. 1986 through '89 I was doing part time in Davis and part time on the farm. Many times we'd have to find jobs off the farm in the winter months to make ends meet. At the end of the 1985 growing season, the fall of '85 was such a time, and we were selling our crops through the [Yo-Cal] Produce Cooperative in Davis. I told my farm mates, "I'm going to take this load of figs down, and then I'm going to look for a job in Davis for the winter." I drove the load of figs down, and drove into Yo-Cal, and said to the boss there at Yo-Cal, Tom, "I'm going to look for a job. Where do you think I should start looking?" He said, "When can you start?"

Reti: [Laughs.]

Sonnabend: I actually started the next morning, because their produce sales person had ended up in the hospital all of a sudden with a difficult pregnancy. Easiest job I ever got. I worked for Yo-Cal for a year part time. I was three days down there and four days farming for the next season, and then got a job at UC Davis at the student farm, on a grant that they got to run a seed saving project. I worked at that for two and a half years. That was grant funded and the grant ran

out right in 1989, right about the same time we sold the farm, which was also the same time as my mom died back East, and I inherited her furniture, and so I had to move to a place big enough to hold furniture instead of a rented room at Davis. And so I moved down here.

Reti: And why did you sell the farm?

Sonnabend: Well, there were many of us partners on the farm. There were six of us. The partners started wanting to go off in different directions, and it was a really hard lifestyle, as I said. It was difficult climate, far from markets.

Reti: At what point did you come down to Santa Cruz?

Sonnabend: I got here in May of 1989. When I was farming, there were not paid inspectors in CCOF. The farmers in our chapter inspected each other, and so every year we had to go inspect two other farms. Two farmers would go to each farm. So I'd been doing that ever since we were farming, and then in 1988 they started paying the first inspectors. I took the training at that point and started doing some inspections from Davis, and then moved down here.

The Ecological Farming Association

Reti: Tell me a little about the history of the Ecological Farming Association.

Sonnabend: This organization is twenty-six years old. The first conference was in 1981 (which I was not there for), and the second one was in '82, [which] I was not there for. But when we were farming in 1982, everyone got their organic fertilizers and organic supplies from Peaceful Valley Farm Supply. The first spring we didn't have any money, and so we just used compost that we made ourselves and our own supplies, pretty much. But as soon as we made some money in the fall, we decided we'd go up to Peaceful Valley Farm Supply to get supplies. It was in Nevada City, which was a few hours from the farm, but we drove up there with our truck. And we met Amigo Bob Cantisano, who owned Peaceful Valley Farm Supply.⁵ We struck up a friendship with him, and he told us about this conference. So in 1983, I and one other person from the farm went to the conference for the first time. That was the third one that had happened.

In those days, at the end of the conference, they would have a little rah-rah session to inspire everyone to take something home with them. And they would say, "Well, if anyone wants to help the conference develop and be on the board" (it was then called the Steering Committee for Sustainable Agriculture), "if anyone wants to be on the board, come up on the stage right now." So we went up on the stage, and then we were on the board. Some years forty people went up on the stage; on other years, less. [Laughs.] It was one way to get board members.

Anyway, the board met in Davis, and they had just become an organization after the second conference, I believe. Dru Rivers was the first director. Since I was in

Davis part time, I was on the board and I would go help Dru do mailings; we did different stuff. So that's when I first became involved with the organization.

Forty people would [hardly] ever come—but at least twenty or more people would come to the meetings. I went off the board before I left Davis, but I was on the board for a few years. I can't really remember when I left. But I'm sure I stopped being involved when I moved down here, except that I went to the conference every year because it was the main networking event for people involved in sustainable agriculture.

Reti: What were the conferences like back then?

Sonnabend: Our newsletter for our twenty-fifth anniversary (which I can give you) actually has a really good interview with people who were at the beginning of the conferences and talked about why they were there. The first conference was just organic farmers getting together to share information because there was no [organic] Agricultural Extension, and there was no research. There was just no infrastructure. I think there were something like forty-five people at the first one and one invited guest speaker. The rest of the time was people sharing with each other.

