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Nancy Gammons: Four Sisters Farm and Watsonville Farmers' Market Manager

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Nancy Gammons



Photo by Tana Butler

Four Sisters Farm & Watsonville Farmers' Market

Nancy Gammons is both a longtime organic farmer and the manager of a weekly downtown farmers' market in the largely Spanish-speaking city of Watsonville. Four Sisters Farm, which she and her husband Robin named in honor of their daughters, produces a variety of fruits, vegetables and flowers on five rolling acres in Aromas, California.

Gammons found her way to both of these callings by following her heart. (“I’ve approached everything in my life,” she says, “in kind of a romantic way.”)

After falling in love with the Spanish language in high-school classes, she went on to major in Spanish in college, spending time abroad in Spain. Her facility with the language has since enabled her to make close connections with the Spanish-speaking workers at Four Sisters, and with farmers and other vendors at the Watsonville market.

In the 1960s, Gammons came across a copy of Robert Rodale’s Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening at a friend’s house, and was drawn to Rodale’s rhapsodizing about ‘the deep recesses of the compost pile.’ Again, it was love at first sight. She had her first professional gardening experience in 1970, as an employee of the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California. Starting Four Sisters in 1978 on marginally fertile land in the hills of Aromas, California, she and Robin have since built up twenty-eight inches of topsoil using compost and green manure. They grow kiwi fruit, apples, avocados, greens, and flowers.

Gammons’ involvement with farmers’ markets goes back to her participation in the founding of markets in San Francisco (Alemany Market), Berkeley, and downtown Santa Cruz. The Watsonville market hired her as manager not long after its 2000 inception. Under her leadership, it now hosts some forty vendors, and provides unique income-generating opportunities for local Latino farmers and food vendors.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Nancy Gammons on Monday, January 26th, 2009, at Four Sisters Farm in Aromas, California.

Additional Resources

Vance Corum, Marcie Rosensweig, and Eric Gibson, *The New Farmers' Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers & Communities*, (New World Publishing 2001).

Jennifer Meta Robinson and JA Hartenfeld, *The Farmers' Market Book: Growing Food, Cultivating Community* (Indiana University Press, 2007).

Micaela Colley, "Organic Cut Flower Seed," Seeds of Change:
http://www.seedsofchange.com/market_growers/field_report_42.aspx

Dan Sullivan, "Magic bus ride yields sustainable farms of many scales: Eco-Farm Road Tour 2004, Part 1," http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/depts/talking_shop/0204/eco-farm/tour1.shtml

"For the love of kiwi," from CUESA newsletter, 1-9-09, <http://www.cuesa.org/cuesa/e-letter/archives/webmail-010909.htm>

Beginnings

Rabkin: Today is Monday, January 26th, 2009, and I am in Aromas [California], at Four Sisters Farm with Nancy Gammons. This is Sarah Rabkin. Nancy, I'm going to start with a basic background question: Where and when were you born?

Gammons: I was born in Fresno, California, in 1943. I just turned sixty-six.

Rabkin: Happy birthday. And where did you grow up?

Gammons: In Fresno. I went to Fresno High School, Fresno State College. I graduated with a degree in Spanish, not knowing exactly what I was going to do, except I had fallen in love with the language and spent some time in Spain.

Rabkin: How did you fall in love with Spanish?

Gammons: [Sighs.]

Rabkin: Did it have to do with growing up in the Central Valley?

Gammons: Maybe. The language was fairly prevalent at that time, and that was back in the fifties and the sixties, early sixties. I took Spanish in high school. I just loved the flow of it, the rhythm of it, the phonetic purity of it. When you make a sound in Spanish, that's the way it's presented. It's so clean and, I don't know, I just loved it. I did well in it, so I majored in it, and was able to spend some time in Spain, and so got a degree in it, which at the time didn't seem like much, but it's been a good thing for me over the years, because I've used it a lot and developed it a lot. Then it was a fairly simple thing that I had, but in working in farming and with the farmers' market in Watsonville, and now one of our daughters is living in Spain, I use it a lot.

Falling in Love with Compost and Organic Gardening

Rabkin: How did you get interested in organic agriculture?

Gammons: Well—I became a hippie [chuckles] in the sixties, and— Oh, I *know* how that happened. I found the *Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening* by [Robert] Rodale. I was spending a night at a friend's house, and I just opened it up to "Compost." He was the most poetic man, and he was talking about—*within the deep recesses of the compost pile, this is happening...* I felt the same way that I did

about Sp[anish]. I fell in love with it. The romance of it was so great, and I just knew then that—

And growing up in Fresno, I was sick a lot. Conventional agriculture has a strong hold in Fresno. I had strep throat, pneumonia, Valley Fever, all these things that could have been brought on by pesticide drift, [though] I don't know. I knew that organic farming was the only way that we were going to get things back on track.

Rabkin: So where did you take that knowledge?

Gammons: I started having a garden every year.

Rabkin: Where were you at this point?

Gammons: Oh, all over the place. I would start a garden and then have to move, start another garden and then have to move. I lived in Corralitos. I lived in Big Sur, [and in] Carmel Valley.

Rabkin: What brought you out to the coast from the [Central] Valley?

Gammons: It was not direct. After leaving Fresno, I went to Southern California, to San Clemente, and then decided I wanted to come to Northern California and started up the coast. Those were my hippie days. I had a Volkswagen bus and

just started up and ended up in Big Sur, that was my first stop. That was in 1970, and that's when I first started gardening, at Esalen Institute.

Rabkin: What was your relationship to Esalen?

Gammons: I was just on the staff, just working there. Nothing dramatic. But the soil there is incredible, and so that was really my first gardening experience. And then I lived in Corralitos for a while, met my future husband, Robin, and we lived in Carmel Valley for a while, all the time gardening, because he's a gardener too. We moved to northern New Mexico and did the same thing, and by the time we came back, he knew that he wanted to farm, and I said, "Let's do it." So we did it.

"Let's just do it": Starting Four Sisters Farm

Rabkin: Did you have any important mentors or teachers or trainers along the way?

Gammons: I wish I had. No, we were self-taught, and consequently— It's a tough way to go, because we've made a lot of mistakes. I think we would have done it more effectively and efficiently had we not done it that way.

Rabkin: When you think about those mistakes, do any stand out in your memory?

Gammons: [Exhales through her pursed lips.] I think we would have been better at crop rotation. I think we would have been better at business planning. (laughs) The way I've approached everything in my life is in kind of a romantic way, so consequently the business aspect of it came after the fact. I wish I had had more of a head for business and made a business plan and done a spreadsheet and figured out cash flow and all that sort of thing. But then again, maybe if we'd done that, we wouldn't have done it. I don't know. [These are] some of the things I think about when I'm just sitting and thinking about my life, because we've been at it for over thirty years, so you learn a lot in that length of time.

Rabkin: Is this property the first place you landed after you and Robin decided that you wanted to farm?

Gammons: No. We rented a place in Prunedale, which is in north Monterey County. He started farming with a friend in the hills out behind Watsonville, and we were fortunate enough that his father bought this land for us in 1977. It was marginal pastureland. And that's what I mean: If either one of us had taken any kind of class in sustainable ag, like at UCSC, we would have known to get a better piece of farmland. But we didn't know, so we thought: We can do this.

