



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BUNKER

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIBER: KEITH LUDDEN AND LEIGH ANNE KEICHLINE

Keith Ludden: We are in Palermo, and we're talking with John Bunker about his Super Chilly Farm. Can you tell me what year you were born?

John Bunker: I was born in 1950.

Keith Ludden: 1950, OK [Some handling noise, changing a setting on the recorder] So you were born in 1950.

JB: I was born in 1950.

KJL: And where was that?

JB: In Boston.

KJL: In Boston, okay. Now were your parents from Boston?

JB: Yes.

KJL: And were they first generation?

JB: No, they were not. No, they'd been there for a while.

KJL: Where did they come from?

JB: Mostly from the Boston area. A little bit of New York, but mostly from the Boston area.

KJL: What kind of work did they do?

JB: My mother was a stay-at-home mom, and my father was a doctor.

KJL: Particular kind of doctor or a general practitioner?

JB: He was an anesthesiologist.

KJL: (Wind noise and pause to adjust windscreen) So where did you go to school? In Boston?

JB: No, I went to—part of my elementary school I went to in Concord, and then in 1960, when I was nine, we moved to California and I did the rest of my elementary school, junior high, and high school in the Bay Area.

KJL: How long were you in California?

JB: Eight years.

KJL: How did you get to Maine?

JB: I had and have a friend from Massachusetts, who I met a couple of years after I was born and we spent a lot of time together during the school year, but never in the sum-

mer. He did his thing and I did my thing in the summer. When I moved to California, his family invited me to come to their summer place, which was an old camp in Belgrade. I had never been there, because as I said in the summer he would go his way and I would go my way, but we were very close friends and I decided I would go, which I did. I was eleven, and I spent a week or two, I don't remember how long, with my friend and his family, and during those days of my first trip to Maine, I decided that I would live here permanently as soon as I could.

KJL: And how old were you then?

JB: Eleven. That was 1962. So I knew early and I don't know why I knew, but I knew. I wasn't analytical then, I was young, so I don't think I analyzed my decisions or analyzed the circumstances of facts, I just made decisions.

KJL: What was it that you liked about Maine?

JB: Well, everything. At that age you know or you don't know. You know you like it, or you know you don't like it, put it that way. And I knew I liked it. I knew I wanted it. I knew this was where I was going to go. I didn't say, oh, the pine trees were beautiful, or I loved the lakes, or—I mean I did, but I didn't analyze it, I didn't know why. It didn't matter why. Why was irrelevant. Right? You just know you're going to do something, but why? Who cares why? Especially at that age.

KJL: You studied at Colby College, is that right?

JB: After that first summer, I spent the majority of every summer—most of every summer after that, for the next ten years or so in Maine, and when I was contemplating going to college, I decided to apply to Colby. I knew nothing about Colby. I knew no one.

I think I knew one person who had been there, but I didn't know anything about Colby. I just knew that it was near where I wanted to be in Maine, and that if I went, I would get four years in Maine, so it was a no-brainer. So I went to Colby.

KJL: And what did you study?

JB: I studied English, art and music, and I did the minimum requirement of everything else, but that was really what I did.

KJL: And was there a particular area of literature that you focused on?

JB: No, I just decided that once I moved out here I was not going to have so much time to read because I was going to be doing things outdoors most of the time. And so, I thought, okay, you've got four years, why don't you read a lot? So I read a lot for four years, and I still read, but I was correct. I spend most of my time outdoors, so I don't read nearly as much as I did when I was at Colby. So I didn't read a lot of contemporary work, I mostly read all sort of classics, we'll say, and I also studied art and studied music because I knew that those were the things that would bring me pleasure throughout my life and I was correct. They do.

And I was smart enough to know that although I could learn a lot about art and music on my own with no help, I would benefit from meeting people that were very into it, who could introduce me to things that I might miss otherwise. So I did that, and I had some good teachers and they introduced me to some excellent stuff that I may or may not have discovered on my own. I figured, hey I've got these four years, I'll do all this stuff, I'll learn a lot about art, I'll learn a lot about music, and I'll read a lot, and I also was able to live in Waterville. Back then many students lived in dirt cheap apartments and so I was one of them. So I got to live in Waterville, which was great. I really enjoyed it, and

studied these things that were going to be things that I knew I would keep with me for the rest of my life. So that's why I did it.