By the third year, though, it had grown to two hundred people, and it had moved to Jones Gulch YMCA Camp in La Honda. There were a number of invited guest speakers. It was still almost exclusively grower production topics. Things like beneficial insects, and how to read a soil test, and the best ways to

grow peaches—very production-oriented but very worthwhile. And because it was family-style dining there at La Honda, you got to sit with other growers and meet them over a meal, which is always one of the best ways to get to know people. Over time, it's grown, moved to Asilomar in 1986.

Reti: How did they end up picking Asilomar?

Sonnabend: I wasn't involved in that process, but I'm pretty sure it was because we had outgrown La Honda, and the YMCA camp—the lodging facilities were abysmal. It was bunk beds with eight people in a room, and the springs squeaked, so one person would roll over, and the other seven would wake up.

Reti: I've been in situations like that. It's horrible.

Sonnabend: [Laughs.] Although there was no camping allowed and no sleeping in vehicles, I couldn't even take it; I would just go out and sleep in my truck, in the back of the truck, because it was really bad. And I'm pretty tolerant, but not of that. So it was realized that in order to really grow at all, we had to have a place where people could sleep comfortably. Probably Asilomar was one of the few places where we were able to negotiate [an] arrangement to serve organic food. Because hotels won't let you do that usually. In those days, no one had heard of it. There was a two-year waiting list to get into Asilomar; I do remember that part. But it did move there.

So anyway, I continued going to the conference, but wasn't too involved in the organization. The organization went through a very stressful period. I had friends who were still on the board, so I heard about it. There was very much divisiveness among the board, and the director wasn't getting along with a lot of people. There was a lot of controversy in that period, as well as a lot of growth in the movement. There were years where the conference was very poorly run, where you'd be stuck in lines for hours waiting to register, and things were really disorganized. However, I wasn't paying that much attention other than noticing that.

And then in 1993, my friend who was on the board was visiting me, and she told me that the director was leaving and that they were in real trouble financially, and that they were looking for someone part time who could just be the administrator of the organization through the summer until they could figure out what to do in the fall and put on the next conference, hire a director. I wasn't doing that much at the time, and I said, "Well, I have some free time. If I can just do this really part time, maybe I'll do it." Second-easiest job I ever got. I shouldn't have said anything. But she was like, "Oh, we're having a board meeting this Saturday. Can we just call you from there?" And I'm, like, "Okay."

So they call me from this board meeting, and they go, "Do you have time to do this for twenty hours a week until September?" I said, "Yes." And since many of them knew me, I didn't even send a résumé [laughs] or anything. They're like, "You're hired."

The office had been outside of Grass Valley, from the previous director, and me and my friend and a couple of other people went and packed up the office and put most stuff into storage and moved a few things down to my living room that I'd need. Two weeks later we get this really nasty letter from the IRS saying, "You misfiled your payroll tax. Pay us all this money or else within two weeks." Which no one had told me about, and no one had really told anyone about. The last director had really mismanaged things really badly. So it turned out that we got the bank balance down to about thirty dollars at one point, and I had to go on deferred salary for the rest of the summer, pretty much. [Laughs.] Luckily, since my mom—when she had died in 1989, my inheritance took until about '92 to come through, so I was able to do that, at least.

But we realized that not only did we not have enough money to hire a director [laughs], but we didn't have enough money to put on the conference unless we did something severe.

Reti: This was really a crisis.

Sonnabend: Right, it was a crisis in '93, I would say. We did manage to scrape together enough money to straighten things out with IRS. So we had a meeting, and [said]—why didn't we just ask some of the companies that supported organic to be sponsors and put up their money ahead of time so at least we could pay the printing bill. That's where we came up with the idea of sponsors, although some of the very early conferences had had a few companies put up some money for startup costs. So we started a sponsor drive, and that got us

through to be able to put on a conference. I was able to get paid once the sponsor money started coming in, but we still couldn't hire a director, and so I had to take over the conference-running job, along with Sam Earnshaw, who had worked on the conference the previous year. So he and I did it together that year. We were successful enough at that conference that year that once the money came in, we could hire a director at the end of the conference.