Rabkin: How many acres?

Growing Kiwi Fruit

Gammons: Five. And we put in the kiwi—

Rabkin: What made you just decide to start with kiwi?

Gammons: Robin and his dad wanted to do it. Robin's father was a very adventuresome guy, and he loved the idea of doing something different. He had read about kiwi fruit, and it was right at the time when kiwi was being brought in from New Zealand by Frieda Caplan.¹ She had to change the name from Chinese gooseberry to kiwi. So we thought, let's get in on the beginning of this. It had just been started being grown in Chico, so we were able to get plants from Chico, and that's how we started. They took about four years before we had a crop. So to keep things going, Robin planted cherry tomatoes and zucchini. I was raising children, and we were raising crops, and that's how we got started.

Rabkin: You said that Robin's father helped you buy this piece of land. Do you remember what it cost back in 1977?

Gammons: Twenty-five thousand dollars.

Rabkin: Do you have a sense of what it would cost now?

Gammons: Right now, I don't know. The piece next to us, which is almost ten acres, five years ago or six years ago went for—[pause]—\$490,000? But I don't know. The land prices around here were so inflated, so it's kind of getting back to what it ought to be, I think. All our children are grown now, and we want them to be able to live around here and have something. If property values had

stayed what they were, it wouldn't have happened, but now they're looking at—it's a possibility to them. They're teachers.

Rabkin: And how did you acquire the financial capital needed to get started farming once you had the land?

Gammons: We didn't. And that's another reason why it took us so long. Robin's father helped with the original cost of the kiwi orchard. As far as the other things, we never had a tractor until a year ago. We always had a rototiller that Robin inherited, an old Troy-Bilt rototiller. We never hired anybody. We just did it all ourselves.

Rabkin: Just the two of you.

Gammons: Just the two of us.

Rabkin: While you were raising, eventually, four children.

Gammons: Four children. We would buy seed, and chicken-manure compost, and chicken manure, and irrigation equipment, a little bit at a time, a little bit at a time, a little bit—and that's how we did it.

Rabkin: Were you borrowing to do that, or only spending money when you had it?

Gammons: No, only spending money when we had it. We didn't really start borrowing until we had to put our kids through college.

Rabkin: Oh, boy. [Laughs.]

Gammons: Actually, no, that's not true. We started borrowing when they hit the age where they needed to fit in, I guess—you know, clothes-wise and—and they needed a car because we're quite a ways from school and there's no bus—you know, on and on. But that was about twenty years—our oldest daughter is thirty-six, and our youngest daughter is thirty, so they were in junior high, I guess, when I got my first credit card.

Building the Topsoil

Rabkin: I've read that you started with about maybe three inches of topsoil on this land. Tell me about building it up and where it is now.

Gammons: We did. It was about three inches [of] topsoil. I'm not even sure we had that much. And little by little, by—because we didn't weed extensively, what we would do with the rototiller is work everything back into the soil, and because we used a piece at a time, everything else on it was fallow. Then we would work that in and work that in and work that in. So now, in the front field, which is our first place, we probably have close to twenty-eight to thirty inches of topsoil.

Rabkin: Wow.

Gammons: You can see it when you come down the driveway. The field goes up like that. [Demonstrates.] From the driveway, itself.

Rabkin: So there's a rise now, a significant rise that's all composed of new topsoil.

Gammons: Yes. Humus-y topsoil, which is a really wonderful thing because we're in a sandy belt, but underneath that sand is a layer of sandy hardpan. It's very, very interesting soil. It's really marginal, so we needed to build up the topsoil. Our first crops weren't all that great because they didn't have a sustainable soil structure, and now they do. The greens Robin grows out there are gorgeous because of that.

Rabkin: Were you growing cover crops?

Gammons: No, we were allowing the weeds to be cover crops. We couldn't afford the seed for cover crops.

Perfect Climate

Rabkin: What are the advantages and disadvantages of this location for farming, in terms of climate and other conditions?

Gammons: The climate is just about perfect for many, many things. It rarely gets over eighty degrees. It will get down to maybe twenty-five in the wintertime, which is a perfect chill for the kiwi and for other fruits. There are about four to

six weeks in the winter where things will actually stop growing because of the light factor and the cold factor, but we're coming out of that already, and so we'll start in again. We can grow greens all year 'round here, whereas inland a little bit more, it would be too hot. We did once rent some land in Gilroy and could not grow arugula or mustard and these things there, because it was too hot. We have a friend who grows out near Pinnacles [National Monument], and he sold his land to a fellow who tried to grow those greens, and it just didn't happen. It's just too hot. So it's perfect for that. We can do it all year 'round.

Rabkin: Do you get much ocean fog?

Gammons: Up till about maybe ten in the morning, and then it burns off.

Rabkin: How many miles are you from the ocean?

Gammons: Thirteen, directly, as a crow flies.

Rabkin: So you definitely get less of that fog—

Gammons: Absolutely.

Rabkin: —than the people on the coast.

Gammons: And we have hills in between that block it.

Rabkin: You mentioned your children. There are four daughters, yes?

Gammons: Right.

Rabkin: And were you able to raise that family on what you were making from the farm, or did you have to take night jobs?

Gammons: We both did other jobs. I substitute taught. Robin worked for Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, delivering produce to them during their summer months. We would take on different jobs, just to keep our income up.

Labor

Rabkin: And what did you do, what have you done about labor on the farm? At first it was just the two of you working.

Gammons: Right.

Rabkin: Did that eventually change?

Gammons: That eventually changed. Right now we have three mostly full-time guys here: Antonio, who has been here for, let's see—how old is he now? He's thirty-three. He's been here almost fifteen years.

Rabkin: Full time, year 'round?

Gammons: Pretty much. Right now the hours are fewer, but we're able to keep them on full time, or keep them on year 'round. And then his brother, Raul, and then their friend Chino. For a while it was just one guy, then we needed two guys, and now we're at three. We couldn't do it without them. Antonio's been here long enough that he knows how Robin likes to do things. He knows what comes next. He lives here with his wife and kids, and it's a perfect arrangement.

Rabkin: So you provide housing for him and his family.

Gammons: Yes.

Rabkin: And the other two as well?

Gammons: No, no, because we don't have a big enough place. If we had more acreage, we could. And even though this is zoned agricultural, it's kind of semi-residential, and we really don't want to attract a lot of attention to ourselves with people saying, "What are they doing there?" Already we've had complaints about the bees that we're keeping. This is what happens to marginal farmland that is so close to residential [areas]. People love the *idea* of living near farms, but they really don't in practice. We're finding that out with our next-door neighbors. But we're in San Benito County, and I talked to our ag person, and she said, "First of all, you're zoned agricultural, and that's very important for San Benito County. And secondly, it's illegal to kill bees in the state of California, so you're covered." And I said, "Okay, good."

Rabkin: Have you had problems with neighbors actually trying to kill your bees?

Gammons: No, they just complain about them.

Health Insurance

Rabkin: Interesting. What have you done about—if this isn't too personal a question—health insurance for your family?

Gammons: We haven't had it. We never had it. What we did about it is we prevented it as best we could, and we were very, very lucky there were no broken bones. There were no injuries. There was no illness. We just ate well, and avoided antibiotics if we could.

Rabkin: None of your children had childhood emergencies?