KJL: What music do you remember that you got introduced to?

JB: Some of the best stuff was the opera, and I don't necessarily go to the opera very often. I wouldn't call myself a big opera fan. But I did learn a bunch about that that was excellent. Also I would say a lot of what I would call twentieth-century classical music, for lack of better — contemporary classical music. But everything. It's probably if there was one word to describe what I was trying to do, although at the time I only sort of semi-understood it, is "history." Because I think that you can take music as an example that contemporary music, whatever it is, turn on the radio, is part of a progression, a musical progression that began really hundreds of thousands of years ago. But you can go back easily to 1920 — go back a hundred years. And look at American music, or if you want to go and think about what we call classical music, then you go back three or four hundred years, and see it evolve over time.

KJL: Do you play an instrument?

JB: Sometimes, not very often.

KJL: What do you play?

JB: Well, I say I play, quote unquote, piano. Sometimes accordion. But I don't play much anymore.

KJL: And you taught English for a while?

JB: Yeah, the day after I graduated from Colby I moved here. So that was 40, 46 years ago. I was 21. And for the next a little less than 20 years, we'll say 18 —for the next 16, 18 years, I was a kind of jack of all trades, master of none. Or jack of a few trades, master of none, or whatever. I did a bunch of different things. Carpentry, you know. Tended a co-op store. You know, different things. At one point, I did teach high school English in SAD 49 at Lawrence High School in Fairfield. I did that for two years.

KJL: Tell me about the first time you saw this land.

JB: The first time I saw this land was in the winter, in probably March or so of 1971 and we came out three of us, I think, came out here with a realtor and snowshoes. And they say you're not supposed to buy land when there's snow on it, but we didn't listen to that. Or we didn't know that that was the case. So there was snow, a lot of snow, I have vague — I have pretty good memories, actually — but we didn't walk all over the land. I think the realtor probably actually didn't even know where the boundaries were. But he got us sort of to the basic area. And we purchased it shortly thereafter, I'm not sure — you know, within the next two or three months or something.

KJL: So you snowshoed in from what point?

JB: Actually, up on Turner Ridge Road, which is, if you went past our driveway, around the corner, up the hill. And we could have driven down, 'cause it was open, but our realtor didn't want to. I don't know if he was afraid he was going to get stuck or something. But we couldn't have driven down what is now our driveway, that would have been totally unpassable, though it did exist.

KJL: And now you said you're not supposed to buy land when there's snow on it. Why is that?

JB: Because you don't know what's under the snow. But we did, and here I am, forty-six years later, forty-seven years later.

KJL: And so what year was that?

JB: We bought it in 1971. We had a garden here in 1971. I was not around that summer; I was working in Vermont. But I bought it with two friends, and the other two friends and their girlfriends all had a garden here, although it was not here on our property. It was on our next-door neighbors' property. They were dairy farmers. We started to try to dig a garden down here. This was just woods, all woods. There was only the smallest of clearing, maybe about a, between about a fifth of an acre, a sixth of an acre, there was a clearing. And it wasn't here; it was over there. And we started to try to dig a garden, and they came down and said, you can't do this here, this is not possible. And we didn't know. We thought you just dug in the dirt, and you know, whatever. So they plowed us a piece of land on their property, and manured it, plowed it, did it all for nothing. And it was a really little nice piece of property, a little nice garden space. And we used that for several years. The first year we did that was in '71. But then it was a year later when we moved here, when I moved here.

KJL: Now, you had a couple of people with you?

JB: There were three of us who purchased the property together, undividedly. It was 180 acres and it was 45 hundred dollars. So it was \$25 an acre. And the three of us bought it undividedly in 1971. One of them lived here for three or four years; the other one never lived here. And over time eventually some part of it got taken away, got sold

off to other people. And then eventually my wife and I bought out everyone. So now we just own it ourselves.

Did you study horticulture at all at Colby?

JB: No, the only horticulture I studied was the trees in a painting maybe or maybe Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. You know, that was my horticulture training.

KJL: So how did you learn?

