

Preface

The following text contains the first three chapters of a proposed narrative history of the Community Mercantile, a natural foods cooperative grocery in Lawrence, Kansas. The material for this history comes from an oral history collection commissioned by the co-op's former general manager Amy Fields and funded in part by the Kansas Humanities Council and the Community Mercantile. Approximately eighty interviews constitute the collection, now housed at the Kansas Collection of Spencer Library at the University of Kansas and at the Watkins Community Museum of History in Lawrence.

The narrative derives exclusively from the interviews conducted for the oral history. That is to say, the principal figures in the co-op's formation and development tell the history of the co-op in their own words. Speakers are identified in bold; the interviewer's words are italicized. Chapter 1 begins with a description of the various Lawrence food buying clubs, the Food Conspiracy among them, in the early 1970s and proceeds to the stories of the health and specialty foods stores—Downtown Health and Foreign Foods and the Mercantile Grocery—that operated in Lawrence during the years immediately preceding the opening of the Community Mercantile's first storefront in January of 1975. Chapter 2 contains an account of how the members of those buying clubs and the people affiliated with those stores coalesced to form the Community Mercantile. This chapter also includes profiles of co-op founders, including Molly (Van Hee) Hamaker, the store's first paid employee and manager. A discussion of the diversity of this group of founders concludes Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, after a brief account of the co-op's move in 1975 from its original storefront at 730 Massachusetts to its second location at 615 Massachusetts, the narrative shifts focus to the origins of three related businesses that emerged simultaneously with the Community Mercantile: Verbena Bakery, Ozark Cooperative Warehouse, and the Community Mercantile Credit Union.

Subsequent chapters of the narrative history, if completed, would address the following topics: the co-op's original work collective, the co-op's board of directors, Sister Kettle Café, volunteerism at the co-op, the 1977 decision to move from downtown Lawrence to 700 Maine, the perspective of the children of co-op workers, food politics, Blue Moon Ranch, the East Side Community Grocery, the second generation of work collective members, the shift from volunteerism to professionalism at the co-op, the

evolution of the natural food industry, the co-op and feminism, a series of profiles of the producers that have sold to the Community Mercantile over the years, the 1993 move from 700 Maine to 901 Mississippi, the competition with Wild Oats for the natural foods market in Lawrence, the almost complete overhaul of staff during the 1990s, the “turnaround,” Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance, and the expansion and move into the 901 Iowa storefront in 2001.

Access to the Community Mercantile oral history collection is available to patrons of both the Kansas Collection at the University of Kansas’s Spencer Library and the Watkins Community Museum of History. A nearly complete collection of the Community Mercantile’s newsletters is also housed at the Spencer Library. Published books that might be of interest to readers of the oral history of the Community Mercantile include *Dashed Hopes, Broken Dreams: Some Consumer Goods Co-op Failures*, by Art Danforth, self-published in 1980, and *What Happened to the Berkeley Co-op?: A Collection of Opinions*, edited by Michael Fuller and published in 1992 by the Center for Cooperatives at the University of California. The Center also published *The Greenbelt Cooperative: Success and Decline*, by Donald Cooper and Paul Mohn, in 1992 and *Weavers of Dreams: The Origins of the Modern Cooperative Movement*, by David J. Thompson, in 1994. *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*, by Craig Cox, is a report of the Twin Cities co-op scene of the 1970s, published in 1994 by Rutgers University Press. Warren Belasco’s *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, published in 1993 by Cornell University Press, is a history of the natural foods industry in the United States. Finally, two books that describe Lawrence during the period that immediately preceded the emergence of the Community Mercantile are *Cows Are Freaky When They Look at You: An Oral History of the Kaw Valley Hemp Pickers* by David Ohle, Roger Martin, and Susan Brousseau, published by Watermark Press in 1991, and *This Is America?: The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas* by Rusty L. Monhollon and published in 2002 by Palgrave.

Charles Brown proofread many of the interview transcripts and this text. Early on in the project, Victoria Foth Sherry provided direction and guidance. After she replaced Amy Fields as general manager of the Community Mercantile, Jeanie Wells supported the project’s completion. Tom Lewin lent his expertise as an oral historian. Albert Sellen,

the historian of Lawrence's Plymouth Congregational Church, donated the use of a transcription machine. Deron Lee, Roger Martin, and Barbara Watkins read portions of this narrative, and each of them offered advice and encouragement. Lynn Armstrong and Laurell Matthews joined me in conducting a few of the interviews. I thank these people as well as all of those I interviewed.

—Tom Kreissler

Excerpts from the Community Mercantile Oral History Collection

Jim Mayo

(KU professor and author of *The American Grocery Store*)

When you have a co-op, you really have more than a place to buy food. It is a symbol of responsibility in the community, viewed in much the same regard as a Catholic church, a Protestant church, or a synagogue. If you were to drive down church street, you would see these local places of responsibility. Although not as direct as our religious institutions, co-ops, like other businesses that strive towards providing goods for human betterment, are symbolic as well. They serve the same purpose.

Hal Sears

(co-op member since 1977, staff member from 1982 to 1986 and from 1989 to the present)

They tried to make it difficult to be a member. First of all, you couldn't just walk in and buy a membership. You had to come to a membership meeting, which meant that you had to be dedicated enough to attend at least one meeting at night. Then there were other kinds of meetings. It was like going to a church and they taking you by the collar, saying, If you want to be a member of this church, you gotta do this and you gotta do that. Today, by contrast, we're just happy to have people come in and sign the membership. Back then, we were kind of like, Well, we'll think about it, and you gotta do this in the meantime.

Kelly Kindscher

(co-op member since 1975)

Things were slower then. People visited more. The store was not as busy, and interacting was more important. You would have a philosophical discussion in the aisle with a work collective member or even with someone else shopping. Lots of talk. There was talk about pesticides and all the things related to organic food or related to any type of political or social issue. You go to the Merc now, and it's like, people are shopping. You might visit with some people who are friends, but there's not a lot of political discussion. And there used to be a lot. It was almost tiresome. You know, someone would corner you, and it was like, I don't want to hear about this radical leftist anarchist group.

Caryn Goldberg

(co-op member since 1983)

The Merc has been a place where people have played out whatever emotional needs they have in ways they wouldn't at a normal store. We wouldn't walk into Sunflower Surplus and start trying to help people conquer their fear of being outdoors. But at the Merc, people have considered it fine to use the store as a place to confront people and push them and push themselves. And it's been very effective.

Nancy O'Connor
(staff member since 1992)

I came to the Merc before Wild Oats came to town. If I was going to choose a word to describe the Merc at that time, it would be “funky.” And not bad funky, but funky in kind of a closed-community way. It was a small store. It was intimate. There weren’t sliding glass doors at that Seventh Street store. It was just a door. It was like going into somebody’s house, and as soon as you went inside, you met the person at the register. For many people it was too intimate. If you were one of the people that felt comfortable with that culture, it wasn’t too intimate for you, but if you came there after work and you were wearing a suit, you might feel like it wasn’t your place. And that was probably okay at that time, because there wasn’t any direct competition. Wild Oats wasn’t even a thought at the time.

Gwyn Mellinger
(board member from 1995 to 1997)

The co-op absolutely had to have people who were not like them come into the store to buy stuff in order to be profitable. The staff had no concept whatsoever of how to interact with the larger market base, the people that were coming in to shop. And it’s understandable. I mean, you choose to be a countercultural person because you want to counter that culture. Well, all of a sudden, the people who were countering the culture have to kiss up to the culture in order to get them to come in and buy stuff. That was just totally dysfunctional.

Dan Nagengast
(founder of Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance)

Your dollar doesn't go as far with whole foods, but I don't think that's the Merc's fault. I think that's probably what food should cost, and people should be paid more. It's a symptomatic thing. You know, we've had ten years where what farmers get paid is less than what they put into it. And then the government swoops down at the last second and throws money at them, so they do it another year. But what farmers do bears no relation to the prices that they receive. The figures I've seen indicate that Americans are paying less and less and less for food all the time, and I think the quality of it shows. It's turning into a peanut-butter-on-cheezit-crackers nation—that's the kind of crap we eat. That's what people get used to, and that's probably the way it'll go for the vast majority of people. Then there are other people that don't think like that at all. That's a minority, but it's a growing minority. Whole foods is the fastest growing part of the grocery industry.

Gabe Lewis-O'Connor
(staff member since 1998)

My uncle Andy worked at the Merc too, and at one point he coined the term, the "Lawrence 200." There seems to be this group delineated by social choices and a commitment to community. I don't know if it's two hundred people, but they show up

everywhere in different arrangements in very similar circumstances. It's hard to describe, but a lot of the people that shop at the Merc are part of the Lawrence 200. You've seen them other places. There really is a commitment and somewhat of a communal feeling, where it's a shared effort.

Community Mercantile Oral History Contributors

Jo Abbott, formerly known as Jolene Anderson, was a founding member of the Food Conspiracy buying club, which was formed in Lawrence in 1970. A member of the Community Mercantile since it was established in 1975, she lives in Lawrence and works as a design specialist for Tolar Cabinets.

Deborah Altus moved to Lawrence and joined the Community Mercantile in 1982. From 1988 to 1994, she served two terms on the Community Mercantile's board of directors. She has also written, over the years, a number of articles for the co-op's newsletter, including a regular column that focused on issues of co-op history, principles, and practices. She lives in the Lawrence area, where she now "focuses on being a mom," she writes. She is also a professor in the Human Services Department at Washburn University in Topeka.

David Barclay was the project manager for the Community Mercantile's 2001 move to 901 Iowa. He and his family live in Northampton, Massachusetts. He is a production manager for a firm making high-end architectural elements.

fran beier belonged to food buying clubs in Lawrence in the early 1970s. A longtime member of the Community Mercantile, she served on the board of directors in the early 1990s. She is a lay midwife, and she lives in Lawrence.

Dan Bentley is a longtime member of the Community Mercantile. He lives in North Lawrence, where he gardens, writes songs and novels, and works on video production and on oral histories and genealogies.

Anna Berger operated Downtown Health and Foreign Foods in Lawrence from 1964 to 1974. She employed Molly Van Hee, who went on to become the first manager of the Community Mercantile, and her store's last location, 615 Massachusetts, became the second home of the Community Mercantile in 1975. She lives in Independence, Missouri.

Hank Booth is the general manager of KLWN/KLZR. He lives in Lawrence and is a member of the Community Mercantile.

Rex Brandt joined the Community Mercantile in 1977, became a part-time worker in the early 1980s, and became a full-time staff member in 1988. He left the Mercantile in 1992. He lives and works in Lawrence.

Gregor Brune worked at the Community Mercantile from 1991 to 1997 as a cashier and a shift manager. He lives in Lawrence, where he has lived his entire life, and he is currently a student.

Suzanne Bryant is a founding member of the Community Mercantile. She was a manager of the co-op in the 1970s. Along with others, she started Sister Kettle Café in Lawrence in 1976. Currently, she is an attorney who limits her practice to adoptions of all types and

to working on stabilizing lesbian and gay families through legal documents. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her life-partner Sarah Goodfriend and their four-year-old adopted daughter, Kim, who is from China.

A member of the Food Conspiracy food buying club in the early 1970s and a member of the Community Mercantile since the mid-1970s, Jim Cooley started Central Soy Foods in Lawrence in 1978 and has been a general partner in the tofu shop since 1984. He lives in Lawrence.

Mary Coral belonged to food buying clubs in Lawrence in the early 1970s and has been a member of the Community Mercantile since its inception. She lives in Lawrence.

Robin Devine, formerly Robin Naramore, belonged to food buying clubs in Lawrence in the early 1970s, and during the 1970s and early 1980s she and her former husband operated Sadhana Flour Mill, a supplier for the Community Mercantile. She is an artist and a writer, and she gardens on her land next to the river.

From 1974 to 1980, Leslie and Betsy Evans lived at Fanshen Farm in Leavenworth County. They supplied the Community Mercantile with wheat and soybeans. Presently, Leslie, also known as Duane, teaches drawing and ceramics at Haskell Indian Nations University. Having retired from her position as an education manager at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, Betsy is semi-retired and walks dogs for a veterinarian. They live in Lawrence.

Amy Fields was the Community Mercantile's general manager from 1991 to 1993 and from 1996 to 1999. She now lives in Liberal, Kansas, with her husband and her two children. She is the executive director of a nonprofit housing organization.

marci francisco joined the Community Mercantile in 1977. She served on the board of directors during the 1990s. She and her husband, Joe, live in Lawrence, where they buy, renovate, and rent out houses. She recycles aluminum and other metal and is the space analyst for the University of Kansas.

Charlie Gardiner helped found the New Destiny Federation and the Kansas Organic Producers. He also encouraged and advised the founders of the Community Mercantile. Presently, he lives in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, where he buys and sells antiques, restores old houses, and takes care of his mother.

Gretchen Gwaltney's mother, Linda, joined the work collective in 1978, when Gretchen was eight years old. After working at Verbena Bakery during the summer of 1985, Gretchen joined the staff of the Community Mercantile and worked at the co-op from 1986 until 1995. She now lives in Kennewick, Washington, where she is a business development specialist for the Tri-City Industrial Development Council.

Linda Gwaltney worked at the Community Mercantile from 1978 to 1996. Until 1986, she was a work collective member. From 1986 to 1992, she was either the manager or the

co-manager of the co-op. She's married to Paula Schumacher and works as an accountant for a bank in Lawrence.

Molly Hamaker was known as Molly Van Hee when she was associated with the Community Mercantile. In the early 1970s, she was an employee of Downtown Health and Foreign Foods and the Mercantile Grocery. She was the first manager of the Community Mercantile when it opened in 1975 and was a work collective member until her departure from the co-op in 1983. She now lives in Walnut Creek, California, and after years of being a consultant for small businesses, this fall she is beginning a new career as a school psychologist.

Dickie Heckler worked at the Community Mercantile from 1989 to 1999. While at the co-op, he was at various times in charge of stocking and receiving, the cooler and freezer department, and the produce department. He was also a member of the board of directors from 1991 to 1995. Heckler and his wife own Brook Creek Gardeners, a landscaping company. He lives in Lawrence.

Jeff Helkenn has been a member of the Community Mercantile since 1975. He served on the board of directors during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Helkenn was the project manager for the Community Mercantile's 1993 relocation from 700 Maine to 901 Mississippi. Currently, he is a sales representative for Solaray. He lives in rural Jefferson County with his wife, Cynthia, and son, John.

Boog Highberger joined the Community Mercantile in 1979. He was a member of the Community Mercantile's board of directors in the early 1980s, and he has been a board member since 1993. He lives in Lawrence and is an attorney for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment in Topeka.

Kristy Jennings was hired to be the deli manager at the Community Mercantile in 1997, and two years later, she became the grocery manager. She began law school at Washburn University in the fall of 2001. She lives between Perry and Lawrence.

Valerie Kelly joined the Community Mercantile when it opened in the mid-1970s, and she became a member of the work collective in the 1980s. She was a founding member of the collective that started Sister Kettle Café. In 1986, she moved to Portland, Oregon, where she has been working since 1991 for the United States Geological Survey. In the fall of 2001, she moved to Corvallis, Oregon, to begin a graduate program in fisheries and wildlife at Oregon State University.

A member since the Community Mercantile's formation in 1975, Denise Kester became the co-op's volunteer bookkeeper in 1986. Eventually, her position became a paid one, and by 1992, when she resigned, she was the finance manager of the Community Mercantile. She also served on the co-op's board of directors as well as the credit union's board of directors. She now works as an accountant and lives in North Lawrence on a one-acre lot where she grows herbs commercially. The Community Mercantile is one of her largest customers.

KH worked at the Community Mercantile from 1984 to 1994. She was the grocery buyer for part of that time. She lives in Lawrence.

Kelly Kindscher became a member of the Community Mercantile in 1975 and served on the steering committee in the late '70s. He is currently a professor at the University of Kansas and a scientist for the Kansas Biological Survey. He lives outside of Lawrence.

Harry W. Kroeger, Jr., with his former wife Judy, owned and operated the Mercantile Grocery Company from 1971 to 1974. He is a retired organic chemist. He lives in Lawrence.

Mark Larson has been a member of the Community Mercantile since 1976. He lives in Lawrence and is retired.

Ken Lassman joined the Community Mercantile in 1975, and Caryn Goldberg joined in 1983, when she moved to Lawrence. Lassman served two terms on the board of directors during the 1980s, and Goldberg was a member of the board in the 1980s and in the 1990s. Goldberg has also been the president of the Community Mercantile Education Foundation. Lassman is an occupational therapist and the director of Habilitation Services at the Kansas Neurological Institute in Topeka. Goldberg is the author of *Write Where You Are* and a book of poetry, *Lot's Wife*. She directs the master's program in transformative language arts at Goddard College, in Plainfield, Vermont. Goldberg and Lassman live south of Lawrence with their three children.

Thom Leonard helped found the Ozark Cooperative Warehouse in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 1975. From 1976 to 1977, he made tofu at the Community Mercantile in Lawrence. In the mid-1990s, he established Wheatfields Bakery and Cafe in Lawrence. Currently, he works with Heartland Mills, a farmer-owned provider of organic flours and grain. He also does consulting work with artisan bakers. He lives outside of Lawrence.

Gabe Lewis-O'Connor's mother, Nancy O'Connor, began working at the Community Mercantile in 1992. He began working at the co-op in 1998. He attends Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin.

From 1993 to 1995, Dave Loewenstein worked at the Community Mercantile, managing the produce department for part of that time. He helped found the Lawrence Community Garden Project in 1993. He lives in North Lawrence and is a muralist.

Bob and Joy Lominska are longtime members of the Community Mercantile. They are founding members of the Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance, a CSA. They both teach at Lawrence elementary schools, Joy at East Heights and Bob at Hillcrest. They live and farm in southeast Jefferson County.

Diane Luber was a work collective member at the Community Mercantile from 1976 to 1982. Currently, she lives in Tucson, Arizona.

Chuck Magerl became a member of the Community Mercantile's work collective in 1976. Prior to that, he started the credit union that became known as the Free State Credit Union. He left the Community Mercantile in 1984. Since then, he has established the Free State Brewing Company and Wheatfields Bakery and Café in Lawrence. He lives outside of Lawrence.

Mark Maher is a founding member of both the Community Mercantile and the Community Mercantile Credit Union, which later became the Free State Credit Union. In the mid-'70s, he was president of the co-op's board of directors. He also belonged to the board of directors of the credit union. Until 1998, he served on the supervisory committee of the credit union, chairing it for many years. He and his wife, Alyce, live on a farm midway between Lawrence, Perry, and Oskaloosa. They both work for SRS in Topeka. Their daughter, Kate, a student at the University of Kansas, currently works for the Community Mercantile.

Michael Maher is a retired professor of biology at the University of Kansas. He is a longtime member of the Community Mercantile, and he lives in Lawrence.

Bob Marvin joined the Community Mercantile in January of 1975, the month it opened as a storefront. A member of the steering committee in the co-op's early years, he was also an officer of the board of directors and one of the co-op's first contract workers, hired to fill in for the work collective and extend the store's hours. He works for the University of Kansas library system, for which he has cataloged monographs, and he is currently working in serials receiving. He lives in Lawrence.

Nick Masullo is the general manager of Ozark Cooperative Warehouse, a food distribution cooperative of which the Community Mercantile is a charter member. He has been on the staff of OCW since 1976. He lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Jim Mayo is a professor in the school of architecture and urban design at the University of Kansas and the chair of the graduate program in urban planning. He is the author of *The American Grocery Store*, among other books. He lives in Lawrence.

Gwyn Mellinger joined the Community Mercantile in 1994. She served on the board of directors from 1995 to 1997 and was board president from 1996 to 1997. She teaches at Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, and is working on a Ph.D. in American studies at the University of Kansas. She also writes a weekly food and gardening column for the *Lawrence Journal-World*. She lives in rural Douglas County.

A member of the Community Mercantile since 1976, Tim Miller served on the co-op's board of directors in the early 1980s. He is a professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas. He is also a freelance writer and editor and lives in Lawrence.

Anne and Tom Moore were members of the Community Mercantile until they moved away from Lawrence in the early 1980s. They now live in a Quaker boarding home in West Chester, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia.

Dan Nagengast is a farmer who lives with his wife, Lynn Byczynski, southwest of Lawrence, near Lone Star, Kansas. In 1994, he helped establish Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance. He is also the director of the Kansas Rural Center. Nagengast and Byczynski supply the Community Mercantile with fresh cut flowers.

A longtime member of the Community Mercantile, Kathryn Nemeth Tuttle helped found Sister Kettle Café in 1976. She lives in Lawrence and is the director of the Freshman-Sophomore Advising Center at the University of Kansas.

From 1974 to 1975, John Newman managed Ozark Natural Foods in Fayetteville, Arkansas. While he managed the retail operation, a wholesale division split off and formed Ozark Cooperative Warehouse, which he managed from 1975 to 1976. Presently, he lives in Fayetteville and is an independent consultant specializing in rescuing troubled businesses, especially co-ops. It was in that capacity that he led a turnaround of the Community Mercantile from 1994 to 1995.

Nancy O'Connor moved to Lawrence and joined the Community Mercantile in 1986. After volunteering at the store for years, she was hired in 1992 to be the co-op's nutrition educator. She has also served over the years as newsletter editor, outreach coordinator, and marketing director. In 1999, she and others established the Community Mercantile Education Foundation, of which she is the executive director. With her husband, Jim, and her two sons, Gabe and Isaac, she lives south of Lawrence.