Gammons: No. No, not a one. We were extremely lucky. Now I have Medicare, and Robin could have had insurance all these years because he was in the Navy, and he didn't know until two years ago that he had veterans'— So we're both covered. And our kids are covered now because, of course, they're teachers. Well, three are teachers. One lives in Spain. But they all have medical insurance, finally. But they're still fine. Everybody's fine.

Rabkin: Do you know what your employees do about health coverage?

Gammons: [Exhales through her pursed lips.] No, because we can't provide it for them. But so far they've been very, very, very lucky.

Storing and Ripening Kiwis

Rabkin: Let's come back to the farm, itself. You mentioned the kiwis, and I know there are some interesting aspects of storing and ripening kiwis. Could you talk about that?

Gammons: Sure. We don't put anything in cold storage. The first year we had a crop, we did put it in cold storage. We rented some space in Watsonville. And not knowing anything at the time, we stored them in with apples, and what we found out is that apples ripen kiwi, which has turned into a good thing because we store them on-site, on the farm. We have a large trailer that goes with the truck, just the trailer itself that we store the kiwi on. We have an old milk truck that we started with. And when we want to ripen some for the farmers' market, we bring in apples or we have our own apples, and we use those and ripen them with the ethylene gas that comes off the apples. So that's how we're able to keep it totally organic.

Rabkin: So did you have to deduce this from observing that when the kiwis were with the apples they ripened faster?

Gammons: We deduced it by the mistake of putting them in cold storage our first season with apples, and we found out that they ripened them. So our whole crop, which was very small that time, ripened.

Rabkin: And you figured out that it was because of the proximity to the apples.

Gammons: Yes. A farmer told Robin that, an apple guy. So Robin thought, hmm. Because we hadn't started taking the kiwi to the farmers' markets yet, but as soon as we did, we realized that we— See, when you pick kiwi, you pick it all at once, and you pick it after the sugar content is high, is where you want it to be. The reason that kiwi is sweeter grown on the Central Coast is the same reason that apricots from Hollister are better than apricots from the Central Valley, because they have a slower, longer ripening season, so the sugar content builds up. So we pick it when the sugar content is right for kiwi. But it all has to be picked at the same time. If you let it go through the winter, it will soften on the vine, but it will lose its quality. Pears are the same way. You have to pick them before they're ripe. And then they go into storage. If we allow them to ripen on their own, it'll take till April or May to happen. They would have been perfect for the ships, for preventing scurvy, because they would have stored.

For the farmers' market, people want fruit they can eat right away, so we ripen them little by little for the farmers' market, which is a real guessing game for Robin because he has to try to predict how much to put in the ripening room for the farmers' markets, figuring out what will sell and what won't. So that's how we do it.

Rabkin: How do you and Robin share the work of the farm?

Gammons: At this point in my life, I do very little outside work. Originally I would work with him side-by-side, planting, picking, doing everything. And then, as I got older and [our] kids got older and all that, I would still do a lot, especially when we started growing flowers, because that was my project. I wanted to do flowers. I still pretty much decide what flowers we're going to grow and so on. But I don't cut them; I don't bunch them anymore; the guys do that. I used to do all that. So at this point, I'm doing largely the bookkeeping, paperwork, I make labels for things. I step in and pack when he needs it, and so on.

Selling at Farmers' Markets

Rabkin: And you do the farmers' markets?

Gammons: Yes. We used to do more farmers' markets. I would do some, and he would do some, but now he and I have decided we'll do a couple of them together, and then that's pretty much it. And then other people do the distant farmers' markets. Our daughter Jill goes to Ferry Plaza in San Francisco, and Antonio's wife, Lupe, goes to Berkeley twice a week, and Menlo Park. We used to do all those. He used to do all the Berkeley— I used to do San Francisco, Menlo Park and Santa Cruz. It's exhausting.

Rabkin: So how many markets are you doing, all told, now?

Gammons: Seven a week.

Rabkin: Wow. So Santa Cruz and Watsonville, a couple of Berkeleys, the Ferry Plaza—

Gammons: Menlo Park, and we go to Monterey Peninsula College on Thursdays, but that's during kiwi season only.

Rabkin: And tell me about your other markets for your produce. Do you sell elsewhere, other than farmers' markets?

Marketing to Grocery Stores

Gammons: We sell to the Rainbow Cooperative Grocery in San Francisco. (I love that grocery store.) We sell to New Leaf in Felton.

Rabkin: Just the Felton one.

Gammons: Just the Felton one.

Rabkin: How did that come about?

Gammons: Well, we used to sell to Real Foods in San Francisco. We started out selling our flowers up there, on Stanyan Street, and so we got to know all the folks that worked there. And then Bert [Brown], who was one of the produce

people at Stanyan Street, came down to manage the Felton New Leaf. And he got in touch with Robin, and so that's how that happened.

Rabkin: So it was really all about particular relationships with people.

Gammons: Yes. Have you been at the New Leaf, Felton?

Rabkin: Yes.

Gammons: Have you noticed how they display produce? That's Bert's genius. He's a produce artist, and it's beautiful. It's a beautiful display. But that's because that's what they did on Stanyan Street, I think.

Rabkin: So Rainbow in San Francisco and the Felton New Leaf?

Gammons: And—where else do we sell? Right now, that's pretty much it.

Rabkin: Tell me what other food crops you grow besides the kiwis.

Growing Leafy Greens

Gammons: We grow the greens. We grow two different kinds of arugula, two different kinds of kale, two different kinds of chard, red mustard. We grow endive, escarole, sorrel, French sorrel, two kinds of cress, sweet basil, parsley, purslane, amaranth, dandelion greens.

Rabkin: Lots of leafy greens.

Gammons: Yes, lots of leafy greens.

Rabkin: Have you been affected at all by this whole Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement that came in the wake of the 2006 *E. coli* scare?

Gammons: No. I don't even know about it.

Rabkin: Oh. Terrific. [Laughs.] Great. So kiwis and greens. Other food crops?

Gammons: Cut flowers, some herbs.

Rabkin: Are you doing tomatoes?

Gammons: No. I do tomatoes in our garden. I grow six or seven different varieties of tomatoes for the garden. We got really interested in Spanish peppers when visiting our daughter in Spain, so we've tried a couple of different varieties of that. I grow a lot of different beans in the garden, but we don't do any of that for the farm. It's pretty labor intensive. And also, there's commodity control on almost all the farmers' markets, and at this point it would be really hard to get tomatoes into it. We don't do strawberries, for the same reason.

Rabkin: Do you sell your apples?

Avocados

Gammons: At times, if we have a good crop. I forgot to mention we also grow avocados. That was supposed to be our retirement thing, and every time it freezes, if we have a really bad freeze, it knocks them back. So it's been pretty touch and go for the last few years, but we do grow some really nice Bacon and Fuerte avocados. We're actually growing more than two varieties. We have Hass, Fuerte, Zutano, Bacons. And the best ones for this area are Bacon and Fuertes. The Hass, we've had a hard time with because it's a Guatemalan avocado, and the Zutanos—they're okay, but not that great. There are Mexican avocados and Guatemalan avocados, and the Mexicans do the best here because they're a little more designed for temperate climates. But avocado is primarily a tropical fruit. It's more marginal here.