Reti: Do you remember who some of the companies were that were sponsors in those years?

Sonnabend: The companies that have historically supported us: Lundberg Family Farms, very instrumental; Rincon-Vitova Insectaries—they're not sponsors anymore, but they had given us a bunch of the start-up money. Veritable Vegetable and a lot of the other distributor companies have helped right along, and Peaceful Valley Farm Supply and Harmony Farm Supply. If I had my sponsor list, I could tell you some more. The first year of this we had probably thirty companies. We asked them for between three hundred and a thousand dollars each. That was enough money to get us through the hump at that time.

Reti: This was at the time when organic was really just starting to grow, in the mid-nineties.

Sonnabend: Yes, [in] '93 it was really starting to grow. [In] '90, '91, it was in that holding pattern. [In] '92, when they published the federal law, OFPA [Organic Foods Production Act], then it really did take off from there.

Reti: So the conference started to get more financial stability at the same time as these companies are starting. Everything is kind of growing hand-in-hand?

Sonnabend: Right. Conference attendance had remained sort of flat through the early nineties. There were a series— Well, like I say, some mismanagement, and then, for instance, the year the [First] Gulf War started [1991], it started on the first day of the conference.

Reti: Oh!

Sonnabend: Everyone got to Asilomar and they pulled a TV into the main building, which they usually don't have, but they put up a TV, and everyone watched the TV for a few hours and turned around and went home mostly. I don't know that people needed their money back, but a lot of people didn't come who might have otherwise come. So some things like that happened. The conference attendance had remained somewhat flat, and we had to build it back up through the nineties.

After that first year, I realized I do not like administration particularly. [Laughter.] I'm more of a technical person. And so as soon as we could hire a director, I was all for that. But I continued to do the conference organization. The

director we hired lived in Morgan Hill, so we moved the office to Morgan Hill for a couple of years, and during conference season I commuted a couple of times a week (it's really not all that far) over Hecker Pass. Then that director left in '97, and we moved the office here [to Watsonville]. I ended up stepping in as interim director for the summer of '97, got the office moved here, and then they hired a new director in winter of '97.

Reti: And so you've had the same director for the last ten years?

Sonnabend: Nope. Lynn [Young] lasted four years, and then we had Kristin [Rosenow], who just left. She was here five years. We're searching for a new director right now. We have an interim. Our board president is the interim director right now.

Reti: Okay. So what is your position with the Ecological Farming Association at this point?

Sonnabend: Program coordinator for the conference. Although we're a small office, so until quite recently I was also the IT person and the general historian. I still am the general historian, but I had to do a lot of other things besides just the conference. Luckily I don't have to be the IT person anymore, thank goodness.

Reti: That is a lot, to be jumping in fixing computers.

Sonnabend: Especially when nothing works half the time. [Laughs.]

Reti: Really crazy. So the conference—how has it changed over time, other than getting bigger?

Sonnabend: Well, we've taken on more topics. Of course, as the movement has grown, all of the associated components of the movement have their own interests. First, of course—and as part of the original conference but not emphasized—was the marketing issues. That's really expanded at the same time as the production issues. The social issues, the community issues, the consumer-oriented issues, and the research issues are now all encompassed in the conference. So the topic area is much broader than it used to be. Since quite early on, we've been able to attract really national-caliber speakers and a national and even international audience. That's continued to develop as well.

Reti: Because this is a national conference.

Sonnabend: Yes.

Reti: And there's no other conference really like it.

Sonnabend: Oh, yes, sure there are. There's no other conference exactly like it. But each region of the country now has fairly substantial conferences. The Midwest region—they have a conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin, which now brings more people than we do.⁶ They have more capacity. We've reached the capacity of Asilomar, pretty much.

Reti: Which is what?