Becky and Floyd Ott live on their farm and tend their orchards in southeast Douglas County. She's a retired nurse, and he's a retired farmer. They first sold produce to Turner's Grocery and have sold to the Community Mercantile since it moved into Turner's in 1977.

Mick Palmer has been a member of the Community Mercantile since 1979. He served on the board of directors from 1992 to 1996. He is a carpenter, a cabinetmaker, and occasionally a teacher, and he lives in Lawrence.

Cheryl Powers joined the Community Mercantile in 1981. She was a member of the co-op's staff from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, and she rejoined the staff in 1997 as the grocery manager, a position she held until 1999. Currently, she is the director of youth ministries at Plymouth Congregational Church in Lawrence, where she lives with her husband and two children.

Dick Powers was a staff member of the Community Mercantile from 1984 to 1994, managing the grocery department for most of that time. Now he teaches at an elementary school in Eudora and lives in Lawrence with his wife and two children.

Nan Renbarger started Verbena Bakery in 1975 in the backroom of the Community Mercantile at 615 Massachusetts. In 1989, Verbena became Amazing Grains, a women's baking collective, and was located on the east side of the alley beside the 700 Maine Community Mercantile. Nan and the bakery moved with the Community Mercantile to 901 Mississippi in 1993. Amazing Grains moved into its own space at 518 East Eighth in 2000. Nan left the bakery in 1999, "to explore," she writes, her "fiber art passion." She also works at a family-owned greenhouse and garden center. She lives in North Lawrence.

Sheryl Robertson began her career at the Community Mercantile in 1981 as a work collective substitute. The next year, she became a manager and worked at the co-op until 1986. She returned to the co-op in 1990 and was on staff until 1992. She managed the deli in 1994. She graduated from BMSI Massage School in Kansas prior to moving in 1997 to Bellingham, Washington, where she is a licensed massage therapist.

A founding member of the Community Mercantile, Marilyn Roy was the secretary of the co-op's original board of directors. She was also a member of the collective that founded Sister Kettle Café and was active in the Community Mercantile Credit Union. She continues to live in Lawrence, where she currently has a housecleaning and yard-care business.

Mike Rundle joined the Community Mercantile when it started. Since 1997, he has worked at the Community Mercantile, where he has been the membership and customer service coordinator, the newsletter editor, and the front-end manager. Currently, he is a shift manager. He is the mayor of Lawrence.

Rod Runyan joined the Community Mercantile in 1975, when it was established. He served on the co-op's steering committee in the 1970s and on the board of directors in the early 1990s. He was also an interim manager for part of 1995. He managed the Community Mercantile Credit Union during the early 1980s, served on the supervisory committee during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and again managed the credit union, then called the Free State Credit Union, from 1992 to 1998. He lives in Lawrence, where he is a stay-at-home dad for four-year-old George and one-year-old Elizabeth.

Shirley Scheier worked on the Community Mercantile's management collective from 1979 to 1982. Presently, she is an artist and a professor of fine arts at the University of Washington. She lives in Seattle.

Ed Scheurich has been a member of the Community Mercantile since its formation in 1975. He served on the board of directors in the 1980s. He is a builder who lives in the Lawrence area.

Jim Scheurich helped organize and run a food buying club in Lawrence in the early 1970s. He is a professor in the Educational Administration Department and the director of the Public School Executive Leadership program at the University of Texas. He lives in Austin.

Hal Sears became a member of the Community Mercantile in 1977. In 1982, he joined the work collective as a substitute, and two years later he was hired as a manager. He served on the co-op's board of directors in the mid-'80s. He left the Community Mercantile in 1986. He returned to the co-op in 1989 and has worked there since. He is currently the supplements and health and beauty aids manager. He lives in Lawrence.

Barry Shalinsky joined the Community Mercantile in 1978 and served on the board of directors from 1989 to 1994. He has been a member of the Ozark Cooperative Warehouse's board since 1990. In 1999, Shalinsky moved to St. Louis, where he has been an administrative judge for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Presently, he is in the process of moving to Tampa, Florida, "to take a position," he writes, "with a non-profit organization as the statewide director of a program to provide advocacy services and assistance to individuals with disabilities who are seeking to enter the workforce."

Marti Siebert, formerly Marti Brill, was hired as a part-time bookkeeper for the Community Mercantile in 1993. From 1994 to 1995, she served as the manager of the co-op. Presently, she lives in Sedgwick, Maine, with her husband, Jed Siebert, and their son, Cosmos. After working for a brief time in a chandlery in Brooklin, Maine, she leased and then bought a small sail loft. She runs the business while learning the art and science of making sails from her employees.

Kelly Speight worked at the Community Mercantile from 1990 to 1997. She began as a cashier, became a shift manager, and eventually assumed the role of operations manager. At two different times in the mid-'90s, she was interim manager of the co-op. She also served on the board of directors. She currently lives in Lawrence, where she completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Kansas in December of 2001.

Patti Spencer helped organize and run a food buying club in Lawrence in the early 1970s. She was a member of the Community Mercantile work collective from 1976 to 1978. Presently, she is the associate chair for operations in the Computer Sciences Department at the University of Texas at Austin. She lives in Austin.

Dave Van Hee is an artist who lives outside of Lawrence. He was married to Molly Van Hee, the first manager of the Community Mercantile.

Dawn Van Hee is the daughter of the Community Mercantile's first manager, Molly (Van Hee) Hamaker. She works in sales and marketing for McCormick & Company and is completing an MBA in food and agribusiness at Santa Clara University. She lives in Walnut Creek, California.

Dainis Volgasts was the egg supplier for the Mercantile Grocery and the Community Mercantile for over twenty years. He works at Shuck Implement and continues to live on his farm in southwest Douglas County.

Jeanie Wells has been the general manager of the Community Mercantile since August of 1999. She lives in rural Jefferson County with her husband and daughter.

Judith Wynhausen, formerly Judy Kroeger, helped develop the Food Conspiracy buying club from 1970 to 1971. With her husband Harry, she owned and operated the Mercantile Grocery Company from 1971 to 1974. She helped organize the Community Mercantile and continued her membership in it until 1984, when she moved from Lawrence. Currently, she lives in Joplin, Missouri, where she runs a Waldorf kindergarten in her home. She teaches yoga and is also a storyteller, performing as Mother Goose.

Community Mercantile Oral History

Chapter 1

Prehistory of the Community Mercantile

Spring of 1970 university shutdown—I.J. Stoneback—shipment of potatoes from Maine—Food Conspiracy—milk run—1340 Tennessee—rationale for food buying club—Anna Berger—Downtown Health and Foreign Foods—Molly Van Hee working at Anna’s store—pyramids and pendulums—health—foreign food—end of Food Conspiracy—Mercantile Grocery—Harry and Judy—move to 730 Massachusetts—Dainis Volgasts—Molly working at Mercantile

FOOD CONSPIRACY

Jo Abbott

In the spring of 1970, Kent State happened. We felt like our whole country was going to go to war—a civil war. Many of us were completely blown away by the audacity of it.

The powers that be in the university realized that the campus could literally go up in flames if they didn’t take some kind of strong action. So the chancellor said, Okay, we’re going to suspend classes, because something’s going on that’s bigger than all of us.

You could continue to go to class. You could go ahead and take your finals and go home. Or you could stop taking your class and take whatever grade you had. And if you took the second or third choices, there were all kinds of workshops and things you could do instead of going to class.

I chose to take the grades that I had and go to these different workshops. And that’s how I met I.J. Stoneback. He was very impressive, a really neat guy. He was in a labor union for farmers. He was in touch with farmers all over the country.

This was before the Internet, so it wasn’t easy to just push a button and be in charge. People wouldn’t trust the mail. They wouldn’t trust the telephones. Somehow, the communication happened anyway. There was a network all over the country of farmers who wanted to become part of the underground sustenance movement.

We believed that the entire fabric of our society and the economy was changing because of the war and because of this civil war that we felt was coming on. The large corporations were seen as part of the war machine. So if you could get independent farmers to join together and to sell to other people in this underground market, we felt like this would undermine the infrastructure. We could get back to something more basic that we could all believe in and support.

I.J. Stoneback was a local mover and shaker, but not a chamber of commerce mover and shaker. He had been a farmer here in Douglas County forever. Very well known. He was on the county commission for a while. I think that was after this that he was elected to the county commission. A member of the Democratic Party forever. A farm union organizer. Whatever this farm union was, he was the point person for Douglas and Franklin counties.

I remember him taking us to some of these farmers' meetings. Farmers would stand up and talk about how they were being railroaded by the markets, by the middle people, hurt and put out of business and disrespected. They wanted to be more in charge of their own destinies.

So I.J. Stoneback had a class, or seminar, if you will, and there weren't very many people who came, maybe five or six. Molly Cooley and I went. He told us that there were some farmers in Maine who were refusing to sell their potatoes to Lay's or Frito-Lay or whoever was buying them, because they weren't getting enough money for them. They decided that they were either going to destroy their potatoes or sell them in this underground economy. That sounded like a really good thing to do. So I.J. set it up that there would be I don't remember how many hundreds of pounds of potatoes that would come on the train to Lawrence. The Maine farmers were sending potatoes wherever they could find a group that was willing to accept them.

Molly and I got up at probably two or three in the morning and went to the Santa Fe depot in East Lawrence and unloaded potatoes from boxcars. She had an old station wagon, and her car was completely full. And I.J. had a pickup truck, and his pickup truck was completely full. And I had a Volkswagen Beetle, and my Volkswagen Beetle was completely full—and don't laugh, because it probably held more than anybody's, because the Beetle was round and would hold a lot.

It was just starting to get light when we finished. We had to unload the train and then take them to another place to unload them.

Then the word went out that people should come and buy these potatoes for a nickel a pound, because the Maine farmers could only get three and a half cents a pound from the potato chip people. Other people were there to take the money and sell the potatoes. I'd gone to bed about five, exhausted from unloading potatoes, thinking, We'll never sell all of these potatoes. I slept until about eleven, and then I went over there, and there were maybe twenty five-pound bags left—almost nothing compared to what there had been. That was maybe five percent of all we'd unloaded. It was like, Oh wow, okay, this is an idea whose time has come. We can make this work.

It strikes me that the potatoes were maybe some place in East Lawrence. Then there was another place off of Ohio, in the 500 block of Ohio. All I remember for sure is going into a place off the alley. We loaded the potatoes into a cellar, just piled them all up. In my

memory, this place where we left the potatoes is shadowy. I'm thinking that maybe we only used that repository once.

I.J. and Molly and me and a few others that I don't remember were involved. We decided that we needed to look for local farmers who wanted to sell their products directly. Of course, I.J. knew of many because of his role as an organizer.

We expanded the membership. We spread the word. Whoever was interested could do it. I remember calling the first meeting. I chaired it. I remember there were some discussions that took place in my living room. There was a sign-up sheet for people who wanted to do different jobs.

Where the Food Conspiracy ended up—the place I remember the most, 'cause I remember moving the refrigerators in—was right off of Fourteenth and Tennessee.

Jim Cooley

A fraternity in Baldwin donated the refrigerator. I volunteered to go down to Baldwin in an old school bus to pick up the refrigerator. We moved it to over on Tennessee Street, to the house where I think Patti Spencer lived. It was the 1300 block of Tennessee, north of Bullwinkles. Eventually, they had a couple of refrigerators in the basement, and people would come in and pick up their preordered food.

Jo Abbott

People were able to find some refrigerators. The basement we used was owned by a landlord who didn't care if we used it for that purpose and didn't charge us any rent. I believe we had maybe three or four old refrigerators that people had thrown out or didn't want and donated to us. I remember being fairly amazed at how easy it was to find refrigerators.

We started the Food Conspiracy.

Dan Bentley

A terrible name, really, the Food Conspiracy. I mean, everything was a conspiracy then, everything had to have some sort of covert feeling to it.

Hal Sears

I knew of a co-op in California that was first called the Food Conspiracy, and I think that was what this one was called before it became the co-op. It was a conspiracy to buy natural food. It was a nice dramatic way of saying, Let's get together and meet a truck and buy a big hunk of cheese and cut it up, and we'll cut out the middleman and all that capitalist stuff that goes in between. That's an exciting way to do it. It drew people who liked that sort of thing.

Jo Abbott

Because it was a real loose-knit organization and it grew by leaps and bounds, sometimes there'd be twenty people that would come to the meetings, and sometimes just two or three. We always had sign-up sheets, and I remember doing a lot of telephoning, communicating with people that way. If anybody had an idea, they'd just go off and do it. We did some bulk buying of grains, wheat and stuff like that. I remember having a bag of wheat in my pantry forever. Finally, I ended up throwing it out in the yard, and it grew. I had a little patch of wheat for grass.

Then some people wanted to do canned foods. I didn't get into that at all, 'cause I never liked canned foods. But they did a little bit of a business with canned foods.

Judy Kroeger got very involved. As I was phasing out my interest—'cause I was doing other things, like Yellow Brick Road—she got more and more interested in the Food Conspiracy.

Judith Wynhausen

The Food Conspiracy was when I first started getting involved in food co-ops. It operated out of the basement of a house that was on Tennessee Street, around either 1200 or 1400 Tennessee, I can't remember. It was right down the hill. There were a group of I don't know how many people involved in this. I think it eventually ended up with about twenty people or so. It started out with raw milk and eggs that we got from the farmers. Then we branched out into grains, which we were able to get from the Granary in Kansas City, which was a health food store. This would have been the summer of 1970, I believe, when I first started getting involved with the Food Conspiracy.

Jo Abbott

The milk and the eggs were our main staples. Milk was easy. We found farmers who wanted to sell raw milk. It wasn't pasteurized. Back then, we really believed that that was better for our children and better for us. It was raised by really healthy certified cows, so you didn't have to worry about getting polio or something. We used to skim the milk off and make butter. It was just delicious. It was so wonderful.

Judith Wynhausen

Operating out of a basement like that, we were always afraid the health department was going to come down on us because it really was dirty down there. We were also distributing raw milk, which we weren't legally supposed to do. The law was, Go out to the farm and get your own raw milk—but you couldn't sell it. We thought we were getting around that because people were ordering it ahead of time, and we were just going out to pick it up for them.

Jo Abbott

At the height of the Food Conspiracy, we had people who would go pick up however many gallons of milk you could fit in your car, twice a week, and other people would sign up for it and pay in advance.

Joy Lominska

Have you heard the story of the milk co-op?

Bob Lominska

This was the time of the Kaw Valley Hemp Pickers. It wasn't just people trying to circumvent the law. It was kind of in your face, saying, Look, this is not wrong, and we're going to do this. People had shirts and backpacks with that kind of thing on it. There were lots of things that were really illegal that you could get busted for. Lawrence was a pretty active place for lots of different kinds of drugs, and a lot of people could have gotten in big trouble, and they did. But David Hann breaks down in his station wagon carrying the raw milk back for other people, and the police stop and see all this milk, and he gets busted for milk.

Joy Lominska

I think at the time the law was, you could sell raw milk on the premises to the customer. You couldn't transport it. He got in trouble for that. I think that might have been the end of the milk co-op. David Hann is the only person who's been busted for milk.

Robin Devine

We were going to talk about the very, very beginning, which was when we all made out lists of what we would buy, collected money, and people made runs to get stuff, and they brought it over to the house that is up there up on Fourteenth and Tennessee, right across from what was the CIA house. All the people that did the newspaper lived in it.

Every Saturday someone would make a run out in the country and bring all this milk to the back yard of this house. I'm trying to remember what else we got besides milk.

Jo Abbott

The milk and the eggs were the main staples of the Food Conspiracy. We'd also sell other things, like fresh produce when it was garden time.

Robin Devine

Everybody pulled up in their cars and wandered around while the stuff got divided up. It was highly unorganized and inefficient, but at that stage in our lives it was perfectly all right. It was a social event in which we all tried to get better food.

fran beier

Rod Gray and I would drive to Alma, Kansas, and pick up Alma cheese and bring back these fifty-pound round things of cheese. I can remember some fairly heated arguments about who had to handle the cheese once it was time to chop it up.

Robin Devine

You spent an hour and a half to get your cheese and milk, and that was okay. We got vegetables too.

fran beier

From the farmer's market in Kansas City. Susan Davis and her husband had an organic natural foods warehouse in Kansas City. People would go there and pick up fifty pounds of rice and fifty pounds of oatmeal, flour, that kind of stuff, and bring that back.

Shirley Scheier

In '73 or '74, I was living on Tennessee. There were quite a few households in the neighborhood with folks that were older than me. I don't think Patti Spencer's ten years older than me, but she was part of this other generation of folks living in Lawrence. Patti and a bunch of her friends had a food buying club. It was out of the cellar in their house halfway down the alley. I noticed this commotion every Saturday morning, all these people walking down the alley and then all these people walking away with bags of groceries.

Patti Spencer

When I was living with Jim Scheurich, Beth Lindquist, and Sharon Mayer, we started a buying club out of my house.

Robin Devine

In the beginning all we were trying to do was get food cheaper. We weren't really thinking about the quality of the food. That's how I remember it.

Michael Maher

i: To the people who formed these buying clubs, was food more important than ideology?

This is my memory, and if you get enough memories together you can probably figure out something close to the truth. When we got together to do the food thing, I would say there was virtually no ideology in that at all. We just thought that this was a good way for us to get some good food. I would say that this group of people didn't really act in their daily lives out of ideological motives very much. We just lived the way we wanted to live. This was a countercultural community. In fact, those of us who were involved in it frequently referred to it as "the community."

I was an unusual member, because I was a professor. So I was in a different category. Most of the other people were students. Some of them dropped out and stayed in Lawrence, and a bunch of them are still here, as a matter of fact. Lawrence is a hard place to leave.

When the food thing was formed, which would have been '73 or '74, something like that, a lot of them were the same people that were involved in *Vortex* and in various political activities, like organizing protests on campus. Yet a lot of people who weren't involved in politics were into the food stuff. They were into it just because it was a good way to get good food.

Shirley Scheier

At that time, the food options in Lawrence were similar to what most people in the Midwest had. It was all packaged food. It was shipped in. The produce was quite sad. My awareness and interest came in because I was having a lot of allergy and health problems. So I got interested in food. My father worked for John Deere for well over fifty years, and so I had knowledge of what was happening out in those fields. The more I studied the farming industry, the more I saw of the vast use of chemicals and pesticides. Also, my father developing cancer led me to become much more interested in alternatives within food. I was very interested in the food part of it for personal care reasons, but the intense political issues around food mushroomed into this huge, overwhelming amount of information to try to know more about.

Access to that information wasn't as prevalent as it is today. The folks in these buying clubs knew all about this. They were wanting to buy raw milk and cheeses that lacked red dye coloring that were specially made in Alma. We were buying produce from the Kansas City market that was produced locally. Basically, that was why when I walked down the alley and saw this activity, I was immediately very interested in pursuing it.

Jim Cooley

There were a lot of concerns about pesticides and irradiation of milk

Diane Luber

It was something I think we did in an effort to have more control over our lives, to be more affordable perhaps, more geared to building community, to getting what you needed other than through the organized capitalistic structure. Certainly, the milk was a quality thing. I'm not sure we got necessarily better produce by going to Kansas City. It was a way of providing for ourselves without depending on the institutions that existed and made money off of it. At least it cut out some of the middlemen. We wanted to go more directly to the people. We wanted to go as directly as we could to get the food that we needed. I think it was born of all those things.

Patti Spencer

i: Do you recall why you would have formed a food buying club?

My guess is that it was Jim's idea. He always extrapolated into a meta-political view. A buying club was a very political act. We were cutting out a whole level of producers. We were living together in a house with other people at that time. It may have been partly economics and partly politics. If you're living collectively and you're buying food anyway, it's a natural extrapolation.

i: Did you call it the Food Conspiracy?

Oh yeah, we called it the Food Conspiracy. It was out of our house, so we were always centrally involved. There'd be days when you couldn't find a person to drive into Kansas City and you had to go. None of us had really good cars. Whose car could make it and get back?

Jim Scheurich

i: Did your buying club have a name?

I don't remember that we had a name.

i: Did you form this buying club or did you inherit it from another group?

No, we put it together. There were four or five, six, seven, eight of us, including Patti Spencer and Robin Naramore. It was word of mouth. We didn't advertise or anything. It evolved out of who we knew and who we were mainly connected with.

I would say there was a significant percentage of our buying club that was from the gay and lesbian community.

Michael Maher

i: How did your friends or colleagues who were not members of the "community" regard this group?

They didn't know much about it. I didn't talk this up particularly among the people I associated with at the university. I would talk to them about politics, but they wouldn't have even known about these food things. In fact, people in town that weren't directly involved would probably not have known anything about this until the Community Mercantile opened up. There weren't enough people involved for it to be any kind of a threat to anybody. It was just a bunch of countercultural people doing something that appealed to them.

ANNA BERGER

Robin Devine

What was the process by which we started thinking about the quality of the food? I can remember when that was something we all knew to think about, and I know there was a time when we really didn't know how to think about it.

fran beier

Do you know who it was for me? It was Adelle Davis.

Robin Devine

What was that old woman's name that ran the health food store?

fran beier

Anna Berger.

Robin Devine

She had a major impact on my education.

Dan Bentley

Anna Berger was the anchor here in Lawrence, getting people to pull toward healthy food.