Rabkin: I've heard that they tend to do really beautifully except in years when you get a hard freeze. And then forget it.

Gammons: Exactly. That's exactly what happens, yes.

Growing Cut Flowers

Rabkin: Well, let's talk about your flowers.

Gammons: Okay. (I love the flowers.) When we first started the flowers, I was growing a lot of native plant flowers, and then my interest in flowers enlarged

from that. I've gone from trying to grow over a hundred different varieties of cut flowers, to scaling back to maybe thirty-five different varieties that do really well here, my favorites that are not too difficult. I used to do a lot of perennials, and I don't do those anymore so much because they do take up a lot of space in the field, and they only produce a short time. We used to do bucket-loads of flowers, and now we don't. We send most of them with Jill to Ferry Plaza. We maybe do fifteen buckets a week of cut flower varieties, of bunches, mixed bouquets, mostly cosmos, zinnias (I love zinnias), sweet peas, godetia, agrostemmas, larkspur and delphinium, those kinds of things. Simple varieties.

Rabkin: What are the special challenges of growing cut flowers organically?

Gammons: You know, there really are none. And that's what's so bizarre to me, that more people don't grow them organically. Growing flowers requires more time in the field. If a lettuce person is growing lettuce in their row, they need that row for fifty to sixty days. With cut flowers, it's anywhere—sunflowers are fifty-five to sixty-five days, but some cut flowers are up to a hundred days, so it's taking up more space. I know that Lori Perry of Blue Heron [Farm] started growing a lot of flowers. She's doing a great job. But they have, like, fifteen acres, so she's designated maybe four or five acres just to cut flowers.

The way we are, with five acres, we can only do, like, maybe less than an acre of cut flowers. So we have to be very specific about what we're going to grow. That's one of the reasons why I'm not experimenting anymore, because we just can't afford to take the space for it.

Gophers, Deer and Other Pests

Rabkin: What kinds of pest problems do you have on the farm, and how do you deal with them?

Gammons: We deal with gophers all the time, so we have rodents. Deer can be a seasonal problem.

Rabkin: Are you fenced for deer?

Gammons: Partially, partially, but not the whole thing. But we do have a couple of dogs. And we will dust crops with blood meal because [deer are] vegetarian animals, and they do not like the taste of it. If we have to. If we find—for example, Robin saw that before it started raining that the godetia had been hit by the deer, so he got a bag of blood meal and dusted it with blood meal, and that stopped it, because they won't eat it anymore. Now that the grass is growing, they'll pretty much leave it alone.

We used to have certain problems with *Diabrotica* [Spotted Cucumber Beetle, *Diabrotica undecimpunctata*], which is that green ladybug-type thing. But we rotate all the time, so in that process, you tend to keep pests down. It's monocropping, never changing what you grow, that will encourage pests, and we just don't do that.

Rabkin: How do you deal with the gophers?

Gammons: Trap them. I don't do it. I do not set traps. I'm afraid of 'em. I don't like 'em. If I have a gopher in the garden, I'll say, "Robin, there's a gopher in the beans," and he will go out and set it. Fortunately, he doesn't mind doing it, and he'll go out and set the traps. He's pretty successful with it.

Rabkin: I saw a couple of cats on the way in. Do they help at all?

Gammons: They do, but they're—you can't depend totally on a cat to do it. [Chuckles.] As much as I love them. They earn their keep because they're cute and I love them and they're cuddly and all that. The big black guy—he catches a lot of rodents, but he also catches a lot of birds and stuff like that. Cats are cats, and they're going to do what they're going to do.

Flower Trials

Rabkin: Before we leave the flowers completely, tell me about the flower trials that you've done with Seeds of Change.

Gammons: Ah! That was very, very lovely and fortunate. One of our employees several years ago was a young woman, who was actually just here this weekend, named Micaela Colley. Micaela came to Santa Cruz, before she had finished her education, from Oregon, and started working with us on the farm. Terrific woman. And loved working with the flowers. She went back to Oregon State, got a master's degree, and went to work for Seeds of Change as their farm director in New Mexico. And because she was in charge of seed selection, she talked to me

about trialing the flowers for them. So we did, and it was really a great thing. We tried a lot of different varieties. We found some really wonderful things that worked. Micaela left Seeds of Change, I think three or four years ago, went to work for the [Abundant Life] Seed Foundation in Port Townsend, Washington. She's into gathering open-pollinated seed and saving that. We just saw her. She was down for Eco-Farm [the Ecological Farming Association conference], and she came and stayed overnight with us.

Rabkin: And what came of those trials?

Gammons: We found some wonderful varieties. I had started developing my own sweet pea seed, and she took that, and I don't ever know what happened to that. They just did their studies, I submitted my ideas on them, and that's what came of those trials. [Laughs.] I don't know.

Inputs, Machinery, and Irrigation

Rabkin: Do you use compost or any other inputs from outside the farm?

Gammons: We no longer use compost. The reason we don't use compost is because it requires spreading [which] is a really difficult thing, and the fertilizer content is not as great as it could be. So what we use is a pelleted organic fertilizer from California Organic Fertilizer. It's called 7-5-7, and it's a preplant, and we work that in. Sometimes we top dress with it. But it works for us really well.

Rabkin: And machinery. You mentioned the rototiller that you guys inherited, and that you recently acquired a tractor?

Gammons: We did, two years ago.

Rabkin: Has that changed your lives?

Gammons: Somewhat. It opened up the very top of the hill, which has been problematic because we're on a steep hill. It was pretty wild up there. He's made the rows up there work with the tractor. But everywhere else, we've designed the rows, they're semi-permanent rows, designed for the rototiller, so they're that wide. The tractor won't work on them.

The reason we have semi-permanent rows is because of the way we irrigate. We have a raised mister system, so that instead of a drip tape on the ground, everything is on a riser, and it's a fairly firm tube with a mister on it, a 180-degree mister, and that's how we can grow the greens so well. We can start them from seed in the field, we mist it, and that gives them enough moisture to germinate. So we don't have to start things in a greenhouse; we can start them in the row.

Rabkin: Do you get a lot of evaporation from the mister?

Gammons: No, because it's either at night or first thing in the morning.

Rabkin: And what is your water source like here?

Gammons: We have two wells. PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] is very expensive, and we're talking now about putting in some solar panels. We've been wanting to do it for years, but it requires a cash outlay that we haven't had. But we're getting ready to do that, and so we will be totally on-site.

Rabkin: So currently you're paying a lot for the electricity to pump.

Gammons: Right.

Rabkin: How deep are your wells, and how much do they yield?

Gammons: They're shallow agricultural wells. They're sixty-foot wells. So all the irrigation that we do has to be done in intervals with a downtime. We'll do an hour [of] irrigation and then a downtime of two hours so it can recharge—one hour, down two; one hour, down two.

Rabkin: Have you seen any changes in the water availability since you settled here?

Gammons: No, mainly because we're hitting such a shallow water table that nobody else is using it. Everybody's gone a lot deeper.

Organic Certification

Rabkin: Why did you choose to become certified?

Gammons: We knew that it was a good marketing tool. We knew that we needed that kind of affidavit for some people to prove that we were organic. And what we started finding out when we started doing farmers' markets is that there were people who would maybe say they were organic but weren't, and so we needed that kind of proof because we were. We've always been. So we needed that backup.