JB: Well, when I was a sophomore, I had a VW bus. And some other students wanted to make cider, and I had the vehicle. So they invited me to come along. It was like I was the one with the baseball bat and the glove so they invited me to play baseball. But in this case it was that I had a van. And I knew there were old apple trees. I didn't know a lot about apples at the point but I could identify an apple when I saw a tree. So we went there, a bunch of us and harvested apples, harvested a lot of apples. Well, enough to make let's say 60 or 70 gallons of cider. And that was my other introduction to horticulture was making cider in a dorm room in a college. [laughs]

KJL: So did you learn from people around here?

JB: Well, yeah. We had, we started — We had a garden; we didn't know anything about gardening. We got Rodale's book which was what everyone used back then. *How to Grow More Vegetables Than You Ever Thought Possible* —? Whatever it is. Oh, oh — *Fruits and Vegetables By The Organic Method*. I think that was what it was called. But anyway, the big Rodale book that was out back then. And so we just read that, did what he said, and the garden was great. It was fairly unsophisticated, we'll say, or easy. And then as I became interested in — and that was about the time MOFGA was getting start-

ed, Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association, and so we started attending all those things. Went to the, it was a few years, it was all beginning to happen. So there were things you could read. When I started to get interested in apples, I had gotten pretty good at picking up information here and there and sort of assembling it in my brain. That was how I did music. I felt like I had and have a pretty eclectic appreciation of music. And I didn't adopt any one mentor's or person's or anything — somebody's, well, I can't think of the word. Anyway. So what I did as far as music was concerned, you know, I liked that thing that you listened to, and that thing that they listened to and that thing that she listened to, and so forth and so on. And I didn't care if it was rock and roll or opera or jazz or swing you know or folk or country or country western. It didn't matter to me. It was all music and so I took a little here and a little there and I learned everything I could about it. Well, when I got into plants, I just used that experience of not adopting any one particular sort of version or vision of what gardening should be. But I just said "Okay, this is what I like; this is what I'm going to do." And I didn't know how to do this, so I'm going to go find somebody that can teach me how to do this. So I did have mentors in horticulture primarily people who were into apples, almost entirely. And they definitely helped me a huge amount. Although, again, it was a sort of eclectic. I picked up a little from a bunch of different people. They all helped me. They were incredibly generous with their time.

KJL: Were they people from nearby?

JB: No, not necessarily. Some, some nearby. Some it was only an afternoon that we spent together. But others, in some cases, it was hundreds and hundreds of hours.

KJL: So, how did you get interested in apples?

JB: Well, maybe it was pressing cider in college in my van, with my hallmates. They're beautiful colors, beautiful sizes, shapes, tastes. You know, they grow, they're not the

oldest trees that grow in Maine, but they grow to pretty old. And they age elegantly. So the oldest trees that I've seen are the most beautiful. They may not be the most productive. But they're the most beautiful, so visually, and the fruits are so different from all the different varieties and the history behind them — you know, back to the word “history” — that I got into the history of the varieties, where they came from, why are they named what they're named. What are they good for? Why do they taste odd? Why don't they all taste like an (inaudible)? Why should anybody grow them? Who should care?

KJL: And how many varieties of apple do you have here on the place?

JB: Well, I think maybe about 400 or 500, something like that. I should have that number in my head, but I don't. But somewhere in the four to five hundred varieties.

KJL: I noticed as I drove in, there'd be an apple tree here, and there'd be an apple tree over there. They're kind of — some of them are kind of scattered out.

JB: That's one right there. [laughs] So, yeah. Most of — we have one orchard of about 300 or so trees that at least looks vaguely like an orchard. They're in rows. You know, that sort of thing. But most of the trees that we have are just wherever we could find a space to stick them in. So, they're not — Uniformity and regimentality are not hallmarks of our landscape style. We call it like, sort of “random post-modern.” [laughs] Whatever that means.

KJL: Was your wife one of the three people who originally helped you purchase the land?

JB: No. It was two male friends of mine from college.

KJL: Tell me how you met your wife.

JB: Well, I had a, had and have a number of friends from my childhood. One of them met my wife in college and then he lived with her and her boyfriend, later to become her husband, we lived with her and her husband for a number of years after college. He was like their perennial housemate. And it was through him that I met my wife.

KJL: Now when you came here to scout this land, what were you looking for?