Bob Marvin

Anna Berger had the health food store in Lawrence when I was a kid. It was at Ninth and New Hampshire. Anna's a wonderful woman. She's a Mormon.

Tom Moore

i: Do you remember Anna Berger?

Yes, very well. Is she still alive?

i: Yes, she is.

How old do you suppose she is?

i: I'd say eighty.

My recollection of her is that she looked like she had, as the saying goes, one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel, so I'm impressed to hear that she lived to be eighty. I remember my eyes were opened wide when we went to some sort of a picnic and she sat there and she took pill after pill after pill. I think she took thirty pills. I know my children were goggle-eyed at this sight. We almost never took any pills around our house.

She made me think of a man who we met by a thermal pool in Thermopolis, Wyoming, when I was a child on our way west. He was extolling the value of the waters, but he looked terrible, you know. If the waters had helped him, why, think what he must have looked like before he started drinking those mineral waters. Anna was the same way. She just looked pretty bad to me, and yet she was taking all these pills and she was running this health food store.

Anna Berger

There came a time when I had rheumatic fever and ended up with MS or rheumatoid arthritis, whichever you care to call it. It's a matter of discretion. I had a friend who was dying of it in the KU Med Center, a church friend, and I drove there, compulsively, to visit her once. She was already on the respirator. Without words, she communicated to me, Get with it girl, or you're going to be in the same place. So I went home, and I don't remember all the sequences, but I started reading and studying.

I ended up with MS and knew that I'd had rheumatic fever, which is the sequence of events. I had also read in the literature that prior to MS, classically, is not necessarily abuse but tremendous tension, lots of stress, and God knows I'd had it. My family role was difficult; I guess that'll do to say. So when Adelle Davis's book came out, I studied it.

I was so bad that I didn't dare run. My feet wouldn't come down in the right place. I had had long hair. I'd been selling my hair for a couple of years. I sent a batch, and they sent it back. That was a red flag. So, anyhow, finally I went for a regular checkup. We had a family doctor, my doctor. I told him, I said, This is MS. I could read the literature. The only thing I'd heard to alleviate it was vitamin E. And he said, Well, some people get some benefit from it. Yeh, yeh, yeh. So I tried it. I had been routinely getting up at four o'clock in the morning for aspirin, because I was hurting. The day I took a one-hundred-unit vitamin E capsule I didn't wake up in pain. I mean, that had to be a small miracle, but I'll accept it. So I took it, and eventually I got my strength back.

I was well enough to get back in circulation. My daughter was in kindergarten. I could be away from home. I had decided that I'd had enough of pregnancy.

I think it was more inspiration than plan.

i: Starting the store?

Everything I did.

i: Why did you start the store?

Because I wanted the stuff, and I figured if I had a store, I could get it cheaper than if I had to drive to Kansas City after it. And I had a friend who had a store here in Independence with whom I traded. I had a circle of friends in Lawrence who wanted things. I put an ad in the paper, saying anybody who wants stuff, I'd go get it. So I took my list, and he filled it. Pretty soon, he suggested that he could sponsor me. That lasted less than a year, I think.

i: What was the name of your store?

Downtown Health and Foreign Foods. I had a local hippie paint me a beautiful sign for the front of the store, you know, with swoopy stuff.

I had one, two, three places before I got a good location at Ninth and New Hampshire. At first, when I was in those other places, it was Staf-O-Life, because that man in Independence sponsored me a little to start out.

I started on \$600 bartered off an insurance policy. I had no capital. When I started in business, this company, Pavo, which was in Minneapolis, a food house with Scandinavian, Swede, Norwegian, or Dane management, I don't remember which. Anyhow, the market was so dull in those days—this would have been about '65 or '66—that Pavo shipped me \$1,700 worth of stock, sent a man to help me put it on the shelf and arrange the store, and gave me advice about how you observe everything. And they let me pay for it gradually. Most of the other houses were such that you could order and then pay for that order when you ordered the next time. That was my theme.

The vitamin companies were liberal. I went to seminars to learn stuff, to Chicago and to Eureka Springs and once to Oklahoma. They paid most of my way. So I learned all of it.

Dave Van Hee

Anna was one of the more unique people I'd run into. She seemed like the manifestation of the little old lady in tennis shoes. She was in her fifties, and I was in my low twenties, so she seemed like an old lady to me. Yet she was such a nut. She was carefree, or seemed carefree. She was a real nice person.

Bob Marvin

Anna had intense personal power. Charisma. She was very positive, bossy in a nice way. I mean, she would steer you.

Dan Bentley

She was kind of a medicine woman, really. She was studying alternative things on her own and doing it and telling people about this stuff. I don't think she had a lot of support; she just did it.

Bob Marvin

I think she's truly inspired.

Dan Bentley

She was a precursor to the health consciousness of the co-op, because she was educating people. She understood natural foods.

Patti Spencer

The thing that pushed me toward an understanding of health was that I got hepatitis. I was teaching at Lorien, and hepatitis hit the schools. We were all very affectionate at Lorien, and a couple kids got it. Pretty soon, we all had it, or at least I had it. I was desperately ill. I went to the doctor, and he took a blood test and said, You have hepatitis, but I don't know how sick you are. There's nothing I can do. I felt horrible, and I was yellow and orange. It's the most colorful disease. I really thought I was dying.

For some reason, I have no idea why—grace, maybe—I went down to where Anna Berger was running her health food store and got Adelle Davis and found tiger's milk and got all the stuff for that. This was totally foreign to anything I had done previously. I made tiger's milk. The next day, I felt well. Three days later, the doctor called me and said, You've got to go to the hospital, you're so sick. I said, No, I'm well. He said, You can't be well. You're desperately ill. You've got to go to the hospital and get blood. I said, No, I'm well. He said, Come in. I said, I'm well. He said, Something happened. I told him what happened, and he didn't believe it. That's when I got turned on to health food.

Jim Scheurich

At that time, to be involved in health food was a lot more unusual. Today it's in all the supermarkets, but then it was very different. She was not a mainstream kind of person. She was different in terms of what people were like and how they thought at that time.

Dan Bentley

One time I went in there, and she had a pyramid on her head. That was the first pyramid I'd seen. It was made of metal. She was holding it, had it right on her head like a hat.

Bob Marvin

Cool. To catch the energy.

Dan Bentley

Yeah, directed down to her.

Bob Marvin

That's great.

Dan Bentley

Pyramid power. Some of my friends had pyramids built over their beds.

Bob Marvin

There are always people who are not on the main track, but she was one of those not on the main track who was also a very powerful and positive and outgoing person.

Anna Berger

Staf-O-Life, the fella that first sponsored me, has fallen on relatively hard times because of competition, but then he deserved it because he relies on the pendulum. I resolved for myself, the pendulum is autosuggestible.

i: What's the pendulum?

Have you heard of the one that they hang the needle over the lady's belly to see whether it's a girl or a boy? It's a divining device. Divination. It is condemned in the scriptures. You can use crystal. You can use many different things. I experimented with it and resolved for myself that it was autosuggestible. Okay, I don't need that. I know what I think. And I didn't do it anymore.

Some preacher man came and hassled me once about this practice, and he quoted the one that advises against it, and I said, Okay, the pendulum is not a problem. But I have pyramids. You saw them hanging in the kitchen. Pyramid is valid. It is plated similarly as a transistor is. It's a matter of layering metals, and it does create a magnetic field. There are no bugs under the pyramid. There's also no smoke. If smoke gets there, it drops. It is an electromagnetic construct. We are electromagnetic beings. That's what life is. That's not hokey. That's for real. That's the reason why I've got magnets on my knees.

Mark Maher

I remember going into Anna Berger's store on Ninth, the side street just half a block or so from Massachusetts. My wife would want to go in there, and I'd go in and I'd look around. We were reading Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* and *Recipes for a Small Planet*, which we may have gotten at Anna's store. She also had old literature that seemed to be addressed to fanatics. At that time, I might have thought of myself as a minor-league fanatic politically, a minor-league fanatic in terms of legalization of recreational drug use, but I was sensible. From the science I took in high school and college, this seemed a little distant from double-blind studies. But the stuff smelled good. She certainly seemed to be interesting and a Lawrence institution.

There would be other people like me who were looking around, wondering, Does all of this stuff sell? And to whom? But there'd be other people I'd see, customers, who'd go in and go right to something and buy it and then they'd buy something else and out they'd go.

Anna Berger

I got some mail from the Myasthenia Gravis Association. I found an address in there of this lady who lived down in Pomona, so I called her and told her about Adelle Davis's book. She bought the book. She did what it said, and she got well.

Another lady came in desperate. Her son had done belladonna till he couldn't put a sentence together. He'd start one sentence and finish another one. I mean, he was out of it. We went to the books, his mother and I, and set him up on a program. I don't remember exactly how long, at least two months—he was okay; he was starting his own business.

There was a family at church with a child who had cystic fibrosis. He went to KU, and the kid got through it, but he was puny, you know, pale. I never did see this kid again, but his RN mother came in and we hit the books and put him on a program. Within a very short time, he was well.

Another old lady was stiffer than a Republican, but she came. They had her in KU Med Center with severe liver difficulties, and they chewed her out for using vitamin A, but she came back home just barely able to toddle about. We put her on a program, and she went back in after maybe four or six weeks, and they couldn't understand how she got well so fast. This just went on and on and on. The more you did, the better results you got.

Molly Hamaker

The summer of '73 must have been when I started working at Anna's store. She always looked so overwhelmed that I asked her if she could use some help, and she said she didn't have any money, and I said, I don't need much.

If you've ever been to a used books store where nobody believes in putting anything on the shelves and they buy a ton of books but they never sort them out and categorize them, that's what Anna's store was like. It always looked like the truck had just come in. There was food all over the place. It was funky maybe more than filthy. I think she slept in the back room a lot.

Linda Gwaltney

Anna's place was only a place that Anna could figure out.

Molly Hamaker

Anna was nonlinear, very good-hearted but nonlinear. If I'd ask her a question, I wouldn't get an answer, I would get a story. She was a storyteller. And she was deeply unhappy in some really bad way. I think one day she told me her whole life story, but I don't remember the details. I just remember it seemed like, Why doesn't she just leave him? I was young. I didn't understand things very well, like why people—adults—did what they did. I didn't even feel like I was an adult yet. Now I know I wasn't.

Diane Luber

I remember Anna as having long hair and as being tall and with a stern expression. I was going to her store because health food was really starting to become an interesting thing to me. She wasn't a warm, fuzzy person.

Linda Gwaltney

I was intimidated by her, because I didn't know anything about natural foods. She was one of those people that were into Jethro Kloss and all those pioneers in natural living. She was a crotchety old lady. So you walked into her store and you had to deal with Anna and her eccentric ways. It was hard to learn anything from her because she was so opinionated that I think she found a lot of questions silly. I was totally lost when it came to natural foods, so I was never comfortable going in there.

Patti Spencer

Anna was great. She was wacko. She was just out there, and she had these kids that were really out there. She was just really herself. Unabashed. She could say and do and be whatever she thought. I remember her huge hank of gray hair hanging down her back.

Dave Van Hee

I don't know if at that time she was so involved in going off to Indian stuff all over the country. Eventually, she got into that. In a way, she always looked kind of Indian to me, too. Maybe that was just the long hair. Of course, everybody had long hair then, so that wouldn't have been different.

Anna Berger

The beauty shop next door thought that I was selling drugs. And she'd been good to me. She had trimmed my hair, but I didn't cut it anymore after '67. Running a health food store, I sold some cosmetics. Before you go, you'll have to do my little test. Tell me how long you think it's been since I had a shampoo. It's been four years. I don't shampoo. I brush it every morning, except I missed today. You do not need to wash your head. For that matter, you don't even need to wash your body as often as most people do, unless you eat stuff that makes you stink, such as meat, flesh. Lots of things make you stink. Any indiscretion. Sugar. But particularly too much protein.

Joy Lominska

I remember little unimportant details about Anna. I remember her hair braided around her head. I always called her the butterfly lady, because she wore blouses with butterflies all over them. I couldn't remember her name, so I'd call her the butterfly lady.

Anna Berger

At first, I wore a nurse's uniform in the store and thought, That's not my image. So I took the uniform and dyed it purple. Then that wasn't good enough, and I started wearing the brightest stuff I had.

Bob Lominska

I think she was involved in things like not eating things out of season. I think she believed in that for health reasons.

Kathryn Nemeth Tuttle

Anna Berger's place was one of the first places I learned about natural food. When did her shop start? It was quite a bit before all of this, wasn't it?

i: 1964.

Achim, my boyfriend then, was really into these things. Maybe that was his German background, where they have a lot of interest in different kinds of holistic health. I was still a naïve western Kansas girl. He got tuned in to Anna's store, so we started going down there and would shop there regularly. She was an amazing person—her energy.

The Seventh-Day Adventist church was just down the street from us when I was growing up in this very small community. I can remember hearing somebody talking about them not eating meat. And I thought, Wow, that is so strange. I'd grown up in a home where my mother did all of our cooking. We didn't have processed food. She made her own bread. I took that as something that everybody had. But I didn't start to get more aware of some of these other food issues until later, and probably Anna's store was the first

introduction to that. It went along with this whole movement, this back-to-nature movement, if you will. Being more conscious about what you were eating and why.

Anna Berger

I realized the foreign student market was there. Nobody was addressing it. When I first went to work, all they knew was La Choy. Well, the people came in and asked for Kikkoman, and they gave me the address of Japan Foods in Chicago.

They came in looking for tahini. In fact, a lady from New Orleans came in looking for "teenie," she called it. I've always had linguistic tendencies, so I got to be known with the foreign students as the place you go to play twenty questions. They'd come, and we'd kick it about, and we'd find out what they were looking for. One time they wanted burlap. It was interesting, you know. They came in and asked for sopa. This was Hispanics. Of course, I thought soap. No, it's soup.

Oh, and I discovered feta cheese, even when I was still over on Ninth Street by the alley. I ordered it by air from New York. When the foreign students would come in and ask for things, I'd say, Well, do you know an address where I could get the stuff? So I dealt with Turkish Kalystian. He was a mean cuss. He wouldn't send anything unless it was \$300 worth.

i: He was a wholesaler?

Oh yeah, he was a big jobber, a shipper from Brooklyn. In the health food stuff, I discovered Sahadi because of halva bars, so I got other foreign goods, Middle East foreign goods from Sahadi and some from Kalystian. And I discovered there was a Greek outlet in Kansas City, so I would drive up here to get feta and fillo, the thin dough, and I discovered scimecas and kalamata olives. I went a little nuts.

The East Indians came in, and they would look at the whole wheat I had on the shelf: Oh, that's too expensive. We can get it for so-and-so at Dillons. I didn't argue with them. But they tried mine, and they came in and said, Yours is better. Because it was fresh. Chapati is very important to the East Indian market. Then we got to where I sold them when they were going to have a function at KU. I'd give them a discount on the outlay, and they'd invite us to the dinner. It was great.

I wanted good cheese. It must have been spring or fall, when it wasn't too hot. I drove up to Wisconsin and bought a bunch of it. See, until I had the store, the only cheese they knew was American or Colby. I mean, it was pitiful. So I brought them up to speed. I brought feta from Kansas City, and I brought Muenster and sharp and Edom. I mean, a whole spread of good cheese.

Do you know what chile picin is? It's only about this long. It's the Jerusalem plant. It's a decorative. Here, it's considered to be an ornamental. It is so hot you don't even touch it,

you do not pour it on the scales. It takes your breath away. It's hideous. You couldn't package it. I only got it once. It didn't sell that great anyhow.

I even brought platonos—plaintain—from the Mexican store. I probably had the broadest clientele of anybody, of any store in town, and I was shopped extensively.

While I had the store, I had a fella come in—I think he was in uniform—and he spread a map out on my counter and told me why we were in Vietnam. Oil and minerals—that's why we're in Vietnam. I don't know why he did that. I mean, it was crazy. Like a bomb out of the blue, he came in and laid it out and showed me.

Bob Marvin

I remember going into her place once, and Byron, her son who's my age, was running out, and she was following him with this natural ingredient that she wanted him to eat.

Dan Bentley

Her kids were interesting, as you might imagine. She went hitchhiking after her daughter when she ran away. I think that was after she sold the store. Her daughter was fifteen, and she disappears. Somehow, Anna figures out she's gone hitchhiking, so Anna goes out on the road and starts hitchhiking to find her. She went down into the Southwest, went to all the communes down there.

Anna Berger

Another woman came to town—faculty; this happened every fall, of course. She had no more hit town than she came to the health food store to ask if I had bottled water. Do you drink Lawrence water?

i: No.

Hallelujah. You'll get yellow teeth, and you can get a bellyache. She wanted bottled water. Since she'd come to Lawrence, she had pink urine. Just like that. I don't remember where she came from, but she wanted bottled water. I sold a lot of bottled water and enhanced their trade. The truck came to town and delivered everywhere. So I guess on about every front I gave them trouble.

MERCANTILE GROCERY

Judith Wynhausen

When I was involved in the Food Conspiracy, I was one of those who wanted to carry this further. I wanted to have a storefront. Anna Berger had a health food store in Lawrence at the time of the Food Conspiracy. She was always running out of stuff that I

wanted to have, and also we thought her prices were pretty high. So we wanted some way of getting good food at prices that everybody could afford. That's why the Food Conspiracy was born, and that's why we wanted a co-op started.

Jo Abbott

I guess Judy's energy from the Food Conspiracy went into her store, and then the Food Conspiracy basically petered out, because there really wasn't anybody else to keep it going once Judy started the store. I'd already burned out, and Judy took my place as main hustler. It seems like in my memory when Judy and Harry's store started, that was pretty much when the Food Conspiracy was losing momentum.

Judith Wynhausen

I couldn't get other people interested in getting the initiative to do a co-op, so my ex-husband Harry and I decided that we would start our own little store. We were so naïve. I can't believe that we started with—how much did we have?—something ridiculous like \$4,000, I think. We had a partner who was going to be in it with us. He never really contributed any money though, so it was all our money. And we hardly had any money. But Harry worked very, very hard to get that first little store started up next to campus in a wonderful little building called the Carriage House, which, of course, is now gone.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

i: What led you to think about starting a specialty foods store in Lawrence?

Partly because Lawrence was not a place where you could get a lot of those ingredients. I thought there was a niche. I don't think the niche was quite big enough, yet there's definitely a niche now. I started the Mercantile somewhere between 1969 and 1971, although '71 sticks in my mind. I'm not real definite when all that was. It seems like ancient history.

The original people that were involved in the project were my wife Judy at the time and myself, and there was a minor interest on the part of Virgil Cooper, who at the time was the proprietor of the Rock Chalk Bar and Grill. He never came up with any money. He couldn't get anybody to loan him anything, so we dropped him out of the partnership.

My wife and I tried to start it in the building which was next to what was then called the Carriage House, which is now where the parking garage is next to the union. It occupied half of the first floor, which at one time had been a barbershop. I think the other half was occupied by the Avendon Bookstore, as I recall. I'm not positive on that.

Judith Wynhausen

When we started our store, we had a very low mark-up on our food. We thought that Anna Berger was way out of line charging the normal health food mark-up, which was,

like, thirty-three percent on some items and fifty percent on other items. We thought, Ah, that's way too much. Let's not try to gouge people. Let's give them this food at really good prices, so they can afford to buy it.

We set it up to be an old-fashioned mercantile. Our idea was to offer not only really good food to people, but also to have it be a store available for students and people who were on campus, because at that time there was no grocery store close by to campus at all.

We branched out and started carrying Usinger sausages, which are these really good sausages made in Milwaukee from German recipes. I also got into imported cheeses and got to the place where I knew what all these different cheeses tasted like.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

It was originally not intended to be a natural foods store or an organic foods store or health foods store or anything of the kind. In fact, "natural food" and "organic" have always been terms that offended me. I'm an organic chemist. Over and over again, I have had to point out to people that morphine, strychnine, cyanide, brucine, and other nasty materials are perfectly natural and organic, so the fact that something is natural and organic doesn't necessarily make it good. What we were interested in was carrying grocery products that you couldn't buy anywhere else, either quality ingredients or unusual ingredients. We were emphasizing good, fresh natural grain flours from Arrowhead Mills, and what we called charcuterie, Usinger sausages, which were of very high quality but hardly health food. We had other minor items.

Molly Hamaker

When I first moved to Lawrence in '72, Judy and Harry had their health food store up on the hill. I'd go buy cheeses or this or that. Harry was crotchety. I was like, How could this guy be in retail? He was insane. He would insult you when you walked in the store. "Colorful" is the word people would use. He was a character. And he had that organic food rap: I'm a chemist. Organic foods are stupid.

Meanwhile, Judy was sunshine. It was like going to a '70s sitcom. They were so hilarious. I remember being completely entertained. I'd go up there just for fun to hear them interact with us and with each other. Harry'd be reading a book, and you could hardly get him to check you out. Very funny. Like, you'd have to go do it yourself. I probably did start doing it myself. That might be how I started working for them. But I don't think I started working for them when they were on the hill. I think that occurred after they moved down to Massachusetts.

fran beier

i: What was the Mercantile Grocery like?

Harry hated us.

Robin Devine

Yeah, Harry hated us, but it was a nicely run store. It was just a nice little mom-and-pop store. That's basically what I remember about it. And the fact that Harry was very grumpy. Judy was friendly. She was much easier to relate to than Harry. Harry's brows were always knitted together in such a frightening kind of way. You'd walk in, you'd see him, and it was like, Okay, either I'm going to engage this person, like, Yeah, I see that you're grumpy, and I'm just going to play with you now, to see if you can't smile, or else you had to avoid him, and that always felt really weird, you know. So you usually had to get in his face, somehow, just to maintain a respect for his humanity. What a guy.