Rabkin: So you're certified through CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers]?

Gammons: Yes, and we have been since 1987.

Rabkin: And how well does the certification process work for you and for other farmers you know?

Gammons: It's not a problem for us. In the beginning, we had some problems with CCOF. I bought a bunch of delphinium starts because I couldn't start them in the greenhouse and at the time it was impossible to get organic flower seedlings. I put them in the front field, and they took our whole front field out of certification because I had used non-organic seedlings. So we had a big fight about that. [Laughs.] But otherwise, except for stuff like that, we've done—you know. I recognize that we're kind of resistant. It took us a while to recognize that

it's best for the overall good. So we do what they need for us to do. We're going to do it anyway.

Rabkin: And the expense isn't prohibitive.

Gammons: The expense is great.

Rabkin: It is?

Gammons: Yes. And it's become greater. More and more people are coming into organics, and from what I understand, the initial cost now is really high to become certified. So I'm glad we did it when we did it.

Rabkin: So the annual renewal is not as big as the initial—

Gammons: It's about 450 dollars a year for us.

Rabkin: Did you have to re-transition that acreage that the delphiniums took over?

Gammons: No.

Rabkin: Oh, good.

Gammons: I just took them out.

Rabkin: We talked about your paid employees, but I didn't ask whether you have apprentices or interns.

Gammons: We don't, for a number of reasons. We're out here in Aromas. If we were closer to Santa Cruz, it would be more workable. We don't have housing for people, and that is a big thing for interns. And we're so not social, and it requires that kind of sociability.

Rabkin: Do you do any sort of educational programs on the farm at all?

Gammons: Occasionally we do. We will be open to doing that. We did it with ALBA [Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association]. We've done a couple of on-farm things with them. We were one of the farms for the Eco-Farm conference a few years ago, for the farm tour. We've had children out here walk through. And we'll do it. If somebody brings me a suggestion, we'll do it, yes.

Rabkin: Do you enjoy that?

Gammons: Yes and no. I enjoy it once it's happening. I don't look forward to it until it's happening.

Rabkin: Did you ever consider a CSA [community supported agriculture]?

Gammons: We actually have considered a CSA, and we're considering it now, but we would have to do it with another farm or two. We'd have to do it with at least one to two other small farms.

Rabkin: For the sake of diversity of crops.

Gammons: Exactly. And our daughter Jill is actually thinking about putting that together right now. So, yes, it may be in the works.

Rabkin: Did your daughters work on the farm as they were growing up?

Gammons: Absolutely, they did. And that's probably why they're not doing it now. [Chuckles.] They all did. They all picked squash, they all picked kiwi, they all did it all. Yes. They're really, really good kids, with really good work ethics, and I think it's because they worked growing up.

Rabkin: And at the same time, they decided for the most part that they didn't want to make it a full-time career.

Gammons: Pretty much. Lucy is our oldest. She became a first-grade teacher. She's working harder than I could ever work, doing that. Jill is second. She has a child who's one [year old], and she has a degree in psychology. She was going to go to nursing school, and now she wants to develop the CSA because she loves the connection to the farm. Dusty lives in Spain. She has an MBA and works for a company who does consulting with third-world countries [in] commerce and

economics. So she's doing that and loves it and will never move home, I'm sure. And Premma teaches a third grade bilingual [class] in Salinas and is working [hard].

Rabkin: The farm is named for the four of them?

Gammons: Yes.

Rabkin: So it wasn't named until all four of them had been born.

Gammons: That's right. Premma was born in 1978, and that's when we named it.

Loving to Farm

Rabkin: Tell me what you like most about farming.

Gammons: [Exhales through her pursed lips.] Oh, there're so many things I like about it. I love the independence of it. I love having my hands in the dirt. I love other farmers. I love the community of farmers. I love working hard. I love knowing at the end of the day that I have more to do the next day. It gives me a feeling of self worth to work as hard as I do. And it's real. It's solid, and I love it. I love providing food for people. I love being at the farmers' market and talking to people about what we grow.

The Community of Farmers

Rabkin: You mentioned the community of farmers. Are there any individual farmers who have been especially helpful or close to you over the years?

Gammons: My next-door neighbor, Pamela Mason, has Cole Canyon Farm, and she and I are very good friends. I love the folks from Blue Heron (we hardly ever see each other), Dennis Tamura and Lori Perry. But we've known each other for almost thirty years. Sandra and Ken from Greensward [Nurseries]. We've known each other for almost thirty years. It's not that we're close friends, but we have a great respect for each other. I love Dirty Girl [Farm], because they're such good growers. Joe Schirmer is such a good grower, and such a sweet guy. Ronald Donkervoort from Windmill Farm, who's here from Holland, he's so interesting. What I find is that farmers are really intelligent, bright people, and it's a really solid community. I like the women that work at Route One [Farms]. I like Darlene Mora of Mello-dy Ranch. I could just keep going. Judy Nagamine of Nagamine Farms. We know that we're all working really hard. There's no— [pauses for a moment]—there's no posing. Yes. It's very real. It's honest.

Rabkin: Yes. You are all so busy on your own pieces of land. What kinds of occasions give you opportunities to see each other?

Gammons: Well, tomorrow night Ristorante Avanti is having a farmer appreciation dinner. We will see each other then. That's one of the reasons why I like the farmers' markets, because we see each other at the farmers' markets. We

are right next to Dirty Girl at three different markets, and so we've all gotten to know each other: the wives, the babies, the husbands, all of that. Sometimes I feel like a grandma for Joe and Miranda because I knew them before they got married. Now they've had a baby, and their baby is the same age as our grandson, and so it's this ongoing connection, and it's gorgeous, and I love it.

Rabkin: How about connections with local organizations? We talked a little bit about CCOF; Eco-Farm, OFRF [Organic Farming Research Foundation] or any of the agencies, the Farm Bureau, Natural Resources Conservation Service. Are there any organizations or agencies that have been especially helpful to you?

Gammons: [Pause.] Not really, mainly because we don't join a lot of things. We have been members of Farm Bureau one year in San Benito County. The most help we've gotten is from the ag commissioner's office in San Benito County, and that's been very helpful. Through UC Extension in Watsonville, we've had good information and good contacts. CCOF has been helpful. But mostly it's through the network of farmers that we learn things.

Other Aspects of Farming

Rabkin: Are there any aspects of this work that keep you up at night?

Gammons: Yes. I'll wake up in the middle of the night, worrying about whether we can pay bills or not. That keeps me up. But otherwise, no.

Rabkin: And so far, so good?

Gammons: So far, so good. We've taken on debt over the years, but now we're managing to pay it back, pay it off, and that feels pretty good. But our kids are grown, so—

Rabkin: You got them all through college.

Gammons: Yes. Not all married yet, but that's up to them—I mean if they want to be or not.

Rabkin: If you had it to start over, what would you do differently?

Gammons: I would have gone to school for this. I would have taken some classes in business and figuring out that sort of thing, just the bones of the thing. If I had life to do over again, I probably would have approached it from a more solid ground and a less romanticized version of things, but I don't know if I can do that because I am who I am.

Rabkin: Do you think that the romantic streak has hurt you in any way?