JB: I don't think we were, I was looking for anything. I was just out, like, for a drive on a Saturday, whatever. We met up with the realtor probably at his office which I don't know where it was or maybe he told us to meet him here, I don't know, I don't remember. But I was, "Okay, let's go. Let's see it." I wasn't really looking for anything. [laughs] I didn't even know what I *could* be looking for. Not a question of what I was looking for or what *should* I have been looking for, I didn't even know what I could have been looking for. I was just lookin'. I was young! I was twenty! [laughs]

KJL: And tell me about the first year. You said you raised a garden.

JB: Well, the first year I was still attending Colby and no one lived here. The second summer, which was 1972, there were generally about five us here. We lived in wall tents which we borrowed from a summer camp, cooked outside, and built two small log cabins. We didn't even know if we had logs that would work for the cabins. That was how basic our knowledge was. We had to have a friend of ours who was an old logger, who was probably in his 80s then, come out and tell us if we had the logs. He drove in, in his big ole Buick or whatever it was, got out, took one step out of his car and said, "You've got the trees," and then got back in the car and was ready to go. [laughs] We didn't

know! So we built two log cabins. They were small. They were roughly 16 by 20. And mostly two of us worked on them all summer. But everybody, all five, there'd sometimes be friends would come. There'd be six or seven people, friends from college or whatever — not people from around here. We didn't know anybody. And we had a garden again; that would've been our second garden. That was up at our neighbor's. And we then spent that winter, the three of us. I was living alone in one of the cabins, and one of my friends and his girlfriend lived in the other cabin. The cabins were about fifteen feet apart, which, I'm not really sure why we did that. But anyway. They were about fifteen feet apart. And we didn't plow the driveway. So we snowshoed in and out, walked. We were way off the road. Almost a half mile down a little dirt woods road, basically. So we had no power, no electricity at all, no running water. I think my friend had a propane stove that he cook on, that they could cook on. Although they could cook also with wood. And I cooked entirely with wood. The buildings were small. They both had lofts, where we sleep in the lofts. When it was too hot to sleep in the loft, even in the middle of the winter, because it would get really hot in there, I would sleep on the couch, downstairs, so to speak, until I woke up and I was cold, and then I would go up the ladder and sleep in the loft.

I had no radio or way of listening to music, so I just made up songs that were sang, stuff I knew. Whatever. But I wrote, or whatever, made up many songs, because I spent so much time by myself working outside and had no entertainment other than myself. We had no phone. Our phone was about a half mile away, maybe a mile away, at our neighbors', the people that had given us the land for our first garden. After about six or seven years we gave them back their land. We never owned it. And ever since then all the garden's down here. And now we have quite good soil down here. Well, we've been gardening here now for over 40 years. When I needed to make a phone call, I could go to my neighbor's and just go in, just walk in. Make a call. They were happy to have me do it. And when I got a call, they'd come tell me. That was how few calls I got. I got a call about, I don't know, once a month, maybe. And it was usually when somebody died. Those are the ones I remember them coming down and telling me.

So eventually we built more the next summer, 1973, we built three more cabins, and other people began to live here, at least, now and then. Somewhere along there, one of them got a radio and so in the winter when everybody was gone mostly and it was mostly just me and me and my two friends that lived next door, I would go borrow the radio wherever it was in one of the cabins that was empty and use that radio, and started a bit to listen to the radio. But it was still, it wasn't until about ten years of being here that I got a phone. By then, maybe it was 12, 13, 14 years, by then I had started Fedco Trees. I couldn't run the business without a phone. A lot of times, if our neighbors, if it was late at night, I didn't want to walk into their house, use their phone, I'd go to the phone booth in downtown Palermo next to the post office. But the phone booth, you know you go to the phone booth and make a call when they're not home — you just drove ten minutes, or walked down the driveway and drove, and it's like an hour to make a call, and then they're not home. Nobody had answering machines. So, you couldn't leave a message; it just rang. So eventually the other people at Fedco got ahold of me and said, "We're going to pay for a phone, you have to have a phone." [laughs] I think I did pay for the phone, I don't know if Fedco paid for it, but anyway, I finally got a phone.