Dan Bentley

I don't think he's real fond of people. I never got that impression.

fran beier

So maybe it wasn't us?

Robin Devine

I don't think so.

fran beier

I never investigated. I just went, Yeah, okay, I understand. I'm supposed to not fuck with you.

Robin Devine

No, he was really okay once you poked at that thing for a while.

fran beier

I didn't have the guts to poke that. It looked like a real bite to me.

Robin Devine

Yeah, but it really wasn't.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

One little anecdote: my ex-wife at one time was absolutely elated to have found a stimulating drink other than coffee. Because coffee contained caffeine, it was undesirable. Like I said, I'm an organic chemist. I did a little quick research on this

material, which turned out to be yerba mate, and it contains a considerably higher concentration of caffeine than coffee. I ran into this kind of back-asswards thinking over and over and over again in talking to people in the natural food business, to the point where I concluded that an awful lot of them were a bit on the charlatan side.

Dave Van Hee

Harry was enigmatic, kind of quiet, just staring at you, and you wondered, What is he reading there? What is he really thinking? Judy was more personable and normal. I heard Harry was from St. Louis and had maybe left an executive life. Something like that. I never really knew anything about that, but it seemed very likely by his demeanor.

Hal Sears

If I remember my co-op history right, the way the co-op got started as a storefront was that they bought into an existing store downtown that was called the Mercantile, and it was run by an eccentric professor and his wife. What he was really interested in was reading Chinese literature, and he sat in the back and read that, and his wife ran the store. He would get grumped out when people would ask him too many questions about the business. I don't know if he was a professor or not, but he had those professorial habits.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

Basically, things didn't go terribly well up there on Oread. We decided we'd be better off to move the store downtown. I think we had the wrong clientele up there. Students weren't interested, I think, largely in what we had to offer. We thought we'd probably be better downtown. The student population wasn't always that much interested in what we had. We needed to hit a broader clientele. The other part of it was that the original selection of the location was made on the part of Virgil Cooper, not us. We found ourselves stuck with it when he dropped out.

Judith Wynhausen

I think at one time I figured that our salary, if you want to call it that, what we were making, getting back out of the store, was about twenty cents an hour, and we were working many, many hours a day doing this.

When I had my second child, we decided to move downtown to the location on Massachusetts Street. We expanded a bit when we moved downtown. We borrowed some more money and put up some of our stock as collateral.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

So we moved it downtown. I don't even remember what was in there before us—possibly a hardware store; I don't remember. Anyway, we took over a piece of property downtown and remodeled it to some extent. About the time we started ordering some merchandise,

the city came in and—I think quite unfairly—insisted that a large part of it be rebuilt, because it didn't fit the fire code. I think it was extremely unfair. Since having investigated it with people that know something about that, I've learned that what we were asked to remodel would qualify as partitions and not as walls and consequently, I think, could have been made out of anything. They were not supporting walls; they were not of any structural importance to the area whatsoever. Consequently, there's a very good reason to believe that the building inspector was exceeding his authority and misinterpreting the law. Putting three-quarters of an inch of sheetrock over everything delayed us another couple of months in getting open. In any event, because of spoilage during the delay and the additional expense of remodeling, we expended a lot of our operating capital, and from that point on we were doomed to failure. We survived down there not for very long.

i: What was your clientele like down on Mass?

We did much better down there. It was an older group, for one thing. Face it, we got stuck with the location on Oread. If you look at it realistically, students don't bake bread. And we were carrying natural grain flours and things like that. It's obvious.

i: Anything else that would distinguish your customers from shoppers at other grocery stores?

People that were interested in the specialty items that we had to offer. I'm not sure even at that time, though, that there was enough of a base for that type of a store. I think part of the reason that we did have financial problems was probably because we were somewhat ahead of the wave.

Judith Wynhausen

730 Massachusetts had the same kind of feel as the one up on campus, only it was a little bigger. It had some of the same old shelving. It was very funky, actually. We had these old refrigerator units that we had bought at auctions here and there. We had one long line of big stoneware crocks, which we got in Pittsburg, Kansas. They were mostly seconds. That is, they were half-price. So there were the crocks with these wooden lids that Harry had made with big signs on top that told what it was and how much it cost. We had other shelves. We had one long counter. We had an old-fashioned cash register and an old-fashioned scale, as well. We were going for the funkiness of it.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

I thought the old mechanical crank-the-lever-down type cash registers were neat. We always had our eye open for old pieces of equipment that still worked well. They added a little bit of charm.

We operated down there for a short time, selling mostly grains and, again, hard-to-find ingredients—ingredients for wine making, beer making, things that were fun. We had

various grain and fruit vinegars and soaps and Oriental ingredients. We had some Oriental condiments. Herbs and spices. We ordered lots of herbs and spices in bulk and weighed them up by the ounce.

i: Produce?

Not as a rule. Only if something special came in that we could move in a hurry. We didn't have the facilities to carry produce. There was plenty of produce on the market, and I was never that convinced that "organic" produce was that superior. I wash my produce, but I'm not all that concerned about what animal shit in the field as it grew.

Judith Wynhausen

We had selected supplements. Go to any health food store today, and you have rows and rows and rows of so many supplements you can get. I selected the ones that we carried, basing a lot on Adelle Davis and my knowledge of nutrition. We had herbs and spices and Celestial Seasonings Tea. Of course, that was back when they were still selling teas in little cloth bags. Then they went to boxes. I thought they were just great. We did have some health-food-store-type things that were packaged, but we tried to stay away from packaged stuff as much as possible. The only place, I think, we made any money was selling those cheeses and Usinger sausages, which, of course, is not health food at all.

Although the Usinger sausages, I think, are healthier than most of that type of food that is on the market. For one thing, we were able to get some of it that doesn't have any nitrites in it. Some of their products do not have nitrites in them. So that was one thing that I always liked. We tried to get foods that didn't have preservatives and a lot of additives. We really emphasized the idea of bulk. We didn't buy packaged foods. We bought our cheeses, our grains and seeds and cereals and all that stuff in bulk.

I would make forays in our sedan to Kansas City. I took out the backseat so I was able to fill it up with grains and stuff. We got a lot of stuff through the Granary in Kansas City. Kansas City has an Italian food distributor, so I would go over and get R&F pasta, which now you can get at most grocery stores but back then you couldn't. Progresso was another brand of things we had. We were really trying to get high-quality foods you couldn't get at a grocery store.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

We didn't carry magazines. We carried *Mother Jones*, or something like that, for a little while. I think that was Judy's addition.

Judith Wynhausen

We sold *Mother Earth News*. We sold a lot of Adelle Davis's books. Of course now, my knowledge of nutrition has changed considerably. She was really into a high-protein diet. My current husband, who's a chiropractor, says it's really very bad for people to eat that

much protein. You don't need that much protein. So some of my own views have changed, but I sold a lot of her books and pushed a lot of her books on people. *Healthy Children, Let's Eat Right, Let's Cook it Right*. Good books. But, of course, Adelle Davis then died of bone cancer. Rodale books. *Prevention* magazine. Those kinds of things. And then *Diet for a Small Planet*. That was a bible of mine for a long time. And *Recipes for a Small Planet*. Sold a lot of those.

We did put out a newsletter. *Mercantile Gazette* was the name of it. Harry was the one who did most of that. We used to put it off on a mimeograph machine. Purple ink. I did that too. As part of our advertising in the newspaper, we'd put recipes in with a little hand-drawn thing at the top, to try to get people's attention. It was just a little column of recipes.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

i: Who were some of your suppliers? Did you have any local suppliers?

We had Dainis Volgasts, a Latvian. He used to bring us organically grown—I suppose—fresh eggs, which we actually candled. We had an FDA thing for that. We actually candled and boxed them ourselves. He used to bring us things that were very useful for decoration, like bundles of oats and wheat on the stalk, which were fun. Things of that sort. Other local suppliers we'd pick up as catch-as-catch-can. I don't know if Dainis continued to supply the *Mercantile* after the change, but he may very well have. He had wonderful range-fed chicken eggs, which are much tastier than what you get at the supermarket.

Judith Wynhausen

Our egg man was just the sweetest guy. He was, I think, Norwegian. When I think of him, I think about *Prairie Home Companion* and Norwegian farmers. He kept on supplying eggs for a long time. I don't know if he's still supplying eggs.

I learned how to candle eggs when we had our own store. We had a candling machine, which had a little light in it. You take each egg and you have to swirl it with a little twist of your wrist and then you can see inside, and if you can see the yolk twirling around rapidly then you know that it's an old egg, whereas if you don't see much happen, then it's a fresh egg. So we would candle our eggs, and we would grade them A, B, then I don't know what else you could call them, the ones that were too bad to sell. I know he continued supplying eggs. I don't know what's happened since then.

We, of course, were not able to sell raw milk in our store because of health regulations. So I think we just got milk from a regular dairy. I can't remember now how we handled that. We didn't sell that much dairy.

Molly Hamaker

I started helping out at Anna's store, and then Judy and Harry moved down to Massachusetts. I had shopped there. Judy knew me, and I'd chat with them. The next thing I knew, I was working at both places part-time, because neither of them could afford me full-time. I remember thinking, This is really weird. I'm working at competing stores in town. I asked them if they cared, and they didn't care. It was that era, I think. Like, it didn't matter, and they were happy that they could each give me a little work, though neither of them could give me enough.

I'd see the same people because everyone who was interested in eating well or eating natural foods or whole foods would have to go to one or both of those stores.

Judy was organized, and Harry, being a chemist, was hyper-organized, but at some level, the stores weren't all that different. They were both funky, though Judy and Harry definitely intended for theirs to be more organized. It didn't always result in that, but they had more intentions. Judy was very energetic. I was very fond of both of them. In fact, though people complained about Harry, I got a kick out of him. I like people like that, and I related to him, I think, better probably than most people. We got along just fine, and I'd get him to tell me things. I liked hearing what he had to say.

Judy was really vivacious—"bubbly" isn't quite the right word—but really enthusiastic and open-minded and always up for something exciting. She's just a really cool person. She already had kids that were much older than mine. She and Harry were older than I was. I remember thinking of her as almost a mentor. Here's someone who's kind of like me but a little farther along, maybe knows what she's doing a little more. So I considered her as a little bit of a role model. I didn't know her that well or spend that much time with her, but I had that kind of relationship with her. Not quite peers. And she was my boss.

Chapter 2

The Early Community Mercantile

Food buying club at Mercantile—1974 stock market crash—Charlie Gardiner—naming the store—Molly (Van Hee) Hamaker, first manager—financing the opening of the business—for-profit status—products—Molly's standard of living—other food co-ops—Molly's leadership—member workers and dual prices—Suzanne Bryant—730 Mass storefront—food issues and co-op meetings—"our" store—"new wave" food co-ops and populist food co-ops—names of co-ops—reasons for emergence of "new wave" co-ops and for the Community Mercantile in Lawrence—profiles of co-op members—membership diversity

Molly Hamaker

Here's what I remember, and I'm convinced that this is probably not quite right, but I remember there were two buying clubs at least. Maybe a third one that was just a milk

run. There were these different versions of buying clubs. But there was a Mt. Oread food buying club. And the thing that really made me think Judy was cool is that she ran this buying club out of her store. So not only was she not worried about hiring a person that worked at her competitor's store, she let buying clubs use her refrigerator while at some level they were competing with her own sales. I don't think she quite thought that way, because the buying club offered different products from what she had. In a way, it could be a savvy business move to invite people in and help them out to get the things that you can't provide them. Beyond that, I truly think that Judy wanted to do that buying club for herself and her own family, and she was in a position to facilitate it. So that's how I remember the Oread buying club.

Judith Wynhausen

We had another co-op going from the Mercantile Grocery Company the last three months or so. People would preorder food, and they got a significant discount for doing that. We then had distribution times when they would come in and pick up their food. It was out of this activity that the Community Mercantile was really born. The people who were involved in that co-op were the ones who became the first members of the Community Mercantile.

Chuck Magerl

A little over twenty-five years ago, there was a meeting in September up at Twelfth and Oread at what used to be called United Ministries and what's now ECM, and it was an organizational meeting to put together a food buying club that would attempt to provide a reliable source of primarily natural foods for the Lawrence community.

The first days of it were based in the backroom of a store that was called the Mercantile that was a privately owned company but was a natural foods store downtown, and it gradually moved from that backroom setting into a full-scale business operation.

Suzanne Bryant

We had the little buying club out of the back of the Mercantile. We set up an initial board of directors, and I was the treasurer. I'm terrible with math, but I figured I could keep up with balancing the checkbook, which at that time was all we needed. Good, healthy food at affordable prices was the purpose behind the buying club—the world was just beginning to get aware of the importance of nutrition. We really wanted nutritional foods to be available to people of all economic means. The buying club was the beginning of reaching that goal. I can remember many of our meetings of that first little collective board on blankets in the sunshine trying to decide what to do.

Molly Hamaker

I have fuzzy memories about which people were in which buying club, but I know that Patti and Jim were in one buying club, and other people were in another buying club, and

a lot of people were in both buying clubs, and I was barely in either buying club, because I got what I needed mostly at the store. It's fuzzy how that all worked.

Judith Wynhausen

I vaguely remember another food co-op on Ohio Street. I think they were in operation later than the Food Conspiracy, around the time we were changing from our business to the Community Mercantile.

When was the co-op established?

i: January of '75.

Okay, so it was in 1974 that the stock market crashed. And our bank said, Either you give us some money on your loan or put more stock down as collateral. And, of course, we hadn't been making any profit at all on the store. It was more a labor of love than anything else. So when that happened we decided to get out of business and forget it.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

The Mercantile under my administration didn't last very long. I had it for a very short period of time. We'd already borrowed enough money. We lost a good deal of what we invested in it. So at the end of it, the co-op decided that they wanted to buy our assets and the name, which we sold them and were rather relieved to be out of the business.

Judith Wynhausen

Harry got a job working at the university. But I didn't want my dream to die. So Molly and I sat around and talked for hours about how we could have a co-op, because that's really what I wanted, and we finally decided, Let's just do it.

Molly Hamaker

I would actually credit Judy with the idea for a storefront. She asked, Why don't the buying clubs all merge and buy out my stock and equipment and I won't charge them anything for the existing store? Yes, I would actually credit Judy Kroeger with the concept of all of this coming together.

Judith Wynhausen

We put up posters, flyers, and had a little meeting. If I remember right, I think the first meeting was actually in the gazebo in South Park.

Mark Maher

In 1974, there was news in either the student newspaper or the *Lawrence Journal-World* about people interested in a food cooperative. We were stimulated by this notion of a food cooperative. We were probably oblivious to the fact that there was a buying club in Lawrence at the time. In '73 or '74, we reacted to a variety of stimuli and stopped eating meat, and now, here's a food co-op.

The first meeting that we went to was kind of an education or promotion of what a food co-op could be and how easy it was to get one started and how it was working in other places around the country. Charlie Gardiner was the speaker. Charlie was articulate. He came from Ohio to Topeka where his wife, I think, had taken a job with either the law school faculty or English faculty. They had had some experience where they came from in supporting a food cooperative.

Charlie Gardiner

About the time that I arrived on the scene, the gal that owned the store wanted to sell the store, and she was interested in selling the store specifically to her customers. Nobody seemed to know if it would work. Although I had never had that kind of direct experience—that is to say, of a private owner transferring ownership of a store to the community—I'd certainly had as much or more experience than most people on the scene in Lawrence at that time, and I said, Sure, it can work.

Mark Maher

Charlie looked like somebody I might have left at Isla Vista or Santa Barbara. He had some facial hair. He dressed normally; he did not dress like an academic. And he's talking common sense. He was talking about an outlet for energy and intellect and emotional release that appeared to mesh with what I wanted. He was coming over to Lawrence to tell his story, to spread the word, to do the Johnny Appleseed.

Charlie Gardiner

I first became involved with natural foods probably in 1966-67, by picking up Georges Ohsawa's macrobiotic books. At the time, I was still in graduate school at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. The nearest large natural foods outlet at that time was at the co-op in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which was about a four-hour trek for us. So we set about to organize our own co-op in town, in Athens, to make the trip up to Ann Arbor a little bit more economically feasible and at the same time to reach out in other directions to growers of food in the region. We made contacts in a circle of about a hundred and fifty miles from Athens, as well as through the established natural foods distribution network, whose nearest outlet was in Ann Arbor.

I left Athens in 1969, went to Vermont, where I had friends in various communes and intentional spiritual communities that were flourishing in Vermont and New Hampshire at that time. And everybody was doing the same thing, driving their pickup trucks two hundred, three hundred miles in order to come down to Boston to Rainbow Foods every

week or two or three. It was a macrobiotic foods warehouse. As I say, we met each other, and about the third time we saw the same face, same pickup truck on the docks, we're talking about where we came from, and we discovered that there was the potential for a great circle of communes and other interested parties in Vermont and New Hampshire. So we formed the New England People's Co-op, which essentially was a buying group that bought from the Boston distributors, and then distributed among ourselves; then there were distribution networks from each of the drops.

I returned to Athens for more graduate work in '72 and found that the co-op we'd started in Athens was still flourishing and that they were supporting quite a few other buying groups and that there were noises being made in Columbus, Ohio, in the neighborhood surrounding Ohio State. They were interested in doing a storefront. So we got together with them and formed not so much of a formal group as laid the groundwork for what became the Federation of Ohio River Co-ops.

My feeling just from surveying the members of the Lawrence community was that the group had the two things that are necessary to start a cooperative. One is the core of leadership, and the other is the support from within the community to at least make it happen for a while. That's no guarantee of longterm success, but they did have what seemed to me to be a critical mass of people who would both work as well as organize.

So I made the trip over from Topeka for however many meetings there were—there were a lot of them; it was a string of meetings, as I recall—essentially to cheerlead and to encourage the group to identify for itself the leaders from within its own network that could form the Mercantile co-op, as well as the people that were going to supply the money that was going to be involved to get it off the ground.

When a group comes together like this—and to some degree it doesn't matter whether they know each other well or whether they're just loosely associated—they need a certain degree of confidence, and if I had any particular role in the founding of the Mercantile, it was in encouraging them to have confidence in themselves that they could do it. I don't think of myself as having any important role in framing the group. I mean, I certainly gave them access to all the information that I had about different models of co-ops—that is to say, structure, not-for-profit cooperative models, all the rest of that stuff, which was available at that time both from the Berkeley co-op as well as from a nonprofit organization of consumer co-ops in Illinois or Iowa or somewhere in the upper Midwest that was a source of information for starting your own co-ops. I had mined them all pretty well and was able to report what the different models and means of organizing a consumer-based co-op were. And I encouraged them that from what I could see of the group that I saw every four to six weeks or however often it was that I was convinced they had what it took, and there was no reason not to go ahead.

Dave Van Hee

I remember picking Molly and Judy Kroeger up at the store. I was going to give them a ride home from work at the end of the day. It was one of those days when the light is real

golden, kind of. We only have five of them in the spring, I think. I've never been there, but it's what I imagine it might be like in Italy. It's what the Italian paintings look like. I remember I was sitting out in front of the store looking at that sign that said "Mercantile," kind of an old Victorian fancy lettering, an Old West look, and I came up with the idea for the name "Community Mercantile." I told them, and they said, Oh yeah, that sounds like a good idea. So that's my claim to fame—I actually did think of that name.

Mark Maher

Judy and Harry's store was called the Mercantile. I don't know if there was any passionate debate coming up with "Community Mercantile," but I'm sure in those days we tried to have a unanimous consensus on any decision that affected the group. It went over well with me. I don't know if we were able to save any money by just adding the word "community" to already existing signs—probably not. But here it was—something with the word "community" on it in downtown Lawrence, Kansas.

Judith Wynhausen

i: Do you recall who named the co-op? They took part of your name. Do you remember how that came about?

I don't remember if it was my idea or Molly's idea or whether it was a group effort. I mean, it was my idea, I remember, because I wanted to keep the name, the Mercantile, in there because I told all of our suppliers that we were really the same people, but we were just incorporating, and we were changing the name to the Community Mercantile instead of the Mercantile. We wanted to keep that name so that they would recognize this same group of people and extend the same credit to them that they had extended to us, because we had a really good credit rating before going out of business.

Molly Hamaker

I would credit Judy Kroeger with the concept of all of this coming together, but then, I kind of credit myself as being the organizer in the sense that I knew all of these different people from being at the stores and working and making the relationships and the connections and being in a place. I mean, everyone else was at their house, but I was at a public place. So to the extent that I might credit myself with that, I think it was just because I was the person who was visible.

People could come and talk to me while I was at work; then they would go to school or go to work or do whatever they did; then they would come back, and I'd still be there. Meanwhile, I'd talked to six other people. I feel like people were constantly at the store chatting.

Judith Wynhausen

After we changed over to a co-op, I was exhausted. I'd been working for three or four years without getting anything back, and I wanted to stay at home with my children. So I started a day care in my home. And Molly took the reins.

i: Could you talk about Molly?

She was an intelligent, sweet person, a very caring person. She really worked hard, putting in long hours to get the co-op going, and she also had a lot of ideas about how it could be done. Like I said, she and I spent a lot of time when she was working at our store talking about a co-op. Oh, we could do it like this, or maybe we should do it this way, thinking about all kinds of things that we could do with the co-op to get it going. I felt she was very competent and was able to take the reins and go with it. I wouldn't have dropped out if I didn't feel that she was able to do that.