Sonnabend: For lodging it's six hundred, and for the dining hall. So that's seven-hundred-fifty. We have more people than that come, because some people come for just one day or just another day. And some people stay off site. We've never really turned away day people, but we can't get a lot bigger.

Reti: So there's one of them in the Midwest and then the East Coast?

Sonnabend: There's one in the Midwest. There's one in the Southeast, and that one moves from town to town. It's been in Kentucky and in South Carolina. They're growing. I don't think they're bigger than us. The Northeast has sort of a different model, where they combine their conference with a fair. So Maine has their Common Ground Fair, where they have workshops. They have a phenomenal attendance, but they have fair-type activities.⁷

Reti: So did Eco-Farm start before these other conferences, or did they begin around the same time?

Sonnabend: We definitely started before the Southern and the Midwestern. The New England ones had been going—the Common Ground Fair I think is the same age or even older. That one's been going a really long time.

Reti: So the people who come—are they mostly from around here, but with a few national folks?

Sonnabend: They're mostly West Coast, for sure. We get lots and lots of people from Oregon and Washington. So definitely mostly West Coast. We actually get a lot from New Mexico and all the Western states. We do get a good smattering of people from the East and Midwest as well, but definitely more Western than anything else. We haven't actually traced our demographic in a few years now, but between forty and fifty percent are farmers. Used to be, in the old days, a much higher percent farmers, but nowadays it's about fifty. It's running about fifty percent. The rest of the people are—it's probably twenty-five percent marketing people—and then activists, researchers, students, consumers, all sorts of people.

Reti: What do you think accounts for that change—fewer farmers and more other folks?

Sonnabend: Well, we've grown so much and there are so many other people involved in organics. And it's fairly expensive. Although we do offer discounts and incentives for farmers, the companies involved in marketing can afford it more than farmers.

Reti: What are the challenges and rewards of organizing this conference every year, Zea?

Sonnabend: Well, the rewards are to see everyone having a good time, and to see the conference means something to so many people. So many people have

gotten their initial information from our conference, and had it influence their farming practices. So that's rewarding to hear.

The challenges are it gets bigger and bigger every year. [Laughter.] I mean, to figure out where capacity is and to keep myself from getting overworked. I guess those are the biggest challenges.

Reti: Yes, I would imagine it's quite an endeavor. And you're just coming off of leave after having had the conference in January. We are now in April.

Sonnabend: Right. Well, actually I, a lot of times, don't work much at all this time of year. We start up really in July with the conference planning for the next year. But in the interim—because we don't have a director right now and because I have a strong desire to work less next year, I am spending a little time to mentor Jasmine [Roohani], who's here to try to take over some of my responsibilities. I'm working with her a couple of times a week. Because, as I said, we're a small organization, and we're very hands-on. So in addition to coordinating the whole agenda and arrangements, we do our own desktop publishing, we do our own website, we do our own IT work, and we maintain our own databases and mailing lists, and design our own forms, and do everything. So there're a lot of different skills to learn.

Reti: And how many staff people work here? Approximately.

Sonnabend: Approximately four at any given time. Some are part time. Jasmine and Karyn [Wolf Lynn] are the only completely full-time ones. Stacie [Clary] and Crystal [Jensen] are part-time, and then Ken [Dickerson] is interim ED [executive director], is part time, but the ED will be full time when they arrive. [So no outreach coordinator yet, at the time of this interview?]

Reti: Because in addition to the conference, there are many other projects.

Sonnabend: There are several other projects, yes.

Reti: And are you involved with those as well?

Smart Energy Management Program

Sonnabend: Not normally, but I am helping Jasmine with the Smart Energy Management [program], as part of the mentoring process this year.

Reti: So tell me what that's about.