The first couple of summers there could have been at times, ten or twelve of us here. We still didn't know many, really any people from around the area. You know, maybe we'd met somebody. Wasn't until maybe three or four years after being here, that I began to meet other people that were doing more, some version of the same thing. And so that was about the time, at first it was mostly populated with — when people would be here, it would be mostly like my friends, friends from college who lived in other parts of the country and were coming up sort of like an adventure as opposed to like let's move to Maine. So within two or three years, people were in graduate school or had moved so far away that they weren't going to come here or whatever. So at that point my friendship base switched from being sort of connections from college and long out of state to people who I didn't know yet, I was just meeting, whose connection was to Maine. So that altered well, the circles that I traveled in, the people that I knew. I still have those friends, many of them, who used to come visit, way back when, and who now

live in, all over, different parts of the country. Some don't even live in the States anymore. I still have those friends and they're old, old friends. But we don't see them very often. You know, we see our friends up here. So at a certain time your friendship base or whatever sort of shifts to wherever it is that you live, basically. Not very profound [laughs]. You know, after a couple of years, instead of having this little insular scene going here, it became a place where our connections because not out of state but with other people that were doing similar things. [laughs] I've said that before.

KJL: Had you built a cabin before?

JB: When I was six or so, in the woods near our house in Massachusetts, somebody had cut a bunch of trees down. They were probably white pine and they were cut into pieces about, we'll say maybe six or eight feet long. Probably six feet long. And if I had to guess — at the time I didn't know why they were there, and I don't think anybody even talked about it. They were just there. And my guess is that somebody, whoever owned that patch of woods had paid somebody to just come in and thin it. Or something. And these were like logs that they had just cut and there was not enough value to them to sell or anything. They were probably six or eight inches in diameter. And so they probably just cut them up into lengths and just left them. And some of the older kids who were probably eight or ten had made these logs into little cabins. And the door in the cabins were probably about a foot and a half high, or maybe two feet high. So you had to crawl into them. These were, like, funky. There were no nails, there were no notches, there were no — It was something that kids created. And I got to sort of participate in it, not because I was a builder, but because I was a really young kid and came along while they were working on it. As I recall, they were very cool. So that was my first log cabin, something that the local neighborhood kids built.

But as far as building houses myself, or cabins, I had not built anything out of logs before, and I did however, by that time, I had worked for various carpenters as a summer

job. And so I had a sort of a basic understanding of how to build things, you know. I had been working on houses and for the age I was, I probably had kind of a modest amount of experience. Enough to be able to build something.

KJL: Did you build this house?

JB: No, this house we hired essentially friends to build it about ten years ago or so. But all the other buildings here I built or I built with friends.

KJL: When you first came here, what did you hope to accomplish?

JB: I just was wanting to put some distance between me and, we'll say, suburbia. I grew up part of the time in essentially suburbia. And I was interested in seeing if there was another option. So that what I was up to. I'm not a big fan of suburbia. For me — it could be really great for somebody else, but it just wasn't my thing.

KJL: Were there some skeptics sometimes? You told them, "I'm going to go find this piece of land and go live on it." Were there skeptics who kind of shook their heads or anything like that?

JB: There were no non-skeptics. [laughs] I don't think anybody thought I was actually crazy. They didn't want to commit me. Well, maybe they did, but they didn't say they did. But I don't think that I had any fans for what I was doing. [laughs] It was a lonely adventure. My parents, they're both deceased. You know, this was a long time ago, and I was young. But my parents became fans, and so did my siblings, and so did most of my friends. But back then, there must have been somebody who thought it was a good idea — but I don't remember who it was. [laughs] Maybe there was no one. I mean,

there were some people that tolerated it and people didn't abandon me, but I don't think anybody thought, "This was really great, what a good idea!"

KJL: How long did it take before people started coming around and seeing the value in what you were doing?

JB: Oh, maybe about 35 years. [laughs] That's a long time! Yeah. Yep. Better late than never. [laughs]

KJL: You have an apprenticeship program on the farm, is that right?

JB: Yes. MOFGA, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association..... has had an apprenticeship program for about thirty years or so, twenty-five, thirty years, thirty years? Thirty-five years? I don't know. And so we here on the farm, myself alone, myself and my ex-wife, and myself and my wife have had a number of apprentices over the years. They come and they live with us. Most of them come through MOFGA, but we found some through other sources, whatever, venues. They come and some stay here for a month, some stay here for six months, four months, years, you know. It really varies. Sometimes we have one. Sometimes we have several. That also really varies. Some really want to build things, some want to just garden, some want to work with apples. They vary, and the time we spend with them, the number of years and the number of months varies. But essentially they come to learn and their commitment is to a certain number of days a week, and they kind of give it their best, and that they're most cheerful and friendly, and you know, nice to be around. And in exchange, we try to do the same for them. And we also teach them as much of what we know as we can and help them to find teachers or mentors or whatever for the things that we can't help them with — in the hopes that when they leave, they will have picked up some tools to help them to find whatever it is that they're passionate about in life.