Molly Hamaker

My memory of it is that everyone else did something else, and what I did was work at the Mercantile. Somehow, the next thing I knew I was working at the Community Mercantile. I was given the title of manager, I think. It was vague, but I think I was called the manager. I was the first person to be paid.

Chuck Magerl

Harry and Judy's Mercantile had gone out of business because it wasn't valued highly enough to make a go of it, so there weren't any banks that were willing to say to us, Sure, we'll take this strange cooperative entity that's been around for three months and lend them tens of thousands of dollars and let them give it a try.

Judith Wynhausen

We wanted to raise enough money by people giving us loans and buying memberships, so that the co-op could actually buy out our stock and buy some of the equipment that we had. This was a way we could get out of business without actually getting out of business—changing our business into a co-op.

Suzanne Bryant

Somewhere along the way, the store was being sold, and we decided that we could make the great leap from being a small buying club to owning a store. Molly was the inspiration behind the entire thing. She said something that has stuck with me my whole life: If the idea is right, the money will come. I was a little worried about where we would get the financial backing to start an entire store. How do we get the capital to start the inventory? Molly knew if the idea's right, the money will come. She was right. We started out on Massachusetts Street with our little store.

Molly Hamaker

As far as meetings outside the store, I'm sure we must have started having them at some point, but I don't have a very good memory of that. I do remember lots of talk about raising the money. We created this system of shares—not shares, but memberships; I'm kind of fuzzy—some system of how to get money from people. And it was such a pitiful amount. I don't know what it was, but we're probably talking about \$5,000. It was some small amount of money that we rolled up our sleeves and said, Okay, we're going to raise this money. We're going to buy out Judy and Harry's stuff, and then we'll have our own place.

I remember finagling. I remember conversations about people's egos—you know, like the different buying clubs. I think everyone wanted to move it out of their basement or out of their car. Nobody wanted to keep doing it that way, yet there were attachments about "my buying club." Then it was going to become "our store," very big "our." There must have been meetings to come up with a system. I just don't remember these meetings. We also could have just done it standing in the store. We were selling shares for \$5 or \$20. It's not very much money now, but then it was more to people, and no one had much money.

When I look back, there's this incredible trust. There was very little of, How am I sure that this will really happen? People rose to it. I remember people being incredibly trusting, wanting to make this work. I think maybe everyone went out and sold girl scouts cookies or something. You know, we talked it up during long conversations.

There was one customer of the store named Melanie Oldfather. I do remember having lots of schmoozing conversations with her about all of this, and at some point, she gave us a chunk of money that was enough to add to whatever other money people were willing to put up, which wasn't enough, to buy out Harry and Judy's equipment and stock.

Mark Maher

I remember that a child of a prominent university faculty member had some money of her own, and she was supportive of a cooperative movement. She didn't have the time or inclination to volunteer her time, but, as I recall, she loaned interest-free sufficient capital.

It was made clear to me that Miss Oldfather was not expecting to get her money back. I also thought it was from the beginning considered an interest-free loan, so that we didn't have to take whatever little margin there was between our expenses and the income and meet the interest expenses on \$5,000 or however many dollars it was that she was able to extend to us.

Chuck Magerl

i: Could you talk about the decision made by the Community Mercantile early on in its history to become a for-profit organization?

There were three different scenarios, at least in the state of Kansas. There was a standard corporation, a nonprofit, or a cooperative. At that stage, at least in Kansas, a cooperative organization form was focused solely on producer cooperatives, the traditional twin-circle farm co-ops that involved a substantial amount of capital ownership by the individual members, as well as production input from the individual members. They then specified patronage distributions and rebates and things of that nature, but it was an organization structure that was formatted specifically for producer cooperatives rather than consumer cooperatives.

As such, it really didn't seem to pertain to what we were talking about doing, so that seemed like a ridiculous direction to go. Other states had different statutes that were more applicable to consumer co-ops, but not in Kansas. The profit/nonprofit question came down to the fact that even in nonprofit organizations, if they have functions within their operation that do produce a profit, they end up having to pay income tax on those functions that produce a profit. We were not going to be a tax-exempt nonprofit; we weren't going to be a charitable or an educational entity—any of those things that grant you the tax-exempt status. Given that most of what we were going to be doing was going to be for-profit ultimately anyway, it seemed like we might as well go ahead and organize in the most common format and take it that way. There was certainly discussion about it, but looking at what the pluses and minuses of a separate nonprofit structure were going to be, it just seemed like it would be creating an extra layer where we'd still end up having to do all the standard corporation accounting and record keeping and things like that for any of the revenue-generating functions.

Charlie Gardiner

We talked about the producer co-op model and what it involved under Kansas law, and there seemed to be no real reason to pursue incorporation along those lines. I think it was relatively quickly dropped.

That same discussion happened for the New Destiny Federation as well. Some of the states did have and others did not have incorporation laws that would umbrella co-ops. None of them had a consumer co-op law per se. After looking at it, we didn't pursue that as a viable alternative in most circumstances. Some of the groups chose to incorporate as not-for-profits; others incorporated as for-profits.

The word that we actually used at the time was that we would incorporate as a for-profit, because that was the convenient thing to do, but operate as an anti-profit or minimal profit. In other words, the goal of this for-profit corporation was not to increase the net capital worth of its incorporators but simply to continue to exist to serve the community. I don't know if that was quite so blatantly put out in the incorporation papers for the Mercantile or not, but that was the tree that we were dancing around in those meetings, that it wasn't necessarily a capitalist—which, of course, was a dirty word at the time—venture to incorporate a for-profit business.

Molly Hamaker

i: How did the Community Mercantile compare to the previous two stores? Was it much of a change for those who had been shopping at those two stores or for those who had been relying on the buying clubs?

The reason we always had such a good cheese section at the Mercantile was because of the roots from Harry and Judy's store. Most co-ops were not so big into cheese, but we kept a pretty good cheese section. It was the equivalent of alcohol at a restaurant—you know, this co-op is brought to you by cheese. That was, I think, really true. We made our money on cheese. Isn't that funny? We carried an incredible selection of imported and domestic cheese. Most co-ops of our ilk would not have had that. It was a distinguishing feature.

I remember we'd get these giant wheels of Emmenthaler the size of a tire. Cutting cheese was a big job. In fact, for years we consumed incredible amounts of volunteer time cutting cheese at the co-op. As I'm talking about it, on a serious note, cheese really did finance our early days, because there was just a bigger profit margin on cheese than there could be on other things. To begin with, it was more expensive than a bag of rice or a bag of onions.

We added produce. I don't think there was much produce at either store until we took them over. Produce was a big change.

Mark Maher

So we needed people to get the store opened. We needed people to track inventory of whatever it was we were going to be selling. There was fresh produce that we weren't going to buy at Dillons. Someone was going to have to go to the farmer's market and choose who was going to give us the best deal or had the highest-quality product for the price.

Marilyn Roy

I became the produce manager. There was a fellow who lived in what is now the bed-and-breakfast over on Tenth and Ohio. At the time, it was a blue house, a student residence that was kind of run down. It was called Pooh Corner. This fellow—I think his name was Alan, a very handsome guy—headed up this neighborhood food cooperative that was based down in that basement. He and I somehow got connected. We would go in the middle of the night once or twice a week to Kansas City to the river quay and deal with this father and son team who I now think were Pisciotta.

We would take our check and we would pick out the produce and load it into the back of his pickup truck at three o'clock in the morning and drive it back and open up the store, unload the produce, bring it in, and set it all up. I still remember being so happy about tiptoeing away, shutting the door, and leaving all of that. I felt like Santa Claus. Once a

week, I got to be Santa Claus. The bins are empty, and then they're full. People come in, and they don't know who did it. That person was me, and it was really fun.

Chuck Magerl

i: What kind of foods did the Lawrence community want that they couldn't get from their regular grocery stores?

Brown rice. That was a classic of the '70s. At that point, everything was Uncle Ben's and converted white rice. Brown rice had come out of the mysterious East and took on almost a halo effect—this is the food that is healthy and vital and will keep you going forever. It's done wonders for this old civilization who have been farming for forty centuries in China, so brown rice must be the key to longevity.

It was imported cheeses, Jarlsberg Swiss cheese or Danish Havarti. Yogurt. There were yogurts available in the supermarket, but most of those were gelatin- and sugar-based yogurts, for instance, rather than natural cultured yogurts.

Spices, also. The Mercantile had a large array of herbs and spices that were used both for seasoning and certainly a significant amount for medicinal purposes as well. It was really the main supplier in this region for medicinal herbs as well as fresh spices to put flavors in foods.

One of the other things that caught people's attention with the Mercantile was the dairy wholesaler, which was a place up north of Topeka named Hiller's. They were a throwback to an earlier time in the sense that all of their milk was delivered in glass bottles. It really had a wholesomeness and freshness that wasn't the same coming out of a plastic jug. Hiller's was the main dairy supplier for the Mercantile, and we sold phenomenal amounts of that milk.

People were also coming in to buy the half-and-half and the whipping cream. There was the sense of, Wow, I haven't tasted a product like this in years, because of how the processing had stripped the flavor out of a lot of the dairy products. It was also a real identifier in the sense that you would watch people walking out the door with the plastic handles on the top of glass milk jugs. Wow, something is going on here different from what we see coming out of Dillons.

Mark Maher

We had a lot of money going to Alma and to the dairy west of Topeka, Hiller's Dairy, with the incredibly heavy gallon glass bottles. I don't know why my truck didn't break down carrying a couple of loads. I was asking the people at Hiller's, Do you think this is too much? Your wheels aren't rubbing on the frame of the truck, are they? No. You better not hit any bumps, though.

Here I was buying milk in an old-fashioned gallon bottle. It tasted good. It was obviously fresh. And you were recycling the glass; the bottles were going back to the dairy. There was no waste, other than the gasoline it took to move it from the dairy to the Merc. Somebody was going to have to move it anyway, whether it was our members' gas or you paid somebody to deliver it.

Harry Kroeger, Jr.

i: How was the co-op different from your store?

They went far more into the natural and organic product and health food line. Of course, they dropped a number of things that we'd carried, like the Usinger material, which is not health food. It took a very different track at that point. They had an entirely different philosophy than mine. I'm a little bit suspicious of the terms "organic" and "natural." Even when they say that the material was grown on farmland that has not been poisoned—since when? and how are you preventing runoff from other areas? I have a great deal of skepticism—skepticism in two directions. I'm not exactly sure that a lot of what's available in the normal supermarket is so dangerous, and I'm also very skeptical that everything sold in so-called health food stores is all that healthy.

Molly Hamaker

I think we may have stopped carrying some of the packaged things over time and started carrying more bulk stuff. So we had more day-to-day stuff, and we were a little less gourmet than that particular store had been. Those were the big changes.

Judith Wynhausen

The co-op decided to go with plastic things to put the bulk items in instead of the crocks. They were hoping that that would help take care of the grain moth problem, but, of course, it didn't. Grain moths are just a problem, and there's not much you can do about it, I'm afraid. Well, they have these traps with sex pheromones that attract the grain moths to them. Even though you kill a lot of grain moths, there still seem to be more.

Molly Hamaker

We did keep a lot of the same distributors, though. I honestly can't remember what the name of the company was at that point, but we were dealing with one or two natural foods distributors that we would make out our orders to. I think some of the buying clubs would do some bulk orders from those same places. They'd have to buy by the case. Of course, the breakthrough with the co-op was that you could just go to the store on a Tuesday morning and buy a jar of peanut butter, and you didn't have to think how much peanut butter you might want three weeks or six weeks later, when the order came in.

Mark Maher

As I recall, somebody had to be responsible for inventorying grains, beans, and seeds, and I did that for a while. Somebody was responsible for dairy and cheese inventory. You'd have to come in and look at what you had from the last order, look at what was left, and give your best estimate as to how many pounds there were left in this bag of turtle beans and how long it had lasted, and it would be up to Molly, I assume, to place the order. The best I recall, Molly had time, and she had the desire. I think she had a little business experience.

Had she delivered Dawn yet or was she pregnant? She had? I don't think her husband then had a regular job. He was then, maybe as now, a full-time artist, and I had no idea how these people were going to pay their expenses.

Molly Hamaker

i: What was your quality of life during that time?

We were totally, completely poor. I had a family to support, and Dave didn't work. He took care of Dawn, sort of, and then Alita, and he made art, as he still does and never stopped. So pretty much I just worked and supported our little family.

Dave Van Hee

Back then, I was for more pay for co-op workers. That was my thing. More money for co-op workers and better benefits for their families. I was like a union activist for the working man and woman in the work collective, speaking out against the depraved and degenerate conditions that they had to work under.

i: Was it so bad?

It was inhumane. That's what the line had to be, because I needed more money for marijuana and beer, gasoline and diapers.

i: So what were the conditions like that Molly came home and described to you?

Filthy, dangerous, and illegal. No, I'm just making that up. My only point then was, Get paid more. It was just selfish self-interest.

Molly Hamaker

We used to get food stamps before I started working at the co-op. I don't know at what point we stopped being eligible for that. We were pretty poor. I would call it subsistence-level income then for a family. I didn't get paid very much, probably about whatever I was getting paid before. A couple bucks an hour? Maybe less. A dollar an hour? It was very little. That's why I was always like, We've got to pay more if we want to sustain this. If you want people running things, then you've got to pay more, or everyone's just going to quit, and then you'll have to start all over again.

Bob Marvin

I think the Lawrence co-op was fortunate that they bought from Harry, who already had the place. I think it was fortunate that they'd already been in action as a group, because it gave them some impetus.

Dan Bentley

Do you remember that food co-op in Phoenix?

Bob Marvin

Oh yeah. It was in an apartment.

Dan Bentley

Yeah, in a house. I remember going over there. The stuff was arranged up and down a staircase going down into the basement, and you went along and dug out what you wanted. I remember thinking, God, this is a little weird. I don't know these people, and this food is just sitting here. I don't think I went back.

Bob Marvin

It had, just like he said, taken over this house. Did people live there? Surely not.

Dan Bentley

I think they did.

Bob Marvin

It must have been difficult, because there was stuff spread all over. It was like a caravan coming in and moving into a motel.

Dan Bentley

The fact that the Lawrence co-op went to a storefront so soon was really good.

Bob Marvin

I'm not sure why we survived.

Dan Bentley

I think there was good leadership.

Bob Marvin

I think there was great leadership that stayed. There were a lot of times that Molly could have said, Well, fuck you all, and walked away.

Dan Bentley

She kind of did. That was her attitude often. I've always loved Molly. I think she's great, but she was a stern hand, really. At times, she could be autocratic.

Bob Marvin

I think if we hadn't had that, we would have gone to pieces.

Dan Bentley

I've been involved in a lot of hippie organizations that lacked that, where we tried to be egalitarian and totally democratic, and we fell apart.

Mark Maher

I think Molly, the paid employee, was paid for twenty hours a week to start. She may have been the only paid person to start. She may have actually been putting in a lot more time than twenty hours. I'm sure she had a lot of pressure for very little monetary compensation.

An incentive, an attraction for Molly might have been that she was able to work someplace where her little girl could be there and not be in the way when David wasn't able to take care of her.

Dawn Van Hee

When I was little, I was with my mom a lot. She took me everywhere. I remember meetings where everyone was sitting in a circle. I did a lot of observing. I was a pretty quiet kid. I was well behaved. I didn't cause trouble. I spent a lot of time listening to my mom talk.

Molly Hamaker

So now we have a store, and I'm working a million hours a day. I remember carrying the keys around my neck. Let's see. How old was I? I was twenty-one years old, and I had never run anything in my life. The only jobs I'd ever had in my life were working at the Midway Cafe making banana bread and veggie loafs and working at those two natural foods stores. Before that, I'd been in college, and before that, I was a kid.

Robin Devine

Molly came in from the Mercantile Grocery store. She was just the most dynamic person. God, she could keep so many things together at once. It was just staggering.

fran beier

She was amazing.

Dan Bentley

Confident.

Robin Devine

It was real easy for people to believe that if there was anybody that we needed to get money together for to do this full time, it was Molly. That was pretty obvious.

Suzanne Bryant

Molly was a strong voice and had respect from the entire community. When Molly spoke, people listened. Molly had a lot to say, and I think people appreciated that she was the mother behind it all.

Molly Hamaker

So here I am running the Community Mercantile Grocery Company, and I honestly have no idea how I could do anything, but I was excited about it, and I worked really hard, and I had all these great people around me and just did it. I carried the keys around my neck, because I was afraid I was going to lose them. And I don't think there were any others. We couldn't afford to have a locksmith the store was so poor, so I carried the keys to the Mercantile around my neck all the time. And I really did feel like that was more than just so I wouldn't lose the keys. When I look back, the co-op was it in my life at that point. I mean, I had a child and, of course, that was very important to me. But beyond my family, the co-op was my whole universe. And it was an incredible universe, because there were all these interesting people and interesting ideas. It was like, you'd go to work and you'd think, How interesting could it be to sell groceries all day? Of course, we knew we weren't just selling groceries; we were creating a new society. It was very heady stuff, as well as sweeping the floor.

Mark Maher

Molly was effusive. She was generous. She seemed to be about as open and transparent as anybody I'd ever met. She was energetic. She was enthusiastic. She presented herself as a person who was excited about what was going on, what she was a part of, in those early months. I think she thought she was very fortunate to be in that place at that time

and to have that chance to be selling a different kind of product in a different kind of setting with the understanding that we were trying to sell it to each other at cost plus the cost of keeping the store open, keeping the cash register manned.

Molly Hamaker

It was like, you get up in the morning, you go to the co-op, you open the door, you turn on the lights, you sweep the floor, you fill up the bins, and then people started showing up. And what was so cool, of course, is not that the people showed up to buy, but people showed up to work, because the work system, as far as I can remember, was always there. People always had to volunteer. In fact, if I remember correctly, in the early days, you couldn't buy yourself out. You had to work, and if you didn't work, you couldn't be a member.

Judith Wynhausen

One of the things that I think was my innovation, which maybe was not that great of an innovation, was to have the two-pricing system. So in the beginning, we had a co-op price and we had a nonmember price. My thinking on that was that people would come to the store and see the difference in the prices and think, Oh well, I should certainly join the co-op, because then I could get the co-op price. But actually it was a rather cumbersome way of handling it.

Molly Hamaker

There were tons of arguments over this. A big issue for people was whether you could shop there if you weren't a member. If you weren't a member, did you pay more? And whether you could buy your way out of doing your work. Those were major political issues in the co-op, and they got resolved in various ways over the years. In the very beginning, though, everyone who was a member had to work.

A large part of my job was telling people who would show up how to do jobs and then telling new people how to do the same jobs. Now that I look back, it must have gotten kind of tedious, but I was having fun.

Sue helped me in the first store, but I don't know if she was hired yet or not. It's possible that she wasn't hired until we were at the other store, but honestly I don't even remember her at the other store. I only remember her at the first store. And she wasn't there very long. I mean, she only worked a few months, not even half a year. It was a very short amount of time.

Sue was an excellent organizer. I was up to my ears in alligators, trying to keep track of all the stuff. As I said, I had little or no experience doing any of this. Sue was someone who liked things to be orderly, and this was a very disorderly adventure, not just physically but on every level. I think she was good about trying to structure things, and that was really helpful. I mean, it was really helpful to me personally. I'm sure it was

helpful to the store in general. I think about things like files and charts for ordering products, that kind of stuff. This is pre-computer, of course, so things weren't as easy as they'd be now, where you'd get some software, punch a few buttons, and it would all get done. We didn't have that stuff then.

Suzanne Bryant

I was the second paid supervisor at the Mercantile. Molly was supervising everyone, and it became clear that she needed some help. I was hired as a second manager, I think, part-time, and a big part of what we had to do was what you would do running any store, making sure that you had the inventory, buying the food, getting it priced, and getting it on the shelf. When you have perishable goods, you really have to watch that closely.

There was all that running-the-store part of things that happened and the money and the business part of it, but there was also the fact that there was a dual-pricing system. For everything that was sold, there was a members' price and a nonmembers' price. The members' price was available to people who worked a certain number of hours each month.

Shirley Scheier

There were people in the community who weren't on the collective but would step in and help us or advise us. Sue Bryant was certainly someone I remember in that realm. I'm not certain about this, but my impression of Sue was that she rushed in at a time when there were some difficulties and they really needed help. It wasn't the right fit, though. I think Sue wanted to do other things with her time and knowledge and interest.

Suzanne Bryant

I was working at the Mercantile when a group of women came and said, We've been looking around, and all around the country there are small cooperative health food stores with adjacent or connected restaurants. We really need a restaurant so that we can get the idea of good food out to the public. They asked me if I would help with the business part of setting things up.

Bob Marvin

i: What was that first storefront at 730 Mass like?

It was real small. That's the main thing I recall.

Molly Hamaker

In the beginning, we were limited by space, 'cause it was the smallest space imaginable. I hope there are pictures of it. It was little. It was narrow and skinny, like a closet. Imagine

a walk-in closet. It probably was the size of a walk-in closet in a mansion. I mean, it was really small. Maybe there were at the most two or three people working at a time.