Gammons: I think it's a kind of rose-colored glasses way to look at life. I think that life is better looked at head-on, so that you know how to deal with problems when they come up. But romance is a lovely thing. [Laughs.] I think we all need a little of all of that.

Rabkin: (laughs) Do you have any funny memories of the farm?

Gammons: I'm not a very funny person, so— [said in dry tone] Oh, yes! I've slid practically down the hill on my butt, walking down the hill on the grass and it'll be wet. My feet will go out from under me, and I'll just start sliding. We've actually thought about putting our skis on and skiing.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Gammons: Our kids and our dogs have loved playing in the mud. Sometimes we'll just start laughing about things. Like, at the farmers' market it's very entertaining.

Rabkin: All the characters you meet?

Gammons: Yes, yes, and being a character ourselves. You can't really take things too seriously.

Rabkin: What are the most significant changes you've witnessed in the local food and farming scene since you began farming?

Gammons: A lot more people have entered the organic market, on huge scales. I don't even think about that much, and the reason I don't is because I have a belief system that allows me to think that everything is going to work itself out. I'm kind of an optimist in that way. And what I've noticed—for example, we're very small. Almost all the farmers we know are very small, and so we use everything on a very small scale. [Some larger organic farms] were using this

liquid fertilizer that got found out to be—it was not organic, but because we're small, we never even got near it, so we came out of that okay. I really believe in cause and effect in life and that if you do the right thing, it's going to work itself out. It's going to be okay.

Rabkin: How do you unwind or relax or refuel?

Gammons: [Exhales through her lips.] Well, we haven't had a vacation in two years. That's normally how we do it. We drink a beer in the evening when Robin comes in, not every night, but that's one way to do it. We have a beer together. We fix dinner together. We take Sundays off. We take naps if we need them. But look, we're in our sixties at this point. We don't take as many trips as we ought to, but we're planning to go somewhere this year. We'll either go to the Rockies or we'll go to Mexico. We haven't figured that out yet. Robin plays music. I knit. We have a couple of dogs that we take for walks every morning. But because we don't have to be at a job at a specific time, we can find pockets of relaxation. We eat lunch together every day. We have a weekly "date night."

Rabkin: What are your hopes and plans for the future of Four Sisters Farm?

Gammons: Realistically? I hope to get out of debt. I hope that we can hang onto the farm until we die. I hope we can keep doing it. I hope that our guys can keep in there and make it sustainable so that we have a comfortable place to be. I hope we never have to sell it.

Rabkin: Have you thought about transitioning the farm beyond when you and Robin can farm? Do you imagine somebody maintaining it as a farm?

Gammons: I haven't thought past that. I really hope that we will have it to give to our kids when we die, and they can do what they want with it.

Rabkin: So they may or may not to keep it as a producing farm.

Gammons: Exactly. By then, Antonio will be in his—you know, he'll be way up there, so— I want to be able to provide a place for him and his family to grow, and to be here as long as they need to be here.

Rabkin: What advice would you give others interested in starting their own small organic farms in this area?

Gammons: First of all, I think that farming is more of a calling than a career opportunity. If you're called upon to farm, I think this is about the most perfect place to do it, especially organically, although I know that it's opening up in the rest of the world. But we have the climate here and the support system. The hard part is getting into farmers' markets because they're pretty sewn up. I would say: Hang in there, learn all you can, go to school, and pay attention.

The History of the Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers' Market

Rabkin: Can we talk about farmers' markets?

Gammons: Sure. Yes.

Rabkin: So let's talk with your involvement with the early days of the Santa Cruz Market. How did that come about?²

Gammons: The Santa Cruz Market was formed when the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 pretty much decimated parts of downtown Santa Cruz, and people were not going into downtown Santa Cruz. So the Downtown Association in 1990 wanted to form a farmers' market, and they invited several of us to be part of that. We thought, this is a great opportunity. We had started farmers' markets three years before that at the San Francisco Alemany Market, and then the Berkeley Market, and so we thought Santa Cruz would be a great opportunity and it's local. It started on the old Ford's [department store] parking lot and then moved to Pacific Avenue, and has been there in that location, I guess, for a really long time. The Downtown Association wanted to close it down in 1994 or '95, and at that point the farmers got together and said, "We're going to continue on." We formed the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Market, and that's what happened, and it's been there ever since.

Rabkin: Why did the Downtown Association want to close it down?

Gammons: I'm not exactly sure. Farmers are not easy, I guess. And maybe they thought it wasn't bringing enough people downtown, it wasn't working for what they thought it would. I have no idea. But it became income-producing for farmers, so we weren't willing to let it go.

Rabkin: And are you still involved administratively with the Santa Cruz Market?

Gammons: No, no.

Rabkin: When did you leave?

Gammons: Several years ago. I was on the board of directors off and on for a while, but, no, I haven't been involved for about at least five years.

Rabkin: So you were there long enough to be witness to at least the beginnings of the tension between the city and the contingent of folks who were playing music and hanging around at the farmers' market.

Gammons: (laughs) Oh, absolutely.

Rabkin: What was your perception of that brouhaha?

Gammons: Honestly, I think that the city causes its own problems. The city *seems* to (because I'm just witnessing this) but the city seems to allow certain things to happen that they don't like. And then they decide they don't want them anymore, but it's already become part of the community, and then they decide to do something about it, but it's almost too late at that point. I think that they need to maybe plan ahead on these things. If they don't want a drum circle, they should have decided that before they started having drum circles.³

Rabkin: Yes.

Gammons: But Santa Cruz is Santa Cruz. It's always going to have a personality like it is. You either have to let it happen or not. But I don't think you can go in afterwards because it's just too resistant to that kind of thing, and it will cause problems.

Rabkin: Yes. Are there ways in which you felt the city might be able to support the farmers' market more effectively?

Gammons: The city has never been that supportive of the farmers' market once the Downtown Association let it go. It costs the Santa Cruz Farmers' Market a lot of money per year to operate that with city permits, with police presence, with—on and on and on. I manage the farmers' market in the City of Watsonville. It doesn't cost us anything, because the city completely supports the farmers' market. That's not the case in downtown Santa Cruz. It's viewed as an income-producing vehicle, I think. And it's also viewed, I think, by the city of Santa Cruz as problematic—with the groups, with the music, with the drummers and so on—that it brings “an element” in. Well, the element is going to be in Santa Cruz regardless of the farmers' market.

Rabkin: It sounds like two really different models, Watsonville and Santa Cruz.

Gammons: Absolutely.

The Watsonville Farmers' Market

Rabkin: So tell me about the history of the Watsonville Farmers' Market.

Gammons: The Watsonville Farmers' Market started in the year 2000, and it was started by the Watsonville Downtown Association in concert with the city of Watsonville. It was about redevelopment, because the city of Watsonville is an area of low income, so they wanted to bring in a farmers' market. The manager that they hired—neither she was happy, nor was the city happy. I knew a couple of fellows who were on the board of directors⁴, because they were ex-farmers. I saw them at a restaurant in Watsonville, and we were talking about it. I said, "I'd love to give it a try." So they came to me afterwards and said, "Well, you want to meet with the board of directors and see how that goes?" So I did, and gave them my vision of the way I saw it and so on. We started with grant money, and it was very, very touch and go for a really long time. But now it's on its feet. We no longer have grant money. We are pretty much of a social service market. We take WIC [Women, Infants and Children Nutrition program] stamps and EBT [electronic benefit transfer]. It accounts for a lot of the income from the farmers.