KJL: Were there ever times when it got really hard and you wondered if it was worth it?

JB: Yeah, like every few days for years and years and years. Maybe even every day sometimes. Yeah. For a long time I lived without a regular paycheck. Once I started Fedco Trees and once that for years, you know, that was not even a steady paycheck. But eventually that developed and grew to the point where it was a steady paycheck and you know, that's really convenient. And you know, when you don't have that, not so convenient. You know. And for me, I made a personal decision to do this thing to live in a, for Maine, a somewhat isolated spot, in a way that was different from most of my contemporaries, although — well, whatever. And not to the sort of graduate school, professional thing that probably would have been my parents' choice. And I made this decision to do something different, and anytime you make that kind — anytime I have made that kind of decision — it's, the decision-making process itself is kind of challenging. There's a pull to question the decision. And even now every once in a while I think about it and I think about you know, "Was this the right decision?" And you know I don't agonize over it. It's sort of too late for that. But I do sort of review whether this was the right thing to do and part of what this has been, what this has meant, is that many of my contemporaries have spent a lot of time traveling around the world, traveling around the United States, having several different sometimes very interesting jobs in different locations, meeting people from other cultures. I've done almost none of that. And I have done some, but I went for sometimes close to a year without leaving the state. And in some ways, my experience is, well, a lot of what was my experience is dictated by that decision to stay on one tiny piece of property. And I missed a lot. My friends got married on the West Coast; I didn't go. I missed their wedding. Another friend of mine, a real close friend got married in Paris. You know, this was 35 years ago, whatever. I didn't go. I could've gone. I didn't go. I can remember when a close relative of a close friend of mine, really close people, she died very old. She died, and I didn't go to her funeral. And you know that's not, a lot of the times, a lot of the days, I was here, there was nothing really going on [?] other places. I did miss some really — You know, because I didn't have the money, I couldn't go anywhere.

But on the other hand, I'm climbing in trees that when I planted them they were two feet tall, and now I'm climbing in them. And I'm looking at the same trees, the same gardens, I've planted garlic in the same place, in the same garden, you know, rotating it around, whatever, you know, for I don't know, 40 years, whatever. And you can't you can't get to know a person deeply without many years together, I don't think. And you can't get to know a piece of property together deeply without many years together. Now, for most people in the modern world, that getting to know people is hard enough. Getting to know property is mostly impossible and most people don't even really particularly care but it is an amazing experience to be in one place for what is now, you know, it's 2/3 of my life in one spot and it's a fun experience. You know, it's — yeah, it's not for most people. And I don't necessarily think it should be, you know, or anything. But it's pretty amazing to just do it like year after year after year after year and you just see things and they grow or they get cut down or they get moved or you fix something or you add a little here or plant this there or whatever.

I think that with things that have to do with horticulture, agriculture, whatever you could be a genius but you can't learn it in a year. It takes a lifetime. And one of the great things about it is every time you screw up, you know, unless you die, you can do it again next year. So, but you gotta wait. It's not like the next time the ball comes down the court you can, you know, block it better. Well, it's true, but the next time the ball comes down the court in the garden it's gonna be next May, so you just missed a year. Now, the beauty of it is, it is going to come back and you're gonna get a chance to plant the peas right next year or whatever. But the bad thing is you gotta wait eleven and a half months to do it right. But, you can't write it down. I mean, you can write some stuff down; we do write a lot down. I write a lot, a lot down. But you also have to begin to go through the process of assimilating it into your sort of "who-you-are." You know, so you can't forget to plant the peas because you just can't forget to plant the peas, because it's in your — it's in you, that at a certain time you plant the peas. And you just know that you're gonna plant the peas. And you don't have to like, "Oh, yeah, what did I

forget to do this spring? Darn, I forgot to plant the peas!” So you write a lot down but you also, it becomes.... and it’s also nice that the year is so cyclical. There’s nothing linear about it. You know, it does mean that if, you know, the corn wasn’t very good this year you’re not going to get it again for another year — that’s a bummer! But the other thing is, you are going to get it in a year. [laughs] You could do it better next time, because you’re going to be here! You know, it’s not like, “Okay I’ve got this year to do the garden. I’m going to the ‘garden thing’ for a year here and see what’s that all about and learn how to do a garden. It’ll take me a year.” You can’t do that. I mean, you could do it and have fun and learn some stuff but if you want to get good at many of these things, you know, you’ve got to be there for years and years and years.