Mark Maher

There were front and back rooms to the space at 730 Mass, and in the back, I think there was a four-foot-wide closet that would have been the cool room. This was a very low-tech operation. We couldn't afford anything to spoil, so we couldn't overwork the cooler. We had to be sensitive to the motor running okay. I don't remember how they refrigerated the cool room. I suspect it was a window air conditioner popped in the hole venting into the alley into an insulated fiberboard, maybe fiberglass, Styrofoam-type board, to keep the cool room moth-unfriendly and below whatever heat and humidity starts to invite mold onto surfaces or rice and beans and nuts. I'm trying to remember if those had to go into a real cool cooler or if they could tolerate the higher temperatures that the rice and beans could. Ideally, we turned over bulk product fast enough that there wasn't time for anything to go from eggs to larvae to winged before the customer bought it.

Downtown Lawrence has mice, and the cool room was a way to seal the product away from moths and mice. I don't know if we have weevils in Lawrence. I'm sure, especially if you're buying a product that was organic, it wouldn't have been fumigated against critters that came in with the product from the field that somehow got through the de-husking or hulling process and into the bag. There was bound to be some remnants, some bundle of genetics that wanted to grow inside your vegetable bag, and if you could keep that temperature at forty-five or forty degrees, it's not going to grow, so at least you're able to get the product to room temperature and assume you have fast depletion of the product at room temperature; then it's up to the customer to use it quickly, and if they keep it in a jar for three months at summer temperatures in Lawrence, maybe they'll have some egg converted into protein and fat that's crawling on the side of their jar, which people will eat or not.

Bob Marvin

The first day I worked, I worked on the cash register for a while, and I rang up \$20 instead of \$2. Molly came back and noticed and said, Oh, this is our best day ever. I said, That's a mistake. That \$18 mistake made the difference between it being our best day or not.

Mark Maher

I think it was the winter of '75, when Steve, who was from out of town, maybe Oklahoma, closed one Saturday. Molly came in the next Monday. I was at home and got a phone call. Molly was hyperventilating. She was really upset because there was nothing in the cash box. I don't think we had expected everybody to get the cash to the bank every day. There was a note left saying he needed the money to go out of town for a serious family issue. He apologized.

Molly seemed to be taking an awful lot of responsibility on herself. It was a big deal. Lord knows how much gross had to have been sold to account for what was lost. I can't believe it was \$150. It might have been as little as \$70 or \$80. As I say, the profit margin would have been so low that that would have accounted for an awful lot of gross sales.

That was really the only crisis I remember on that side of the street, unless you want to count the little personal crises of so many people in the store and not enough room and people being turned off due to having to wait. This was not your general experience when shopping for groceries. When you go to a store, you have enough room, you walk down the aisle and throw stuff in your cart, you go to the cash register and check out, and you don't have to accommodate other people's thought-processes and wait your turn, all in a very intimate environment. On the other hand, if you wanted to meet new people and talk about why this was different or why you were involved in something different, this was a place to do it.

Bob Marvin

I was active in the farm workers' group. Ed Dutton, who's a retired professor of social welfare, was the faculty advisor to that group. We picketed stores. Anyway, the co-op bought lettuce from the supplier. Not all our food was organic by any means. It got to be more and more so. The connection with Fayetteville may have existed early, but they couldn't supply a lot of stuff, so the co-op would buy stuff from a regular supplier. There are more alternatives now.

They had bought lettuce that was not UFW lettuce, and I had been regularly attending meetings, and I got up and said, I don't think we should do this. Molly and Sue may have been the work collective at that point. They felt like it was providing something for members, which is certainly a good point. But I said, I'd like to vote on it at the next meeting. At the next meeting, it was a unanimous decision not to buy the non-UFW lettuce. People wanted to provide lettuce to the members who might want it, but nobody actually wanted to stand up and say they wanted it. I never heard anybody say they wanted it. There was no argument about it.

I got involved about that point. Chuck was getting real active then. I don't know if he was an original member or not. He was very young at the time. He must have been about twenty, if not younger. I remember he and his roommates were at that meeting. I think I connected with him after that. We got to talking. As I say, there really wasn't very much division on that issue, although there may have been people who quit over it. There were people who quit over any number of things. There were lots of personality conflicts in those days.

i: What were the meetings like?

I remember the first meeting I went to. If it wasn't January of 1975, it was February or March. It was down at the public library meeting room. The chairs were lined up in rows, and there were these people sitting separately, like in church. I went in and sat down, and

nobody was up front. Nobody wanted to take over the meeting. It was like nobody was really in charge. After a while, we just started talking. I had questions, so after a while I started asking questions, but I didn't know where I was directing my questions. It really pissed me and some other people off. At the end of the meeting, I said, This is really stupid. This isn't something where we're coming to talk about Emily Dickinson, where we're all on the same page. We're coming to talk about a store, and the people who know the answers to our questions should sit up at the front. The next meeting, Molly and a couple other people were up at the front. We rearranged the chairs and did a circle, which was good.

It was goofy. They weren't trying to impose. They were trying not to impose, but it meant nobody was in charge and nobody was looking at each other. It was like Molly was over here, and I was over here. There were probably twenty or twenty-five there. Probably that was a stormy night, and there weren't that many people out.

Sometimes we had potlucks. Frequently, they were quite congenial. Sometimes, there was yelling and screaming. Usually, it was fun, kind of a party atmosphere. We'd get the business done and socialize.

i: Was there, then, a vacuum of leadership?

We had to demand leadership.

i: Were there dominant personalities or was there a lack of personality in leadership positions?

I would say that Molly was the dominant personality, at least at first. The work collective was always very important, but there were always other people who were important as well. Before Patti was on the work collective, she was in the buying club, as I understand. So there was Molly and Patti, Sue Bryant, Dick Dunhaupt. I'm not sure if he was active from the earliest time. I certainly talked a lot. Bob Burford. Ed Boles. Richard Delaware was quieter. He was active, though. Denise Kester. She doesn't get up and speak a lot at meetings, but she was active.

Molly Hamaker

Speaking of how the store changed and how the buying club members' lives changed by having a store, I think it was phenomenal. I also remember this incredible sense of pride of it being our grocery store.

Dan Bentley

One thing I remember from that store was that that was where I was trained to go in and say, Do we have such and such? not, Do you have such and such? It was where I reprogrammed my mind that this really was my store.

i: Did the collective encourage that?

Oh yeah. They were reprogramming everybody. Oh no, this is your co-op.

Bob Marvin

It wasn't just them.

Dan Bentley

It was a general attitude.

Bob Marvin

It was like feminism or gay lib or being racially inclusive. Though I don't know how many blacks were members. If they walked in the door, I think we were nice to them. If people weren't, I would have been pissed off. It really was ours. The energy I put into it early on really made a difference, and I think that's true of everybody who put energy into it, including the ones who went away mad. In some ways, it's a monument to what we did, but it was also an educational experience, and we were learning about interpersonal dynamics.

Molly Hamaker

Though I'm not sure we really knew exactly what we were talking about or whether we were even talking about the same thing, I remember having lots of discussions about how we were going to run the world differently. And everyone had to eat, so food was a perfect place to start. And you didn't need to be a doctor. I mean, health care's important, but to be a doctor you have to have really expensive equipment to change that universe.

John Newman

We started these co-ops because there was nowhere to buy natural foods. There were these little health foods stores that basically sold vitamins. I'm sure you could buy some rice in one-pound bags, but if you were feeding your family and rice was a big part of your diet, that wasn't sufficient. Personally, I was a back-to-the-land hippie before I was at the co-op. We bought grains from feed stores sometimes. We'd buy wheat. We couldn't get rice there, but we did get some other things that really weren't intended for human consumption. It was okay to eat. There weren't other sources, unless you were going to buy a pound at a time here or there and pay outrageous prices. That was a big part of why the co-op was formed—to promote natural foods.

Mark Maher

I went from being somebody who would buy a one-pound plastic bag of brown rice that probably had been through fumigation or some kind of temperature sterilization before it got into that plastic bag to being somebody who would take home half of a fifty-pound

bag of brown rice. That was a good feeling, to buy a product that was coming direct from Texas or Arkansas in its fifty-pound bag without being staged down through smaller and smaller bags, which would perhaps be one serving and then you'd throw away the wrapper and have to make another trip to the store and burn more gasoline to buy another day's serving of your product.

We began to think in terms of buying enough beans, seed, and rice to last a couple of weeks. At this point, we were making almost daily recipes out of *Recipes for a Small Planet* and just being filled with joy. I don't know how to put it. We had been buying stuff from Dillons and IGA to make these recipes. And then to be able to buy organically grown products or products from bulk with fewer middlemen and then put together a meal where we had fifteen or twenty ingredients for dinner between the salad in season and one entree or several entrees—I just felt like I was growing up. I felt like I had taken some control over my health. I don't know if you've heard other people talk about changing their diet, but in that thirty-day period, going from cold turkey no meat to some dairy as being the only animal product, and occasionally an egg, there was probably a little weight loss. I had a sense of slightly altered state of consciousness. I felt a little lighter, a little edgier. I'm sure I was eating more often, and I know for sure that I was eating a far greater variety of foods, and probably more raw foods than I normally would have thought of eating. I was doing it for economic, political, environmental, spiritual, and anti-hypocrisy reasons, and I think that, too, brought an emotional response, reaction to the shopping, to the planning, to the building and creating of the meals, and then the presentation of the food, and then having people over to show what this was like. They'd never had anything like this before.

i: Did it taste good?

Of course it tasted good. It was taste, texture, color. And then you get on your high horse and talk about it.

Molly Hamaker

Now, it's hard for people to realize how inaccessible healthy food was, so in those years, it was about access to healthy foods, but it was also about controlling how things are distributed in our society and about ownership of the means of distribution. That was a very big part of the point of doing it, and the point of it being food rather than all the other things that came later—such as the credit union.

Nick Masullo

One big difference was that we wanted it to be a natural foods co-op, and not everyone necessarily agreed with that. The co-op in Fayetteville had only been going a few years. The people before us had different ideas, like inexpensive bulk food. If it was white rice, that was fine. They didn't care so much about natural foods. It was just an idea. It had to do with self-reliance and serving people who'd gone back to the land, since there was

such a huge movement of that here, but not necessarily natural foods. If it was white rice and bulk that was really cheap, that would be better.

Whereas when we came in, when I started getting involved at Ozark Natural Foods, I was part of a group that was purist about our food and didn't want any sugar or any kind of adulteration. No hydrogenated oils or anything like that. We were more purist in that way. I didn't see any reason to carry products that weren't natural products. So we redefined the co-op to be more natural-food-oriented.

Deborah Altus

During the late '60s and the '70s, a lot of natural foods co-ops sprang up. The Mercantile is part of what's been called "new wave" food co-ops. Their foundation seemed to be based on the desire of people to have organic foods, foods free from a lot of chemicals and artificial ingredients. People banded together to get food like that for themselves. This was very different from the earlier food co-op movement, which was more based in the '30s, when you saw food co-ops being formed because people were so interested in economic democracy, very interested in the political ramifications of co-ops, the whole people's movement. It was very politically energized. If you go back and look at some co-op history from around the Seattle area or the Berkeley area, those places where they have old, long-standing co-op movements, you'll really get a sense of the political fervor that instilled that early co-op movement from the '30s.

I loved looking at some of the names of co-ops. Some of the co-ops in the '30s had names emphasizing people or emphasizing democracy or emphasizing one member, one vote. For example, there were Puget Consumers Co-op and Consumers Co-op Society of Palo Alto.

Then in the 1960s and '70s, the names had to do with food. They would bring to mind attractive rural farm scenes. But they weren't instilled with that democratic fervor that the 1930s names had. The current ones usually have food in their names, such as Grain Train, Sunseed, Ambrosia, and Mixed Nuts. Other names of new wave food co-ops were Inner Sunset, Natural Harvest, Good Earth, and Rainbow Way.

Now, the Community Mercantile is different because it took its name from the store that was existing before in that location. You can really see how the co-op has had different phases throughout its history depending on what its members were interested in. And the members that started the Mercantile were more interested, I think, in the food aspects of everything and getting their members organic food than they were in the whole democracy thing. Although that wasn't unimportant. There's certainly a feel from the early work collective that they cared about consensus and that they cared about hearing people and that they cared about democracy. That clearly was an important part of it, but I don't think it was the main reason. I think food was probably the main organizing factor.

Tim Miller

i: Why do you think so many food co-ops emerged at this time?

For a couple of reasons. One was the antiestablishment spirit of the time. We should take control of our lives and get our lives out of corporate hands, and food is an obvious place. It's one of the biggest consumptions in your life, so to democratize it and control it ourselves was important. Of course, at the same time, the modern emphasis on health food was coming into vogue. All of these people who'd grown up on Wonder Bread and good ol' rapidly plasticized American food were suddenly interested in whole grains and natural foods and were beginning to think about pesticides and patronizing local farmers. That was the spirit of the times. This is what was happening. Lawrence was like a thousand other places in that regard, I think.

Deborah Altus

i: Why do you think that a group of young people in Lawrence, Kansas, in the mid-'70s, would have formed a food cooperative?

I imagine there were a number of different reasons. I think the thought of running their own business was probably really exciting. A group of people getting together and starting a business, a storefront certainly, would have been exciting. But I imagine a much more driving force would have been that they wanted organic food, good organic wheat flour to make their whole wheat bread out of and good organic produce that you couldn't otherwise get unless you collectively pooled your resources. Starting a co-op would really be the only way you could do that. Buying clubs help to some extent, but buying clubs are really only good for nonperishable stuff, like bags of flour and things like that. But when it came to getting produce and other things, you really needed to have a storefront, so I could see why they'd really want to do that.

That was such an optimistic time. I think people felt like they were changing the world. They were coming up with a better way to eat and a better way to shop, a better way to run things, a more equitable way of treating each other. It was the perfect form of business for this group of people. It fit so perfectly with their values, in terms of one person, one vote, and really honoring the individual, keeping money local and as much local control as you can have over everything. That was so important. It really fit with everybody's value systems so beautifully.

Judith Wynhausen

i: Do you regard the co-op experience or movement as political? Did you think of yourself as being political in what you were doing, starting a co-op?

Yeah, I think so. It was flying in the face of the capitalistic system in a way, because we were trying to circumvent that. We were trying to offer food at what we thought would be lower prices.

Ken Lassman

In the mid-'70s, there was still a real political edge to Lawrence. Food was seen as a tool for political awareness. *Diet for a Small Planet*. Groups were interested in exploring that. If you're going to become vegetarian, if you're going to explore alternatives, you wanted to make sure you knew where your food was coming from. The co-op movement was, I think, grounded in that. The alternative community in Lawrence was attuned to that. It was a natural outgrowth of all of their activities, of all the other activities of the alternative lifestyle at the time.

Chuck Magerl

The Community Mercantile was inaugurated in an attempt to do a grassroots buying process to supply the foods that were desired but not being served by the Lawrence market. Tied into that was an ideology that said that food is not something that should be dictated by the need for significant profit, that food, as a basic substance of life, should be available to everyone regardless of whether their buying habits result in profitability for corporations.

There was a real distinct us-versus-them sense in Lawrence, and there was a sense that there needs to be a way that the interests of the counterculture and some of the political radicals could be cared for by people within that group, within that mindset. There was a grander sense that an entirely separate alternative culture would emerge parallel to the mass market and that there would be an entire string of manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and retailing that would exist separately from the forces that at that point were still seen as being allied with what was oftentimes called "the military-industrial complex." These were the ugly times of the Vietnam War. These were times when everybody knew the war was a bad idea, but still people that you knew were going over there and getting killed, even though nobody wanted it. There was a strong political component to the idea of setting up an alternative network.

Bob Marvin

i: Why did you join the Community Mercantile?

Ideological reasons as much as anything. I didn't feel repelled by the local supermarkets, and I've never quit shopping at the supermarkets. I felt like it was good to support organic agriculture and as much as possible organize on a smaller level than corporations. Of course, at that time, many stores were owned by local people. That has changed since.

i: What were the people like who were early members of the co-op?

They were freaks. I'd say mostly anti-war. Of course, there were exceptions, but the war wasn't something you argued about. I'd say mostly liberal. If they hadn't been active in civil rights and anti-war, they were at least sympathetic. There were a few people who were more hard-core organic, more interested in food than politics, or interested in

different politics. Mostly young. Always some members with kids. A lot of them with links to campus.

i: What were the politics of the co-op?

Mixed, but left, liberal, radical, communitarian. What do you think?

Dan Bentley

I don't know. To me, it just felt good. It felt like a good place to be. It felt really good for me to go there. I was affirmed every time I went there, for whatever reason. And it wasn't always consciously political for me. I think there was a politics, but it'd be hard for me to say exactly what it was except as you went issue by issue.

It was a place that felt very friendly. It felt very close to my heart and my soul, and I felt like at some level I loved the people that shopped there. Even though some of them I barely knew, 'cause I'd met them through a friend through a friend, I felt like they would cover my ass if I got in trouble. Likewise with me. Like we'd try to help each other out even though we hardly knew each other. It was that connection. A friend knows that person, and you'd see them in there, and you'd start talking to them.

Valerie Kelly

The reason why I was involved was because of the wonderful group of people that was part of the co-op when I was in Lawrence. I felt like we were energized by the things that we were doing. I was energized.

Mark Maher

One of the personal attractors to the concept and materialization of the Mercantile for me was family. We seemed to share a common worldview and acted on it, acting in a way that appeared to be personally healthy, socially healthy, and desirable for the planet. Who could criticize us? It seemed like we were doing something that was different from the mainstream, that was beyond reproach. For me, it was definitely one of those things I came to do over and over again throughout my life, and that is, become physically and emotionally involved in a cause, in a project that meant something to me intellectually. It appealed to my sense of being different from the herd and being rationally justifiable.

After reading Frances Moore Lappe, the rest of the culture seemed irrational in their pursuit where we had been headed since meat became affordable. I could talk for half an hour about the unaffordability of meat in America and the rest of the world. When it's just a matter of paying so much money for protein and fat in a meat product, it looks affordable, but there's the hidden costs that aren't counted in the actual price of the meat.

This appealed to me intellectually, emotionally, and I had the time. It was a place to see the same people, touch base. It was like people were getting on with being adults and

choosing what was important to them. It did not seem like a child's game. It seemed very serious. Fun but serious business. This was a group of people who were personally involved and committed to helping each other and attracting other people to an alternative way of eating and shopping for food.

Judith Wynhausen

i: How would you characterize the community, the people who were working there or who were members? How would you describe yourself and them?

Well, a lot of them were students or professors involved with the university. The hippie era was over by then, but in the early days, I guess, a lot of us would have characterized ourselves as hippies. We were into alternatives, into alternative lifestyles, into a sort of communism, in a way—not exactly communism—but into the idea of everybody getting together and doing something together rather than one person doing it or in having it be really slick and beautiful. Not that it wasn't beautiful. It was beautiful, but it wasn't slick. It was funky beautiful. A lot of them had children, and they were all concerned about food and having really healthy food. Do-it-yourselfers.

Charlie Gardiner

Co-ops were another product of the mid-'60s, of the sudden realization that you were and could be an individual and different from your father and your uncles. That's almost assumed at this point. It's no longer a fresh discovery. Growing up in a society which at least in the '40s and '50s minimized the place of the individual, people had to be educated to the sense that they did, as individuals, have power and that they had to take power and, of course, that they had to use it responsibly. Having discovered their power as individuals, also sitting there for them to discover was that they had far more power by acting in concert with other individuals. This is always with the idea that in order to act in concert you have to be aware, so you're aware of yourself and you're aware of a group at the same time. Acting in concert with other people and in cooperation with other people, great things can get done.

Molly Hamaker

I was thinking about what motivated me and other people to do something like the co-op in the first place. I remember when I was growing up, the duck-and-cover days, bomb shelters, and nuclear war. Then the Vietnam War was on TV. Because of the times that we were living in, I really believed, as I think a lot of my agetates did, that we were not going to live to be thirty. The world was not viable. It was not sustainable. It was going to end. I think there were a lot of us that were raised with this incredible fear that things were going to collapse. There's going to be a nuclear bomb. We'd all be dead. We saw these horrible movies in school about nuclear war, and then they'd teach us duck-and-cover. If you had any brains at all, you'd think, That doesn't make sense. I don't think that we're going to be alive after that.

I think that's why a lot of people used drugs. I think that's why there was this sense that people could experiment. It's easy to experiment and try things when you don't think what's there now is going to last or continue to function. You have nothing to lose. I know I operated under that assumption. Of course, we didn't think about it that way at the time. It's only looking back that I realize that.

When I had Dawn, my first child, I was only nineteen, which was really unusual in those days for my peer group. Many people I knew didn't have kids till they were forty. You know, it was zero population. But somehow I ended up with this little baby. My way of coming out of that whole mindset of how I could do anything I wanted because the world wasn't going to last and the world would be gone before I reached my prime was that once I had a baby, it occurred to me that maybe the world wasn't going to end and maybe it's still going to be here, and I hope it's still going to be here, because now I'm raising this child, and so if it's still going to be here, I made it my mission to make the world a different place, a world that I would want to raise my child in and that I would want to live in. So I hit this point where I decided, If it's going to go, it's going to go, and then it doesn't matter what we do; but if it's still going to be here, then what do I want it to look like and what can I start doing to help make it be like that? For myself and for a lot of other people, something around all of that was underlying what we were up to.

I went to college when I was sixteen, and I decided that I was going to be a vegetarian. There was a yoga group at college, and we started doing yoga. I started reading up on Eastern religion, especially Hinduism. I guess that must have been what got me started on the vegetarian stuff.