What's happened is that the Watsonville market has become more of an incubation market for new Latino farmers in the area. We also developed a section in the Watsonville market of non-agricultural ethnic and regional foods, because people from Mexico would come to me and say, "I need help. I need to find a way to make some money." And I'd say, "What do you do?" And they wouldn't have a farm. They'd say, "I cook." "What do you cook?" I could see

that this was a primary thing, providing food. And then I saw, okay, people will come downtown to get some good regional food. So we started developing that with the health department. They'd get the health permits, do the whole thing right. So now we have Oaxacan food, Michoacan, Salvadorian, all this different kinds of food. And we've gotten tables and chairs so people can sit down with their families and eat, and it's not expensive. It works. For Watsonville, it works.

Rabkin: And it's bringing in a lively population of customers?

Gammons: Absolutely. The Latino population of Watsonville, the last I heard, is about eighty percent. So we knew that we had to provide something that made people feel comfortable and at home. So that's what we're doing.

Rabkin: How many vendors do you have?

Gammons: Last year we had thirty-five. We had twenty farmers and fifteen non-ag. Ninety percent are Hispanic. We also have a public service section for non-profits, to provide information.

Rabkin: So do you speak a lot of Spanish in your job?

Gammons: Yes.

Rabkin: And are there vendors trying to get into the market?

Gammons: Yes.

Rabkin: Do you have a waiting list?

Gammons: We've actually given up on the waiting list because it's full. People have not dropped out of the market, except seasonally. We lose farmers this time of year and there are some agricultural products we would like to bring in, but nobody's dropped out of the non-ag section in over five years. So we've given up that part of the waiting list. The ag waiting list, I keep up. But I also know—like, I got a call from this guy, an olive company, and I [thought], you know, this may not be a good fit because his product might be a little too high-priced, and then he'll be disappointed and he'll drop out. Or the same with, like, a gourmet olive oil may not work.

Rabkin: Not for your clientele.

Gammons: At least not yet. It might down the road.

Rabkin: Do you have a commodity allocation control system similar to what the Santa Cruz market does?

Gammons: Only in my head, because it stayed small for so long. But last year I started thinking, I better find a commodity control program. I know a woman who now works for the San Benito ag inspector's office, who designed the

commodity control program for Cabrillo [Aptos Farmers' Market]⁵, so I'm going to talk to Donna about getting that program.

Rabkin: Do you have paid staff?

Gammons: We have one fellow, Jesus, who started off in the high school program the very first year. He was a senior in high school, and now he just graduated from San Jose State. He's doing this part time. He sets up our signs, he brings the tables, the garbage cans, and then he comes and closes down for us.

Rabkin: You mentioned a high school program?

Gammons: When we first started out, there was a high-school apprenticeship program.

Rabkin: With Watsonville High?

Gammons: With Watsonville High, but they were paid. They were not unpaid volunteers, and we couldn't afford to keep it up because it was using grant money that we couldn't—

Rabkin: Where did that grant money come from?

Gammons: USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture].

Rabkin: And you still get financial support from the city.

Gammons: Only in waiving of fees. They waive permit fees. We do pay for the portable bathroom, but that's about it.

Rabkin: Do you have close working relationships with other farmers' market managers in the area?

Gammons: One of my friends is Catherine Barr, who runs Cabrillo, but that's because we've known each other for years and years.⁶ She's helped me a lot. She's one of the best market managers I've ever known. She's efficient, and she is really good at her job. I know Lori Hennings, who used to manage the Santa Cruz market and now manages the Menlo Park market. Dexter Carmichael, of CUESA [Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture], Ferry Plaza [Farmers' Market], is, I think, one of the best market managers. Nesh Dhillon of Santa Cruz and I talk regularly. How he does that, I'll never know. It's a huge job, and he does a beautiful job with it. I would never want that job.

Rabkin: [Laughs.] You're in an interesting position of being both a farmer and a farmers' market manager. I'm wondering how your experience as a farmer affects your approach to managing the market.

Gammons: I do it from a farmer's approach, so consequently the farmer comes first. Always, always. And I will work with the farmer all the time. They pay a very low stall fee at Watsonville, just enough to keep things operable, our

insurance paid and so on, because I know how hard farmers work, and I know how hard these new Latino farmers are working, and I want to make it as good as possible for them. And I really want to encourage them to become organic. They're so entrepreneurial, and they see the importance of that. That, to me, is where the education begins, and that's how all these children will become healthy. So it's really important to me that we do that.

Rabkin: These new Latino farmers that you're seeing selling at the market, are they coming up through ALBA, or how are they coming into their own farms?

Gammons: Some of them are coming up through ALBA. Some of them just come up to me, and they say, "I'm growing—*¿Habla Español?*" "Si." "I'm growing—" And I say, we can either use it or we can't use it. Normally they'll start out growing *fresa* [strawberries]. We have too much of that. But what's happened is, a lot of times someone will come to me and say, "I grew up in Watsonville. My husband and I, or my wife and I are farming this. Can we sell it?" And I'll say, "Yes, you can," and I'll let them in. Ana Rubalcava—she and her husband are flower growers, and they've been in there since the first year. Patricia Rodriguez and her husband do strawberries under plastic, and they've been there, and she also has a bakery. These people work so hard, and I really love to have them in there. They feel a connection to Watsonville.

Rabkin: So do you have to work with a tension between your desire to accommodate those farmers and your need to control the number of people selling a given commodity?

Gammons: Absolutely. It requires all the tact I've got, which isn't a lot [chuckles], but I'm getting better at it.

Rabkin: And without a commodity control plan at the moment, you're doing it sort of intuitively.

Gammons: I know it in my head. I know that we can afford—like, Esther and Rudy Vasquez have strawberries, Patricia Rodriguez has strawberries, Jose and Berenice Garcia have organic strawberries. Everybody's bringing organic strawberries now. We cannot bring in another strawberry person. That's three strawberry people for a small market. That's all we can do. So I will say, "Okay, if these folks sell out, I will call you," and I will write them down. That kind of waiting list, I will keep.

Rabkin: Does the influence work the other way? Does your experience as a farmers' market manager inform your farming practices at all, or your own marketing practices?

Gammons: Not really, because honestly, Robin and I will talk things over about choices. But ultimately it's his choice, because once I started being a market manager, that was kind of my career. I love it, and I want to be able to put a lot of mental time into it. So I'm not farming as much as I did, and he's making a lot of the farming choices.

Rabkin: How many hours a week, roughly, do you spend in your job as the market manager?

Gammons: About thirty to forty.

Rabkin: Wow, so it's close to a full-time job.

Gammons: Yes. But it's fun, so it's not really a job. [Chuckles.]

Rabkin: What are the main tasks involved in running the market, for you?

Gammons: Talking on the phone all day long! Talking to other market managers, working out things with the WIC office. Working out things. A lot of it is—it's just management. It's talking to Cabrillo College about parking. The Cabrillo Watsonville campus is adjacent to our market, and they just took over a parking lot some of our vendors were using. It went well. We can continue to use it.