KJL: Now, you’ve worked with a lot of heirloom apples now, is that right?

JB: Yes. The criteria — because apples come from seed and because so many people were planting apples from seed, the variation that was in the landscape, and really still is, is quite large and the criteria by which selections were made for the early heirloom, historic, whatever, varieties of apples, the criteria was different then. It wasn’t about another crisp, sweet, juicy, Honeycrisp. It was something else: which one made a good dumpling or baked well or dried well or made a good pie or made good sauce or whatever. And those are not the same apples as the one they sell in the grocery store. So if you want to do anything besides eat an apple fresh, you gotta look somewhere else.

KJL: How has the land changed on the time you’ve been on it?

JB: Well, instead of having an eighth of an acre or a sixth of an acre or something clear, we have about maybe 5 or 6 acres clear. It’s still a very small hole in the woods, but it’s still a lot bigger than it was. So, some of the trees — a lot of the trees within that space are now gone, they are up in smoke so to speak, burned in our stove. So some of the trees are gone. A couple of the big ole trees have just reached the end of their lives and

died. Some have gotten hit by lighting. So there are a bunch of trees gone now because of our expanded open space. And we have many more gardens, then then, we had no gardens. Now we have gardens particularly in a few locations, very concentrated and quite a bit. And also down here we have quite a few fruit trees now that have — their roots have replaced the roots of the oaks and pines and birch and maple that used to be here. So, a lot more fruit trees. More buildings. Lots of little buildings, lots of little sheds and barns and things, that weren't here of course. There were no buildings here.

KJL: And how have you changed?

JB: I don't apologize to myself so much for making a bad decision in coming here. I don't second guess myself anymore. I do think about it. I think about whether it was the right thing to do. But I don't struggle with it. I think that that it's an interesting question to me, you know, was a decision that I made many years ago, what, fill in the blank, whatever it is, was that decision a good decision to make, especially when it hugely affects the rest of your life. Whereas forty years ago I made have anxious about it or angry even or worried I think now I am glad I made that decision. I'm more, I will say, surprised, that I'm living with the consequences that I made when I was eleven. And I think Wow, I was eleven, and I made this decision. And I've playing it out for the last fifty-six years. I've been playing out a decision I made when I was eleven after spending a couple of days in Maine. Makes me think that maybe either I was an idiot or eleven-year-olds are pretty observant.

KJL: You've been pretty generous with your time. I appreciate it. Is there anything you want to point out to me that I might have overlooked?

JB: No, well, let's see. I think that there is a lot of discussion about the importance about having a mobile society and the importance of home and family and are those in conflict with each other. And we live in a funny society that is predicated on mobility

because of the demands of, especially when it was a manufacturing economy, we have that. And then the whole you know go west and all that sort of stuff. And then we have this long tradition of families in some cases being in the same location many many generations, on farms, you know, whatever. We have these two things that are sort of in conflict with each other and sort of not in conflict with each other. The way that my contemporaries for the most part, probably almost all of them that I knew, maybe not all, but most — the way that they configured their lives was I want to do something, x, y, or z, and so that's my focus. Now, I'm going to go wherever I need to go and live wherever I need to live in order to do that. And what I did was the reverse. What I said to myself was, I'm going to live here. And then I'm going to figure out what I'm going to do, in order to afford to live there. Maybe I just got it mixed up, when I was learning about life. But it turned out that what I was doing was sort of the reverse of what most of my contemporaries, if not all of my contemporaries were doing. It's an interesting way to do things. You know. It's a different — You get a different kind of perspective on the world. And I don't necessarily recommend it for everybody, but I won't necessarily say it's not a good idea. In retrospect, when I see where we are now, you know, I think it's been great. I like it. I like getting to know a place, you know, deeply, there's nothing bad about it.

KJL: Well, thank you!

JB: Okay, you're welcome!