Dave Van Hee

I was at Webster College in 1969. Molly was one of the students there at Webster College. This is in Webster Groves, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. We had this kitchen in the men's dorm, and we bought a fifty-pound bag of brown rice and kept it in a shopping cart. We kept a shopping cart in our room for security reasons.

Molly Hamaker

I found out about and started reading about macrobiotics, which was a big trend in those days. We would buy giant fifty-pound bags of rice at a little health food store and put them in a shopping cart in the dorm. There was a cafeteria that we were supposed to eat in. I think we were on the meal plan, but we also had these kitchens in the dorm. There was one kitchen in particular that a group of us started using to cook our own food in. I became the macrobiotic dorm chef and started making all this food.

Dave Van Hee

We had a macrobiotics book by the macrobiotic guy, and so just for the hell of it, just to do something different, we went on a macrobiotic diet. At the same time, we were using all kinds of drugs, drinking alcohol. By drugs, I mean mostly just marijuana—LSD and

mescaline and psilocybin a little bit maybe, but mostly marijuana and beer, I'd say. And I smoked tobacco then, too. I had a lot of colds and sicknesses for some reason. I had a whole bunch of Campbell's soup too. I stockpiled tons of Campbell's soup in all my desk drawers.

Molly Hamaker

I got some kind of grant from student affairs, or something like that, to put on a macrobiotic dinner for the campus community. So a bunch of other people and I put together this giant meal that must have tasted terrible. It was probably tahini sauce and onions and carrots and brown rice.

Dave Van Hee

This macrobiotic book told you how to make a wheat dough and then roll it out flat and put it in the oven. It would make a flat pizza thing, and they split right down the middle into big pillows, which amazed me. Anyway, with this macrobiotic diet, just eating brown rice—that's all I was eating for a while—the most remarkable thing was the difference in stool-fecal-shit composition. All my life, I'd been eating whatever my mom gave me—you know, chicken and peas and lettuce and ice cream—an American diet of the '50s and '60s—whatever was normal for people in Kansas City. You know how there are books and magazines in the bathroom because it's so hard to defecate? It's a big deal, the whole laxative industry. When I started eating this all-rice diet, shit just poured out easily. It was like, This is weird. But it felt really healthy. Compared to that grunting and squeezing, this actually makes sense. That was probably one of my most impressive and remains one of my most impressive, strong feelings about whole foods. You hear of all kinds of cancers of the intestines, and I think, Man, moving the stuff on through quickly has to be good, instead of those hard little balls like the American diet produces.

So I wasn't really healthy, since I was using all these other drugs and so drunk and was horribly vitamin-deficient, but at least I was eating some brown rice.

Molly Hamaker

I went to Boston at one point and visited the macrobiotic community. I became a little skeptical when I discovered that most macrobiotics smoked cigarettes. I started to think, That doesn't seem very healthy. What's wrong with this picture? Over time, I loosened up into more of a natural foods diet and realized that maybe macrobiotics was not really it. By the time I moved to Lawrence—and that was after I'd been cooking at the Midway Cafe, the vegetarian restaurant in Kansas City—I moved toward a more inclusive diet, eating natural foods and trying to eat foods in season. Actually, trying to eat foods in season was a major macrobiotic tenet. You would eat what grew near you. I think that part of macrobiotics was really influential in the co-op movement and fit in really well. That was something our co-op and co-ops in general were very sensitive to. I think macrobiotics deemed it the healthiest thing or the most balanced thing to do, but for us, I think, in the co-op movement, it wasn't just about health, it was also about sustainability.

Now I can see how the ideas connect. We needed to create a sustainable environment so that even if the infrastructures of the larger world collapsed, we had food and we could take care of ourselves locally. There was an awareness of how fragile the idea of buying our food from places on the other side of the country or even on the other side of the world was.

Dave Van Hee

We ended up getting married, and right as Dawn was about to be born we moved to Lawrence from Kansas City. Molly had been working at this health food restaurant at Forty-seventh and Troost. It was a cute little diner from the old days.

i: Why did you move to Lawrence?

Probably I was going to go to school is the reason we did this. We moved to 941 Pennsylvania, which people told us later was the former home of the Black Panthers in Lawrence.

Rod Runyan

I moved to Lawrence in the summer of 1970 to go to KU. I'm a western Kansas farm boy. I was seventeen, and it was an exciting time to move to town. That summer I was teargassed by the National Guard and had guns pointed at me by local policemen. I was a block away when Nick Rice was killed and was about two blocks away when Rick Dowdell was killed. It was an exciting time to be in Lawrence. I was really interested in girls and beer much more than politics.

I had a very typical college-type experience at KU and wound up joining the Mercantile when it opened or after I heard about it. Having grown up in western Kansas, I basically was a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy when I came to town, but I had just moved out of the dorms. I moved in with two vegetarian friends, and I was not a vegetarian, but within a few months I just lost the habit of eating meat and I never picked it up again. It wasn't a political thing for me, though I read *Diet for a Small Planet*, and that was very influential in terms of just making sense of shortages and living with the planet. I liked the ideas presented by Frances Moore Lappe in that book a lot. I think that was a key influence, and I just lost my taste for meat. People have asked me for the twenty-five years or so I've been a vegetarian now, Don't you miss it? And I never missed it a bit.

Mark Maher

In '73 or '74, we reacted to a variety of stimuli and stopped eating meat. What really threw us into the Mercantile was that we were reading Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* and *Recipes for a Small Planet*, which we may have gotten at Anna Berger's store. The Frances Moore Lappe book was an education about the impact of the meat industry on Mother Earth, about water resources, about this land that was turned into a

Dust Bowl because we were growing monocrops, and about what's happened since, in the Gulf of Mexico, for example, where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers spill sediment and chemicals into a saltwater estuary that is responsible for Lord knows what percentage of fish and marine life dying in the Gulf of Mexico because of the way we farm inland.

It was clear to me that there was something of vital importance that appeared to be ignored by most of us. For many reasons, with what little sense of spirituality I had at the time, it seemed to me that I could choose not to eat meat and be glad about it and realize that I could be less hypocritical by dropping it from my diet. If I was going to be an advocate for clean water, clean air, and humane treatment to animals that we breed and are responsible for in bringing into life, the evidence shows that I shouldn't be paying for the meat product. So I plugged into the co-op.

Cheryl Powers

By the time I was thirteen, I was into natural foods. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and then I traveled a lot at a very early age. From an early age, I was a vegetarian. I was involved in a Unitarian youth group, and it was, like, the thing to do. That's not why I did it. I was cooking a meal at a youth group. I was thirteen. I was peeling the chicken off of a bone, and it grossed me out so bad I had to stop cooking. That was the day I became a vegetarian. Now I eat meat again, but I still don't like peeling chicken off of bones.

I traveled around the country a lot and worked at different co-ops and shopped at them. There was a time period of a couple years when I did not step foot into a real grocery store, because that just wasn't part of my life. Co-ops were, and bulk and natural things and organic things were. I remember the first time I walked into a grocery store, I was shocked. I thought, Oh man, these bright lights. By the time I came to Lawrence in 1980, the co-op was just a natural place for me to go.

Robin Naramore

I'm from northern Iowa originally.

i: Why did you come to Lawrence?

Because I hooked up with this youth organization connected to the Unitarian church when I was in high school. One group of this larger group came from Lawrence, Kansas. The Unitarian youth of Lawrence, Kansas, would go to conventions where I was from. I would go to conventions where they were from. That was my first exposure to Lawrence. Within two days of turning eighteen, when I could not legally be stopped, I was on a bus on my way to Lawrence. I didn't stick around for my graduation. I came here because of the hippie community that I had discovered when I'd come to youth conventions here.

i: When was that?

In '68. I moved into 1309 Ohio.

Kathryn Nemeth Tuttle

I was a student at KU from 1968 to 1972. I grew up in a small town in western Kansas. Two people from my high school had the audacity to go to Lawrence. You were either a little off or smart, and I was probably some of both. I had had sisters that had gone here, so it wasn't unfamiliar territory for me. I went through a pretty uneventful first year, although 1968 was far from uneventful, generally speaking. By 1969, I was involved in the anti-war movement. Being at KU at that time fundamentally changed my life and my perspective on a lot of things. My involvement, eventually, with places like the Merc and Sister Kettle was affected by being in a place like Lawrence at that time. It was just a huge event. Lawrence was a great place to be and to change.

I was one of those kinds of people that for a period of time experienced complete estrangement from my family. They thought I'd gone off the deep end. Probably a lot of my cohorts went through this. I mean, I was a real hippie. That was just what I was.

Another thread that started to happen to me when I was in college was that I had gone through initiation in transcendental meditation. That was my first opening to non-Western religion. I had been brought up a pretty mainstream Protestant. That had been an important part of my life growing up. So I made this transition to Eastern religions.

I think I'd pretty much become a vegetarian by the time I was living out on East Fifteenth Street. Healthy living was one of those things that you did when you became a hippie. You know, whole wheat and everything. It was a part of a whole. I grew up in a family with a mother who was a great cook. Interest in food and healthy eating was always there for me. That was a natural thing to start to happen.

I remember going home at Thanksgiving and Christmas. My mother had a big tradition of making huge pots of chili for us when we were coming home, and the first time I refused the chili because it had meat in it, she just couldn't handle it. She got so angry. I was not one to be rebellious, so I would go through this painful process of eating the food while I was there. It would make me sick, because my system couldn't handle it. I'm not a vegetarian now.

It's interesting how all these values get laid upon one another. At the time, it was a part of the back-to-the-earth, the spiritual, the healthy eating, and not living a "normal" life. We'd seen what normal life led you to. It led to the Vietnam War; it led to the military-industrial complex; it led to crime and racism. So it was a statement against all kinds of processing, and processing food was part of that.

The other appeal for me was that I really enjoyed cooking. That was always a neat thing for me. I made my own yogurt and made my own bread every week. *Diet for a Small Planet* was my cookbook that I followed. I think there was more ignorance then about vegetarianism, so they were more careful about combining proteins. I really lived with

those cookbooks. *The New York Times Natural Foods* was another big one. There were several cookbooks that featured in our transformation, I think.

Valerie Kelly

I first came to Lawrence in the fall of 1971, to attend the University of Kansas. I had moved to Kansas from Missouri. I was in the process of going through some life transformations myself as a young woman in the '70s. I graduated from college with a degree in biology, but I didn't really want to be a scientist at that time. I felt quite disillusioned with mainstream culture. The co-op was one of the major endeavors in Lawrence that seemed to be working towards manifesting ideals that were more to my way of thinking, I guess. It felt like a group of like-minded people, and I felt really comfortable. I wanted to be involved.

Kelly Kindscher

i: What brought you to Lawrence?

Quite frankly, coming to college. I had in-state residency, being a high school student in Newton, Kansas. I also had strong connections to land, living in part on a homesteaded farm in Nebraska. So I spent summers up there and winters in Newton. Time for me to go to college, Lawrence looked like an interesting, cool place to be. I had a sister who was at K-State, and I thought, I want to be somewhere else. So I came here.

I started college in 1975, and I remember coming up in the spring of 1975 and driving down or walking down Ohio Street, and I saw all these people out on their porches playing music and visiting—all sorts of wild stuff going on. It seemed real interesting. I'd never lived in a place as big as Lawrence. My first year here I was in a student dorm. I was in Ellsworth Hall. I had never eaten institutional food before. So I'd never experienced dorm food and mystery meats and lack of vegetables. The vegetables you did get were boiled peas and soft, mushy green beans. I'd been exposed to some of that, but not on a day-in, day-out basis. I had had a fairly traditional upbringing. Mom cooked all of our meals. We were avid gardeners. We had fresh food. We ate pretty well for the typical American diet. So I guess I was readily available for being radicalized in food.

By keeping my ear to the ground, I discovered the Mercantile pretty soon after that. Of course, it was down on Massachusetts Street at the time. Before I was out of the dorm, I already decided I was vegetarian. With a couple other people in the dorm, I was cooking meals with Mercantile food, so in 1975, the year I came to school and was still in the dorm, I became a Mercantile member.

Ken Lassman

I was born in Lawrence, so I guess Lawrence was something that was always part of me, so it's not something that I came to Lawrence for school or anything like that. Lawrence was where I lived from the start. My family on my mother's side has been here for a

while. I'm fifth-generation. Lawrence is sort of like the air that I breathe. It wasn't a conscious decision for me to take a breath, to be in Lawrence. It was something that was just there. To stay in Lawrence was probably a conscious decision.

As far as natural foods go, I think the big thing for me that really galvanized the whole concept of natural foods, in addition to the people around me thinking about and talking about this kind of thing, was *Diet for a Small Planet*. I'm sure that other people talk about how that was real important. I learned that food was not ever in shortage and that there were alternatives to meat and if you planned your diet, you could get all the protein you needed. Though in that way, it was overprescribing. I learned a whole lot from that book, and not only about complimentary proteins, but just about food distribution systems in the world. It was a radicalizing book in many ways, and it made me want to get more involved in a conscious way with the Mercantile.

Chuck Magerl

i: What was your introduction to natural foods?

I don't really know a specific introduction, I guess, as much as it was just part of the flavor of the times in regards to alternatives and commerce and eating coming through the popular culture of the late '60s, early '70s, and the rebellion against Wonder Bread and Velveeta Cheese and Tuna Helper and things of that sort, which were in such prominent usage, and it was really the desire to put more flavor and more healthful foods into our bodies as well as to have an economic and agricultural system that we saw as being a greater sense of justice and value environmentally as well.

Linda Gwaltney

I'd been to Lawrence in the spring and summer of '70. Then I left and lived in Colorado for a little bit. Came back in '71. I was married at the time, and my husband and I moved here to start a used bookstore. It lasted for about six months.

i: What led you to become interested in natural foods?

Now that one I don't know. It just seemed like the thing to do if you were concerned about your health, which I'm not sure I was concerned about my health as much as I was concerned about different lifestyles. Natural foods seemed to be a different lifestyle.

i: Were there other ways in which you were interested in different lifestyles?

I'm a product of the '60s. Everybody was experimenting with different lifestyles.

Marilyn Roy

I came to Lawrence in 1974 from Topeka, Kansas. I lived in Topeka for four years prior to that. My first four years in Kansas were spent in a nontraditional way. I traveled and

hitchhiked and wore bell-bottoms and granny glasses and led the "hippie life." At the time, I had a pretty wild boyfriend who I wanted to leave. My best friend had moved here in 1973 to be with her now-husband. She and I had traveled together. We were really close. So when I decided to leave Topeka and leave that lifestyle, I decided to follow her here to Lawrence.

In the fall of '74, somehow I hooked up with the group of people who started the Community Mercantile. I came to Lawrence partly because I wanted to get involved with the Free University. There were organic gardening classes and massage classes and Sufi dancing classes—all kinds of interesting things happening at that time through the ECM. I met several people that way. I believe that's how I hooked up with the group that did decide to put the Mercantile together.

I got real interested in the food co-op. I'd just become a vegetarian at that time. I started gardening, and I started ordering herbs from catalogs and making poison ivy potions. I started fooling around with *Jeanne Rose's Herbal*. I got interested in making everything from scratch, growing a garden, learning to play the guitar, and becoming that kind of person and living that kind of lifestyle. The Mercantile suited me perfectly. It gave me a chance to get involved with a group of people and with a cause that I was passionate about in a way that to me seems like the essence of living, which is, each of us contributing to the well-being of each other through community action.

Mike Rundle

I came here in 1971 to go to the University of Kansas. I was drawn to the Merc by the fact that I grew up on a farm. We grew lots of vegetables. Somehow, I must have just followed something in the news and got hooked up to this idea that they were doing vegetable distribution, ordering cheese and dairy at the Massachusetts Street storefront. I got involved that way. I wasn't part of the grassroots movement in town that launched it, but I plugged in early.

I really had a sense of pride, though, that people were discovering something that I grew up with. My family raised huge gardens, did lots of canning, and liked to get together and eat as a family.

Some of the people at the university I hung out with were also rediscovering community and visiting people in their homes. Somehow I got connected with the people in the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program. A lot of its focus was on things that we'd consider community-type events and activities. I always felt a sense of, that's the way we lived in my experience. Likewise with food, there emerged an appreciation for delicious vegetables and fruit. I felt, in modern parlance, an affirmation of what I already knew and experienced.

Tim Miller

i: When did you join the co-op?

Around '76, give or take a year. When I did join, I didn't join as early as I could have. I was living in a group house out west of town with a group that included Diane Luber, so Diane took care of everything. I didn't have any urgent need to join. Finally, somehow, that all fell apart, so I had to join on my own and went down later than most of my peers and went through the orientation, where I remember Bob Marvin, the guy who ran the orientation I went to, said, The basic thing you need to know is this is not just food; this is politics. He meant by that what we might today call culture. We're making a cultural statement by doing this. We're not just feeding ourselves. There's more to it than that. I've always kept that in mind.

Barry Shalinsky

I came to Lawrence in 1972, to attend the University of Kansas. I remember going into the Community Mercantile once it was formed, probably sometime in the late '70s, maybe a little earlier than that, '77 perhaps, when it was at 615 Massachusetts.

My eating habits were different then than they are now. At Twelfth and Oread, of course, there was the predecessor to the Crossing. It was after the Rock Chalk, before the Crossing. I think it was called the Catfish Bar and Grill at that time. I used to go in there, and they had a dish called "Truckstop" that was hamburger and potatoes, fried egg and cheese on top. There was a juice bar at that corner called Squeezer's Palace. This was probably sometime in the late '70s. They actually had healthy salads and juices and smoothies. It was a new type of eating for me, but I went there on a few occasions and really liked it.

Actually, the reason why I started shopping at the Mercantile is because Shalinskys are dairy freaks. They had some excellent cheese there, and they had fresh milk, fresh from the farm, in bottles, from Hiller's Dairy in Topeka. I would go there and buy my cheese, and I would buy my milk in returnable bottles. That's actually why I first started shopping at the Mercantile. I knew nothing of tofu; I knew nothing of organics; I knew nothing of macrobiotics; I knew nothing of herbs or homeopathy or any of the things that I was later to learn about. It was strictly: This was the best milk and cheese in town. Once I became part of the scene there, I quickly discovered that there were many benefits to healthy eating. Ultimately, in about 1978, I became a member.

Boog Highberger

I moved to Lawrence to go to college. I came here in the fall of 1977, and I lived in the dorm the first year, so I didn't have to buy groceries, but soon after that I learned about the co-op. I joined the co-op in 1979, after living for the summer in a house with a bunch of other freaky hippies like Chuck Magerl and Dennis Duermeier, Keith Abrams and Bob Carey. And they turned me on to the co-op. So after that summer I was all excited and joined right up.

I was intrigued by the co-op. I'd decided to become a vegetarian, so I was learning to cook for myself for the first time, too, after another year on my own, where I predominantly ate hamburgers and hot dogs and Campbell's soup. Luckily I survived that, but then I sort of had to teach myself to cook, as my mother certainly didn't do it—certainly didn't learn me how to cook with tofu.

I remember being really fascinated by the peanut butter grinder and the bread-slicing machine. Just the whole political idea really excited me too, the fact that we owned it, and it was like this little niche we'd carved out from the capitalist world.

Tim Miller

i: What kind of people formed or joined this food co-op or food co-ops in general?

Largely, people who were in their twenties in the 1970s. There was a real generational consciousness.

Hal Sears

They were hippies, people that had been disaffected by Vietnam. Perhaps they were students. To a degree, there were drug culture elements in it, too. And the hippie let's-have-a-good-time ethic. Peace and love. There was always incense. I didn't see any co-ops that were head shops. That was a different thing. There were head shops that had all the crystals and the paraphernalia. Co-ops always had some books that you could buy. They had books about cooking and books about healthy eating. Local newspapers and stuff. One of the books you always saw was *Diet for a Small Planet*, a Frances Moore Lappe book.

Tim Miller

These young people were saying, We're the generation that's going to break away from all this oppressive tradition we've grown up with. So I think a real youth movement was a part of it, although it was never a hundred percent that. There were some older people that related to the larger youth culture of the time. Also, there were people of all ages who had some interest in health food. It's never been a completely homogeneous movement with only one particular demographic slice. It's been somewhat diverse in constituency, and it was then.

A good example, I think, of the diversity was Nancy Hambleton, who was a fairly early member of the co-op; I don't know how early. I know that I used to see her working at Maine Street. She was a little bit older, ten years or so maybe, than the youth generation of the time. More distinctively, she's been a stalwart of the chamber of commerce and the Lawrence political establishment. She's not countercultural at all, yet she was a longtime member and volunteer. She went down and did her two hours a month of work. I don't think she is anymore, though.

Barry Shalinsky

We had some very interesting customers. Paul Brotsman was a KU professor, probably in his eighties, and he would come in and buy fifty pounds of carrots and take them home and juice them, I guess. That may be why he lived into his eighties; I don't know. It was a really vibrant place and a really diverse crowd, with babies and people in their eighties. It was truly an incredible thing.

Bob Marvin

There are people I think of in terms of the co-op. What was the name of the social welfare professor who keeled over dead poll watching in the 1980s? Paul Brotsman. He used to buy fifty pounds of carrots at a time at the co-op and juice them. He was into the health aspects, but he had a bad heart. He had a couple of strokes and a bad heart and died. He and his wife were wonderful. She's dead now, too, maybe five years ago. They were active in the co-op. He was probably sixty-five or seventy when he died. He was retired. There were a lot of neat people. It was multigenerational. Anna wasn't the only one. The Duttons were members. The Oldfathers helped.