It's keeping our relationships healthy with the city of Watsonville. It's computer work. It's bookkeeping work. It's hands-on work. It's finding out who's going to be there and who's not going to be there. It's setting up the street. Right now, we're trying to initiate a more sustainable environmental policy as far as plastics go, so that's going to require a lot of education. So it's a lot of odds and ends.

Rabkin: Yes. Are you selling your own produce there?

Gammons: No. We sometimes bring our kiwi there. And that's up to Robin to do. The smaller kiwi he puts in one-pound bags that we sell for a dollar at the market. So sometimes we'll bring a box of that to the market. It does well. The hard part about is that somebody has to be there, and I can't always do that.

Rabkin: Yes, you'd have to clone yourself.

Gammons: Exactly.

Rabkin: What do you enjoy most about running the market?

Gammons: I enjoy not being the farmer. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Gammons: There's no financial pressure. I love the people, the family there. I'm very fond of the Mexican-American families. And I see how hard it's been for them, living here, and so anything I can do to provide— That's what I like about it.

Rabkin: Do you get to see expressions of pleasure or appreciation from them?

Gammons: Yes. For example, one of the women who has a food stand there came to me. She's probably my age. It's hard to tell. She came to me twice, and she said to me, in Spanish, "Help me. *Ayúdame.*" I said, "What do you need?" And she

said, "I need a way to support my family." I said, "Well, what do you do?" She said, "I cook." I said, "Okay, this is what you need to do, and then you can have a space here." And she did. She pulled it together, and her son came to me that year, and he put his arm around me, and he said, "Thank you so much." [Pause as her voice cracks with emotion.] They do well. They do really well. And they make a food that nobody else has, because they're from very way deep in Mexico. That makes me really happy. That happens again and again and again, not exactly that way, but I can see that economically we're making a little bit of a difference, and it's good enough. When I was young—and I tend to be really idealistic, so when I was young, I used to think you had to do big things. I no longer think that. You just have to do little things and just kind of chip away at it.

Rabkin: It makes me think of that Mother Teresa quote, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

Gammons: Yes. And she also said (that has always stuck with me) "You have to feed people's bodies before you can deal with their spirit."

Rabkin: Yes. Are there any big headaches about running the market?

Gammons: Yes. [Laughs.] But they're not unsolvable. They have to do with competition. But they're not really difficult. I view them as character-building. For example, somebody may try to bully me into doing a certain thing, and I just won't do it because I know what I will do. For example, "The market cannot afford this competition of two flower growers." I'm saying, "Well, I'm going to

allow them both in there. I know that the market can support that.” I also know that direct marketing regulations do not allow for exclusivity, that competition has to— Too much, of course, is a problem, but two of one thing is not a problem, depending on the commodity. Two avocado people could be a problem.

Rabkin: What do you see as the most significant challenges to the health and success of farmers’ markets around here?

Gammons: [Pause.] I think that the management or the people in charge have to make it be about the farmer and not about bringing people to the downtown. If the goal is to redevelop, I don’t think you should use a farmers’ market to do that. I think if the goal is to bring a good farmers’ market to the community, that in itself will bring people to that area. But that has to be the focus instead of doing it through the use of farmers.

Rabkin: What brings the customers to the Watsonville market? Is the availability of the foods? Is it the Latino farmers? Is it prices? Is it the availability of social programs so they can pay with WIC funds?

Gammons: I think it’s all of that. We’ve worked with WIC for a long time. WIC now comes to the farmers’ market and gives out the booklets at the farmers’ market, so we’ve seen an increase in that. The Second Harvest Food Bank comes to process EBT, so there’s been that collaboration. We’ve worked with CAFF

[Community Alliance with Family Farmers] a lot to develop a Healthy Families network.

Rabkin: What does that mean?

Gammons: Well, CAFF works with getting children to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, and they got a grant to do that. So they work with Second Harvest Food Bank and with us to give funds to the kids to come and shop for fresh foods and vegetables for their families. But all this has been just in the last few years. Originally, people would come to the farmers' market just to see, "what's going on here?" We had to start with pretty low prices because of the economic nature of Watsonville. But over the years, we've found we can bring in more plants, we can bring in more ornamental things, more decorative things. We can have honey there. We can keep enlarging the farmers' market. Because not only are we bringing in the Hispanic population, the Latino population, but there is a growing segment of the non-Latino population in Watsonville that is coming to the Watsonville market. So we want to keep that going.

Eventually, I would like to see all, if possible (but that may be impossible) of our farmers having organic produce on the table, because I know that will bring more. The other thing I'm noticing is that a lot of the farmers from Santa Cruz are starting to farm land in the Pajaro Valley, so people are becoming less afraid of Watsonville, and more comfortable with it, and more comfortable with the diversity of it.

Rabkin: Interesting.

Vision for the Future: An Organic Pajaro Valley?

Gammons: Yes. Again, my idealism. Watsonville could, in another twenty years, become almost completely organic, or the Pajaro Valley could. [There's already] Dick Peixoto of Lakeside Organics⁷; Dirty Girl is farming out by Pinto Lake; Steve Pederson has High Ground Organics. Yes, it's great.

Rabkin: Nancy, is there anything that we haven't touched on, that I haven't asked you about, that you'd like to address?

Women in Agriculture

Gammons: [Pause.] There's a large segment of women in agriculture in this area that's largely gone unnoticed because we do it with our spouses. Agriculture has historically been a male thing—it's sometimes the farmer and his wife—but I'm here to tell you that the wife is working hand-in-hand with the husband, and deserves that equal time.

Rabkin: It's a sign of those times, isn't it, that nobody said to me, "You should really interview Robin." They said, "Nancy Gammons."

Gammons: [Laughs.]

Rabkin: I think [that was] partly because of your management of the Watsonville market, but maybe also because there's some growing awareness about women. Your name came up as more prominent.

Gammons: That's great. Well, you know, two women started Dirty Girl Farm before Joe took it over, but they just got so exhausted. It's hard work.

Rabkin: Have you ever run into any anti-woman prejudice, any kind of misogyny around being a female farmer?

Gammons: No. None, none. Nita Gizdich is very prominent in agriculture. Sylvia Prevedelli is very prominent in agriculture. Women in the agricultural community recognize each other. Betty van Dyke.⁸ We all recognize each other. It's only outside of the ag community that it's still that way.

Rabkin: Great. Anything else?

Gammons: No.

Rabkin: Thank you so much, Nancy.

Gammons: Oh, thank *you*.

¹ See Sally Koris, "Frieda Caplan Sold the U.S. on Kiwi Fruit and Now She's Banking on More Exotic Edibles," *People*, March 8, 1982, Vol. 17, No. 9, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20081620,00.html>

²For more discussion of the history of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets see the oral history with Nesh Dhillon, Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Market manager. See also the oral histories with Jeff Larkey and Ken Kimes. All of these interviews are in this series.

³ See the oral history with Nesh Dhillon in this series for more on this drum-circle controversy.

⁴ Sam Earnshaw was one of the board members who talked with Gammons. See the oral history with Earnshaw in this series.

⁵ See the oral history in this series with Catherine Barr, manager of the Monterey Bay Farmers Certified Markets, for more about the Aptos Farmers' Market.

⁶ See the oral history with Catherine Barr in this series.

⁷ See the oral history with Dick Peixoto in this series.

⁸ See the oral history with Betty Van Dyke in this series.