Sonnabend: Okay. Each year, one of the other main programs besides [the] Eco-Farm Conference is [the] Regionally Appropriate Sustainable Agriculture Series. These events are grant funded, primarily. There're some other funding sources, but primarily grant funded. They started out being called Transition Conferences back in the mid-nineties, where we would just go into an area—Fresno, Mendocino, Ventura or whatever—and talk to farmers about converting to

organic. Over the years, it's developed into whatever the grantor decides is appropriate. We'll get funding for different things. We had a whole dairy series about four or five years ago. This year our two-year grant-funded project is for renewable energy education for farms. We're calling the program Smart Energy Management in Agriculture. The grant was for four regional conferences, of which two have already occurred, and two are being planned for 2007. One of them will be in the San Joaquin Valley, somewhere between Fresno and Merced. We're just finalizing the location, but we don't have it final yet. And the other one will be up in the Sacramento Valley somewhere, in the fall.⁸ There will be a combination of energy topics, including biofuels, photovoltaics, solar pumping—energy conservation is always an important part of it, and other topics related to renewable energy.

Reti: Solar pumping. Does that mean pumping water?

Sonnabend: Pumping water with solar panels.

Reti: So are you seeing a lot of interest from farmers in energy issues?

Sonnabend: Sure.

Reti: It's really becoming a priority.

Sonnabend: Yes. But of course deciding whether it's practical or not is the challenge. Our model that has been successful for many years now is we try to

find farmers who are early adopters, who are at the forefront and have figured out their own thing, and have an installation. We either try to have a field trip to their farm or bring them in to be on a panel of such people, and then combine their experience with more technical information. In other farming topics it can be Cooperative Extension, or it can be consultants and whatever. In renewable energy, since UC doesn't do much about that as far as experts, the experts tend to be the installers, the companies that provide the services of installers, combined with, say, PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] experts on energy conservation. That's what we're in the process of setting up now.

The two events we had so far—one was a pre-conference in advance of the main Eco-Farm. It wasn't one of our more successful events in terms of numbers, just because with the main conference, people are so overwhelmed that not too many people could spare the extra day. But the other event we had last year was up in Healdsburg [in Sonoma County], and that was very well attended: seventy people, the majority of whom were farmers.⁹

Reti: Oh, that's great.

Sonnabend: Right. Normally we try to reach forty to fifty with an event like this, and that's what I expect we'll get. We might get sixty, but in the Central Valley, that's what I would expect we'll reach.

Other Ecological Farming Association Programs

Reti: And then there are other partnerships, I notice, such as Californians for GE [Genetic Engineering]-Free Agriculture.

Sonnabend: Right. Besides Smart Energy we have the Hoes Down Harvest Festival, and the Heartland Festival, both of which celebrate rural living. The Heartland Festival is coming up June 2nd, and then Hoes Down is in October. Those are our projects. And then we're a direct fiscal sponsor for the California Coalition for Food and Farming, which is a policy group who works on Farm Bill policy.

Reti: Oh, and that's a really big one right now.

Sonnabend: Right, the Farm Bill policy.

Reti: Yes.

Sonnabend: However, that's not my area. If you have more questions, Stacie in our office is the one who is concerned with that. I know a little bit about organic policy, but not overall Farm Bill stuff too much

Then we are coalition members or fiscal sponsors for some of these other projects. So the Cal GE-Free group—we're a coalition member. Kristin was on the steering committee. I'm not sure if Ken [Dickerson, the association's interim Executive Director] is on their steering committee. But anyway, we participate with them in the policy work that they do about genetic engineering. And

depending on who's involved, we've taken various amounts of lead. We run a genetic engineering information listserv. Thomas Wittman coordinates that, and we do that with a grant that we've received for that, where he scours the Internet and sends out daily information to subscribers about all the genetic engineering news each day. That's really useful for GE activists who don't have time to keep up with every single detail themselves. Fact is, the volume of e-mails is pretty overwhelming, but it's a really worthwhile service to have for people. And then we're a fiscal sponsor of WWOOF [USA], which is Willing Workers on Organic Farms. Mostly we just help them with their nonprofit tax status, but they do all of the hooking up of workers with farmers.

Reti: So you're fiscal sponsors for that organization? It's a national or international organization?

Sonnabend: It's the U.S. chapter of an international organization. I'm pretty sure they cover the whole U.S. It's actually run out of Santa Cruz here.

Reti: It's just amazing to me how many organizations are based around here.

Sonnabend: Yes. But they're not an organization with an office or anything. It's pretty much all computer—they hook up people to the computer and people run it, do it from their homes. Although they started here in Santa Cruz (they were all UCSC students when they started it), now not everyone's here. But their post office box is here.

Reti: Now, let's see who else? Eco-Landscape Working Group?

Sonnabend: We're a fiscal sponsor for them. They run a conference every other year in Sacramento for ecological landscapers. There's now a national ecological landscaping group, and I think they're going to merge with them soon and no longer be with us.

Reti: Yes, I think those are all the ones that I've found.

Sonnabend: I know there are a lot. In fact, some of our newer staff is like, "Could we please have an explanation of why we're in all these groups?"

Compost Tea Task Force of the National Organic Standards Board

Reti: [Laughs.] Just going back a little bit—I didn't ask you about the Compost Tea Task Force.

Sonnabend: As part of my work with NOSB, the National Organic Standards Board, after my contracting days were up and we got through the initial national list, there were still some gray areas in the federal rules when they came out. A couple of the big ones concerned compost and compost tea products. And then there was also still a gray area concerning inert ingredients. So the NOSB sets up ad hoc task forces, which will include NOSB members and community members, to work on things and make a recommendation. They also have them for—like, right now there's an aquaculture one and a pet food one. There're different ones

that have to do with other areas of organic. So I was on the Compost Task Force first, and the Inert Task Force, and then the Compost Tea Task Force. Each of those groups took a year or two, but developed a recommendation which NOSB then either adopted or didn't, and then NOP [National Organic Program] either adopts or not what the NOSB recommends. Unfortunately the compost tea stuff is mired in controversy to this day and is not adopted by the NOP. The details are sordid. [Laughs.] It's all tied up with the issue of pathogens and *E. coli*.

Controversies over Organic Certification

Reti: This is kind of a provocative question, but some farmers say getting certified is just too expensive. What would you say to that claim?

Sonnabend: If you're face-to-face with your buyers and you can explain to them what it is you do on [your] farm and they believe you, I think that's fine. If you're not face-to-face with your buyers, and therefore no one knows what you do on your farm, who's buying it, then you really need to take the steps to be certified. It's expensive, but you get a premium for producing your organic crops, and the premium usually should offset the cost of certification.

Equally to the expense is the claim that it's too much work. Well, it's quite a bit of work at the very beginning when you do your farm plan. But after that, when you have your system in place, it really should be no more work than anything else that you do. It's just a basic question of being somewhat organized in your life. And most growers have to, for their taxes, anyway, so it's not that much

harder to set up the record-keeping systems for organic. I have no complaints with people who sell direct to consumers and want to assure them that they're organic. But if you're selling at any distance, or to people you don't know, or to be used in a processed food, then you should have that third-party verification.

Reti: That makes sense. What about the whole issue that I've been hearing more and more about—the question of social justice and labor practices and incorporating that into certification?

Sonnabend: Yes. It seems to fuel a whole lot of academics to write a lot of papers about.

Reti: [Laughs.]

Sonnabend: However, I don't think they spend much time in the field to actually see what those labor practices are, so I personally don't think their criticism of organic farmers is necessarily fair, because I think they're making an assumption that people are mistreated, when they don't know if it's true or not. Now, I'm not saying I know if it's true or not, either. But I know as an inspector, I don't know how they would ever determine that. So therefore I'm not that in favor of having something that I have to inspect to in a standard, unless it's very clear how you inspect to it or not. I certainly am in favor of people treating their workers properly, but as a standards writer from way back, I just don't see how you codify that into a standard.

The Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology

Reti: There was a conference I came across mentioned on the Web called the Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology, sponsored by the USDA, and held in Sacramento, California.

Sonnabend: Yes.

Reti: What was that? I just noticed that you had a booth there.

Sonnabend: That's right. Our organization has done all sorts of odd things over the years. [Laughter.] As a non-governmental organization, I guess we can do that. But a few years ago, I think it was 2003 maybe?

Reti: June 23-25, 2003.

Sonnabend: Okay. It was this conference sponsored by the USDA for foreign ag ministers from all these other countries to come to the U.S. The USDA was going to try and sell them on genetic engineering and accepting U.S. technology in their own countries, basically. The keynote address was given by Ann Veneman, who was then the secretary of agriculture of the USDA. People came from seventy, eight, ninety countries. Well, there were huge protests planned by many in the anti-GE consumer groups for outside the venue, protesting against GE. It was

sort of like the WTO [World Trade Organization] demonstrations. It was this scale of big, international thing.

We realized early on that they had a trade show, and they were offering booths to ag-related organizations. The booths were really, really expensive, but we found some business sponsors who contributed, and so we were able to have a booth on the inside. We figured we might as well try and get them from the inside as well as join in the protest. So we combined with CCOF and co-sponsored a booth on the inside. It was very tight security. We had to have these photo passes. They were five of us, I think, authorized to be in this booth. And we had these photo passes, and we had to march in through all these cops with riot gear—I mean, zillions of—it was so heavily guarded, it was ridiculous.

But then we were on the inside. We got a lot of donated produce. I have some photos of it. We set up this beautiful produce display, a beautiful display of organics, and had the message of: You don't need genetic engineering to grow organic food. We were in this hall that most of the time was fairly empty because they didn't give the delegates much free time to go visit. But when they did, they all came over to our booth. The other people there were, like, Monsantos of the world. They had these giant photo displays and these PowerPoints and these videos, but no plants. We had beautiful, live plants and samples of organic fruit, because it was in June so we had quite a bit of fruit to sample.

So the times that it was dead we mostly worked on the other booth minders, and had some interesting discussions with the Monsanto rep and the other

companies. [Laughs.] But during the time when we got to talk to the ministers—we talked to agriculture ministers from many, many countries—it was really great. Most of them were not buying what the USDA told them and were definitely interested in our information and our perspective.

We even had the photo op with Ann Veneman. We got our picture taken with her. Although she refused to have her picture taken while eating an organic strawberry—

Reti: [Laughs.]

Sonnabend: —she *did* eat an organic strawberry, and we got a picture of it, but we agreed not to publish it. [Laughs.] She had this whole entourage that came around with her. So we published the group photo.

Reti: I saw the group photo. That's what I came across. Have you continued to have any connection with the ministers that you talked with there?

Sonnabend: A few of them did contact our office afterwards. But I don't know that we've had that much ongoing [contact], because we're not really in the international scene too much. I mean, we can do e-mail correspondence, but we certainly don't have the ability to go to other countries.

Reti: Not with four staff people.

Sonnabend: [Laughs.] Yes, it was a pretty interesting event.

Seed Saving

Reti: Great. Let's talk about the Seed Savers Exchange.

Sonnabend: Oh, good, yes. In 1982, our first year at our farm in Tehama County—we came from Santa Barbara, so the varieties of vegetables that we were used to were coastal-adapted, and we knew we had to identify more varieties that were adapted to the heat and the conditions up there.

Reti: It's very volcanic soil up there, too, right?

Sonnabend: Yes—volcanic, low magnesium, actually, low sulfur too. We had frontage on the Sacramento River so we had good alluvial soil, fertile soil. But we were near all the volcanoes and just a whole different climate. Very wide temperature swings from hot to cold. No coastal moderation. So we started asking the neighbors, the old-timers in the area, about what varieties did well for them. And we came across this old guy, Laverne, who was in his eighties. He was in Chico. He was an electrician. He had this melon variety that he had been taking care of that had belonged to his friend, Joe Stutz, who was a farmer in Chico the World War II years and afterwards. Joe died in 1970, I believe, and left his melon, which he called the 'Stutz Supreme,' to Laverne to take care of. Laverne had been planting it to get isolation in the back of his property, but in

his eighties he was having to carry a watering can back there, and it was getting really hard for him to do, so he was happy to turn it over. [Laughter.]

He gave us this melon variety, and we grew it, and it did great in the heat. It was a Crenshaw type melon, which usually sunburns, but it was quite sunburn resistant, and it was by far the best-tasting variety that we had grown. We took it to the farmers' market in Chico, and the people right across the way from us had the Bidwell melon, which was their heirloom Chico melon, and we realized that along with those seeds we were given quite a responsibility for keeping that variety from extinction. So after we harvested the seed that fall, I heard about the Seed Savers Exchange and joined, and discovered that no one else had a melon that tasted as good as our melon, but a lot of people had seeds that they had been saving all across the country. So we were able to participate with them and send out samples of our seed. I joined the Seed Savers Exchange at that time and started saving seeds of a bunch of other stuff.

One of my winter jobs off the farm in '83-'84 was working for Abundant Life Seed Foundation up in Port Townsend, Washington, which focused on heirloom varieties. So I started, when I went back to the farm, growing some seed for them of the hot-weather crops, for them to list in their catalog. Probably that's how I went on to get the job at the UC Davis student farm, because they were looking for someone who had seed-saving experience. There I coordinated a little network of seed savers in the Sacramento Valley area, taught classes in seed saving, helped them teach some of their general classes to apprentices in their summer program at the student farm, and started teaching seed saving to the

UCSC apprentices. Once a year, I'd drive down to UCSC for the Farm and Garden, and teach seed saving there, which I have continued to do to this day. I'm still a lifetime member of the Seed Savers Exchange. I can't grow the 'Stutz Supreme' anymore because it's too coastal [where I live], but some friends in Davis are keeping it, and I do grow some seed. In fact, yesterday I was cleaning a little bit of seed that I'd grown the year before.

Reti: What was it?

Sonnabend: It was leeks. Esther Cook, who is a farmer in Sacramento, who I met up there when I was working at Yo-Cal—she had these really distinctive leeks, and I had talked Abundant Life into carrying them in their seed catalog, but then Abundant Life went out of business a few years ago¹⁰ and I still had some seed left, so I planted it and am trying to keep them going.

Reti: And then are you going to make those available through the Seed Savers Exchange?

Sonnabend: I don't list with the Seed Savers Exchange anymore because they want their seed listing in early November, and I'm so busy with the conference right then, I never am able to have my seed all clean to know what I have. So I bring them to the seed swap. We have a seed swap at Eco-Farm which is run by [the] Occidental Arts and Ecology program, but I help organize it. So I'll bring them there and circulate it around to other people.

Reti: Oh, that's great. Do you have anything you want to add that I'm not covering here? You've had such an eclectic career.

Sonnabend: Yes, eclectic mix. [Laughter.] To this day I continue to work with CCOF, both on inspections and now at least get paid a little bit to work on materials policy issues. It's never ending. I mean, things are not set in stone, ever. The organic world continues to expand, and more things continue to become important and come up in it. I never thought at the outset that it would become a career to deal with what materials were okay for organic farming. But it pretty much has, because although we've come a long way in the infrastructure end of things, there still is not really enough research on organics, enough co-op extension type focus, and that really could be expanded a lot. So we in the NGO [non-governmental organization] community have to fill some of those roles.

¹John Jeavons is known internationally as the leading researcher and method developer, teacher, and consultant for the small-scale, sustainable agricultural method known as GROW.

²See the oral history with Richard Merrill in this series.

³See the oral history with Barney Bricmont in this series.

⁴See the oral history with Wendy Krupnick in this series.

⁵See the oral history with Amigo Bob Cantisano in this series.

⁶Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference—Editor.

⁷Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association—Editor.

⁸"Smart Energy Management in Agriculture: for Farmers, Dairies, Ranchers and Wineries," July 18, 2007 in San Joaquin Valley; November 13, 2007, in Winters, CA.

⁹March 23, 2007.

¹⁰After a devastating fire in 2003—Editor.