Caryn Goldberg

I know you had a few pockets of older people, like Tom and Ann Moore. There were a few older people who were with it in some way; most people in their generation weren't, in our judgment. I remember shopping there when I first got to Lawrence in the early '80s. It was people in their twenties, some in their thirties. We've spread out more agewise.

Charlie Gardiner

i: What was your impression of the demographics of the group that formed the Community Mercantile? Could you categorize this group?

In all of the university towns, we're talking about a selection that is based on either university attendance or at least past attendance. In other words, these were all higher-ed types. Not all, obviously, but the majority of them were educated.

Because the size of the university community, which at that time, I think, was somewhere in the twenty thousand, maybe twenty-five thousand range, was relatively so large, I think probably the university town co-ops had a much more diverse group than some of the small town co-ops that I worked with in Kansas and Missouri, many of which were groups of twelve to fifteen people, often related to each other primarily through church affiliations. These are buying clubs, of course, not stores, but a co-op is a co-op. They would be strictly one class, not necessarily one age. In terms of gender, they would be heavily female. Education would usually be high school but not much more. Economic level would be pretty evenly dispersed through low- and low-middle-class incomes. You'd see over and over again almost no diversity at all.

Compare that to a group like Lawrence, and although they might have been primarily young people, after that the diversity was quite immense. In terms of sexual preference and gender, it was all there, because it was all there in Lawrence at the time, and we were all young. Lawrence, like most of the other university communities, was a good deal more politically and socially liberal than its surroundings. That kind of easy acceptance was part of what you looked for and found in the university communities.

Patti Spencer

The good thing about the food co-op was that you got such a huge range of people. We got elderly people who knew how to eat, and we got young people interested in change. You saw your friends and you saw the people you saw at the other activities you did, whether it was open school or something else. You also saw a lot of people who were just interested in health and eating right.

Ken Lassman

We liked to think that we were pretty diverse, but that's sort of like holding up a mirror to yourself and saying, What am I?

Hal Sears

We think of it as an interesting mix of people, but actually, there was a lot of sameness. If somebody'd come in there and said, I believe in Goldwater or Reagan, they would have been hooted. They weren't very liberal. They were liberal to the degree they wanted everybody to be freed, but if you think I'm going to let Barry Goldwater move next door to me—you know, that kind of thing. We're all guilty of our own exclusionary notions.

Ken Lassman

We considered ourselves diverse, but most of the people probably came to Lawrence through either the hippie network that existed or the university. As such, you had a pretty thin cross section when you think about it, although there were all kinds of activities going on. It was fertile for that group, in terms of exploring all kinds of things. There was a strong lesbian contingent, but it was not a focus for the gay community. They were not becoming aware of themselves and building a community through the Mercantile like the lesbian community was.

i: How about along class lines?

I didn't have a sense that there were a lot of class issues. There were a lot of kids who came from rich families, and there were kids from working-class families. Some of the most ideological people that I met were people who'd grown up in central Kansas or western Kansas and had a real strong sense of needing an alternative.

Kelly Kindscher

There weren't—still aren't—a lot of farm kids that come to KU. And, of course, I wasn't a farm kid either, necessarily. There's not a lot of rural influence here. Although I guess I quickly made friends here with people that had connections to the earth, people that are still part of the Mercantile, dear friends, Danny Bentley and Ken Lassman, with farming in their backgrounds and involved in gardening and land issues around Lawrence. That was an important part of it.

Ken Lassman

The real ticket for acceptance in the Mercantile was an interest in food, in alternative foods. If you were sixty years old and had an interest in alternative foods, you were accepted. There wasn't that much interest in a number of people in the sixty-year-old population group in terms of what we were doing. There were members, though, who were into it.

Charlie Gardiner

At least eighty to ninety percent of our members over the years in the Topeka co-op were from the west side, so they were much more likely to be white, much more likely to be at least middle class and in some cases higher, and although we did have some members from all sectors, north, south, east and west, of the town, it was quite clear that we were not primarily a poor people's co-op, not by any matter or means, and I don't think that could have ever been said of Lawrence either.

Tim Miller

i: How about a diversity in ethnicity?

Not much. I don't recall very many other than white people there.

Ken Lassman

I don't think the Black Student Union participated in the co-op at all. The number of Latinos in Lawrence was very small, and they were much more church- and family-oriented.

Anne Moore

I realize looking back how we did not have a cross-section of all of Lawrence shopping there. I really don't recall more than one or two African Americans who shopped there.

Barry Shalinsky

Of course, Lawrence wasn't terribly ethnically diverse anyway, as compared with now, but there were some international students that shopped there. There were a few African American shoppers.

Dave Van Hee

Have you ever seen a black person in the co-op? Same, really, with Mexicans. Oriental people. Basically, it's a white middle-class deal.

i: Is that a reflection of Lawrence?

Yes, to a certain extent, except that when you go to Dillons, the only grocery store left over here, at Nineteenth and Mass, there are all kinds of different races in there. The same with Checkers. Checkers is like the United Nations, including American Indians.

That's another thing about the co-op. I am a white middle-class hippie, ex-hippie, bad hippie, a fallen away hippie, a lackadaisical, crappy one, so when I criticize these people, I am criticizing myself. It is such a self-satisfied, smug group, with its Puritan influence and we're-going-to-found-God's-shining-city-on-a-hill attitude. We're establishing a whole new way of life that is going to show the rest of the world how to live. God, are we ever good and holy and blessed, which is something that I found off-putting, because I always thought, It's just some people running a grocery store. It's in competition with other people who are running grocery stores who aren't really that evil. All the grief of arguing and all the work collective bullshit that everybody put themselves through was built on the idea that we are on a higher plane than mere capitalism.

I just like to talk about this kind of stuff. It doesn't make any difference one way or another.

i: Were you all just young hippies or were there older people involved in this community that started the food co-op?

If they were old, they were old hippies, like Anna Berger, if she was a hippie. Most likely, she was left here by a spaceship. She was just a different person. The Mormons do have a unique perspective on who the Indians are and who everybody is. No, there were older people.

Tim Miller

i: Did the members represent the full range of socioeconomic classes?

Yeah. I mean, they were predominantly countercultural, but some were actually on the opposite end of the spectrum, more or less. There's a certain right-wing element with similar food preoccupations. You get over into the survivalist movement, and some of them are real concerned with pure foods.

Chuck Magerl

Within the organic food movement, there's a wide range. I can remember standing at the checkout counter talking with an organic farmer. We were talking for probably ten minutes or so about all aspects having to do with organic agriculture and specific techniques and products and pricing and things like that. In the midst of that conversation, he came around to the point of saying, Well, you know, I think Hitler was right when . . . I don't remember what the rest of that conversation was or how it ended, but there was a large segment of that. We were dealing with the other end of the picture, the people that have now emerged as the Aryan Nation types. At that point, it was more the alignment called the Posse Comitatus. There were also minutemen organizations that were made up of right-wing, fanatic, occasionally violent, individuals. A lot of that fringe element was still part of our milieu and part of who we dealt with.

Tim Miller

Some of the survivalists lived out in the country and were trying to be prepared for all the horrible things that were going to happen. And there were some religious conservatives who had religious scruples. There were a number of Jehovah's Witnesses who were active members and did their work. I used to see a guy named Dale Baker there regularly. He was a TWA pilot who has since died. He was an active Jehovah's Witness, and he was down there as a regular co-op volunteer.

Barry Shalinsky

There was even some political diversity and religious diversity. A lot of very religious Christians shopped at the store. I don't really know what their beliefs were, but I think clean, healthy living and, therefore, the kinds of foods that we sold keyed into their spiritual beliefs and practices. Of course, that would have also been true for some of the followers of Guru Maharaji. A lot of those people were members and shopped and were involved in the store. A lot of the Sufis, a lot of people in the Jewish community. It was a diverse place in that sense. While I would say in general the predominance in the customer base was liberal or radical, there were some pretty conservative people as well.

Rod Runyan

i: Can you compare the figures in another oral history of Lawrence, the book about the Kaw Valley Hemp Pickers, with the Community Mercantile crowd? Was there overlap?

Oh sure.

i: How were they different, if you knew both communities?

Well, in some cases, they were the same people, of course. The Hemp Pickers were in many ways around a little sooner, of course, than the Mercantile folks. Whereas the Mercantile was always pretty political and, of course, heavily female-dominated in its

early days, the Hemp Pickers tended to be mostly male. Though, certainly, there were exceptions to that. The nature of what they were doing is such that there's more of a me-first monetary aspect to that. That's almost necessary. Though back in the Hemp Pickers' days, there was a lot of good feelings. You know, We're all hippies together. We're not trying to make our living at other peoples' expense. And there was a lot of goodwill in some ways. But there was also a lot of strange paranoia. But that's a different tape.

I personally spent some time in small rooms in the '70s and '80s working for those people, and there are great stories to tell, but that's another day and another interview. Definitely, a lot of the finances in the early days may have come from that area, just like it did in so many other small businesses that started in town during that time. And those people who are still around tend to still be Mercantile members, I think, for the most part. I'm a fairly young guy for an almost original member 'cause I'm not quite fifty yet, but most of those people are going to be in their fifties and early sixties by now. It's a mellower crowd. They've legitimized over the years.

Tim Miller

i: How do you think the most active co-op people, those who belonged to the work collective and those who served on the steering committee, compared to those figures who were featured in another oral history about Lawrence, Cows Are Freaky?

I would say there's some overlap, but it's not a hundred percent. There are some differences. The people in *Cows Are Freaky* were, broadly, cultural revolutionaries, and one element of what was going on at the time was food, but there were other things going on, and there were people who didn't ever care much about food. There were people who just ate junk food.

Chapter 3

615 Mass; Verbena Bakery; OCW; CMCU

Moving to 615 Massachusetts—end of Downtown Health and Foreign Foods—more space at the co-op—Nan Renbarger—Cornucopia—food buying club—Verbena Bakery—naming the bakery—health inspectors—co-op's reputation—rural perspective on hippies—Sadhana Mill—Fayetteville—Ozark Food Co-op—origin of cooperative warehouse—back-to-the-landers—first orders—John Newman—Community Mercantile's involvement—Charlie Gardiner—New Destiny or Ozark?—OCW's trucking route—other cooperative warehouses—warehouse's dimensions—initial loan to start the warehouse—producers and suppliers—Ozark's mill—Chuck Magerl—Off the Wall Hall—Community Mercantile Credit Union—Dick Dunhaupt—charter meeting—credit union's first location—state credit union association—supervisory committee—loans, part one—1101½ Massachusetts

location—loans, part two—Moore's energy efficiency loan—alternative uses for loans

Molly Hamaker

Right away, we were too small. From the minute we opened the doors, we were too small. Then we started having meetings about moving, and then we moved. Anna had already moved to 615 Massachusetts while we were still at the Kroeger's old store. She wasn't there very long and was ready to go.

Bob Marvin

i: You were in favor of the move to 615 Mass?

I didn't even think about the move to 615 Mass as something not to do. I frankly don't remember if we voted on it or not. What happened was, Anna was ready to quit.

Anna Berger

The store collapsed. I had to sell out, and the guy that bought it was a snake. He just bled it and absconded. I have a \$5,000 judgment against him, but it's ancient history. Yeah, I paved the way for the Mercantile. I couldn't do that because I didn't have the capital. I didn't have the help.

Bob Marvin

She was ready to go out of business. I don't know if we paid her for the stock. I don't know if she got anything beyond that. It was amicable. It was the obvious thing to do.

Anna Berger

In ten years, the market had changed. When I started out, they'd bring me \$1,700 worth, and I could pay for it gradually. The other houses, I could order once, pay for that order when I ordered the next time. After ten years, though, it was balance paid up and cash in advance. I had no capital. I started out with nothing, with \$600. I advertised for a partner. I did take a partner for a short time, but it turned out that all he wanted to do was drain it. He wasn't for real, his wife wasn't for real, and his kids were a pain. So I gave that up.

We tried to incorporate, too, but incorporation is not all it's cracked up to be, because you become the partner—the slave—of the state, which means the state can dissolve you at any time. If you have a 501 (c) (3), you're not your own boss. The state can write you off anytime they want to.

Anyhow, I found somebody who said he would buy it.

i: Because it wasn't working out?

Because I didn't have the capital to put stuff on the shelves.

i: You would have kept on doing it? You enjoyed it?

Absolutely, yes. I couldn't have fed four kids for ten years if I hadn't had the store. My husband used to complain about the store, but on the other hand, when I had the store, he could go to the refrigerator, and there'd be a whole horn of cheese there.

i: But it wasn't paying off?

Potentially, it could. But when you don't have capital, you can't stock the shelves. And I couldn't afford to hire enough help.

i: So you found a person to buy it?

Yeah, and he said he would, but he didn't pay up. I got a judgment against him. He disappeared. He just came in and took what he wanted and walked away. The large refrigerator chest, you know, the open front thing, was on contract. I didn't own it. So they took it back. The twenty-four-foot freezer I took home. The extra refrigerator, I think when I turned it off, it died. It'd been seventeen years. If you got an old refrigerator and you want to keep using it, don't turn it off. It's liable to die. The shelving, I gave a considerable amount of it to the Mercantile. I had a more-than-six-foot ladder. I gave it to the Mercantile. I don't remember what all I gave to the Mercantile. It didn't matter. I didn't need it anymore, and they did.

I served initially on the audit committee for the—I forget what they called it—the credit union. I was in on the formation of it. However, I discovered I didn't have the vaguest notion how to do books. I had no idea how to handle a debit. I mean, I didn't have the brain for it. Far as I'm concerned, bookkeeping is negative. Doesn't compute in my head. A thing is moving, I can keep it moving.

The other reason that I didn't feel that bad about it: The years that I had it, I knew I was heaven-protected to keep doing it. Once, I lost \$200. I went to the library to get the book *Anna and the King of Siam* after I saw the movie. I laid the bank bag on top of the card file and ended up walking off without it. But I covered it. Every month, I had this inspired recognition of when I should quit. The creator was doing my math for me. So when this happened, I knew it was time for me to do something else, to move on.

The store didn't go on, but something else took its place. As far as I was concerned, the mission was fulfilled. I mean, the Mercantile was taking care of the trade. They didn't do as well by the foreign students as I had, I guess, but on the other hand, that market opened up elsewhere. I was there at the time to do what needed to be done. Any more

would have been an ego trip. It's what we help to happen that's important, not that we do it. To be of the moment doesn't mean that you're the hero, it just means you fulfill a need.

VERBENA BAKERY

Molly Hamaker

When we moved into 615 Mass, we started from scratch. It was heaven to have so much more space, of course, because we'd been so crowded. In the other store, we couldn't get any more members. As soon as we'd get a new member, we'd lose a member because they'd get disgusted with no room. In the new store, suddenly we had room to grow.

I used to eat at Cornucopia, and I became friendly with Nan, chatting with her at Cornucopia. I was trying to talk her into coming to have her own place at the co-op. She did eventually agree to do it, so she came to 615 Mass and had a little bakery in the back. That was kind of unusual. I mean, it was interesting that it was always Nan's little business within the co-op. I don't think that's very typical. I think that's just one of those as-the-river-flows sorts of thing. Due to circumstances, personalities, and the community, we had an individual, a private person, as our baker instead of it being the co-op's bakery. But I think it worked out great for years.

Nan Renbarger

The seed for the bakery started when I lived in California. I lived out there two years: '72 to '74. Out there, any kind of group that you think you might want to be a part of existed. I was making homemade bread at the time, probably using half whole wheat, half white flour. I got hold of the *Tassajara Bread Book* and was experimenting with a lot of their recipes. I had them up on a pedestal. Since then, I've visited their bakery, and they've been knocked off.

Anyway, there were lots of whole grain bakeries and whole food and organic restaurants out there. I would go to the Sunburst Farm Bakery, which is in Isla Vista, where I lived, close to Santa Barbara, and the more I went in there, the more I had this fantasy of starting my own bakery. I knew that what I was making at home was at least as good. California felt like a temporary place for me anyway. Events transpired, and we moved back to Lawrence. I was married and had Emma at the time. She was two or three years old.

i: You had been in Lawrence before?

I had moved here to go to school from Topeka. I didn't come very far, but it was like going a hundred and eighty degrees around the world, because Topeka was so conservative and, at that time, Lawrence was so liberal. I was much more in the liberal camp. I came for my third year of college. I was still taking general education classes. The first semester that I was here, I took twelve hours. The second semester, I took six

and farted those off. It was '68, and we all know what happened at that time around here. I was experimenting with drugs.

I was a liberal person already, so I had the whole grain cooperative mentality when I saw a lot of that happening in California. That gave me support. When we came back here, a friend of ours, Glen Sohl, was getting ready to start a restaurant and wanted me to do the baking. He wanted to have bagels and crepes. When I moved back here for about a year I was working on recipes and trying to get a bread recipe down that he liked and that I liked. We started Cornucopia pretty much together.

i: Where was it located?

Across from Dillons on Massachusetts Street. I think it's Bambino's now. The address is 1801 Massachusetts. I really wanted the restaurant to be vegetarian. It wasn't my restaurant, but I felt like I was doing a lot of the work for figuring out the kind of food to have. It did have a salad bar, and we had the idea of having little loaves of bread for everybody that did the salad bar. Well, that didn't happen. We just had big hunks of bread that we gave people. And people raved about the bread, of course; it was really good.

At the same time, some of the folks from the food buying club had come in and said, This bread is so good. Could you make us loaves for our buying club? Since I'd been exposed to buying clubs out in California, I said, Hell yes, I'd love to. Once a week, I'd make twenty-five loaves for them. I had to find out where this buying club was, and I would deliver them the bread.

i: Where was it located?

I think it's where Paradise Cafe is now.

i: Where the Mercantile grocery store was.

Yeah, Harry's Mercantile. It was in the back room of his store. At the time, he was talking about getting rid of the store, I guess. I wasn't in on all that. I don't know how that was happening, but I talked to Molly Van Hee, who was working at the store at that time. I was getting pretty disgruntled with Cornucopia, because I wasn't getting paid, and I felt like I'd put a lot of time and energy into it. Being the friend, I was the last to get paid.

Molly was totally supporting me, telling me, Your bread is so great. She was an expansive thinker. She told me, You could be making this and this and this, and people would just love it. They'd buy it up. She was giving me this little nudge, and it got me to thinking, Okay, I know where I can get flour. We were getting fifty-pound bags of flour from Susan Davis in Kansas City. She had a cafe/bakery/health food store in Kansas City at that time. I think their bakery was down in the river market area in an old warehouse. Her husband's mother was doing the baking for their restaurant, so they had this equipment, but Susan and her husband were going through a divorce, so they were going to get rid of the bakery stuff. I thought, There's the equipment. I now have ingredients

and equipment. And the Mercantile was talking about moving to 615 Massachusetts, where there was a space. And there was desire on my part. My grandma loaned me some money. And the bakery happened. Yeah.

When I first started the bakery, it was summer solstice in 1975. It was very hot that summer. I worked in the back of the Community Mercantile at 615 Massachusetts. It was so hot one night that, being the liberal person that I am, I took my shirt off and had on only my apron and my shorts. It may have been two in the morning. I was alone in the back room where the bakery was. There were lights on back there. There was a big door on the loading dock in the back. I had that open for what little breeze there was. At some point as I was working, I heard a knock at the back door or a little noise of some kind. I'm not sure it was a knock. Then I see a flashlight beam. I didn't really have time to get my shirt on, because I didn't even know where it was. I did have an apron on, though. I peeked around the door. It was the cops. I said, I'm baking back here. It's hot. Nothing crazy going on back here. Just working. We kind of talked around the door. They were friendly and left.

The funniest thing about this story, though, was that two years later, when I moved into this house, I realized that that cop was my next-door neighbor, John Shepard. We get along very well. He has totally different ethics concerning his lawn. He's a mower, and I'm a free-growing person. Every once in a while, he'll say, I'll never forget the first time I met you. We have a big laugh. That got the bakery off to a funny start.

I named it the Verbena Bakery because verbena was my favorite wildflower, mainly because my grandma grew it. It was one of her favorite flowers. She gave me the money. At that point in my life, I was sensitive to possession, and I didn't want it to be Nan's Bakery or Verbena's Bakery. I just wanted it to be Verbena Bakery.

i: How many hours a day, or night, did you work?

In the very beginning, I worked four nights a week. Since I bought the equipment from Susan, she no longer had bread for her cafe, so she was one of my first accounts. The bus station was right across the street from the old Mercantile. There were two health food stores in Kansas City that had become aware of my bread. They wanted my baked goods. So I would bake bread and box it up in banana boxes from the store and tape them up and take them across the street and put them on the bus and send them to Kansas City.

I started getting feedback from people who'd bought the bread in Kansas City at this store. They were talking about how incredibly crumbly it was. Could I do something about how crumbly it was? They only ordered once a week. I found out that they would freeze the bread, take it out of the freezer, and then put it in the refrigerator to sell it. Well, that's about the worst thing you can do to bread. Freezing is okay. You take it right out and let it warm to room temperature, but I always discourage people from refrigerating. I asked these people if they could sell it in a different way and told them that it would really help the quality of the bread. I never heard from them again. So much

for honesty in business. Anyway, I was probably working four days a week, thirty-some hours a week.

i: And you worked during the night?

I would go in about ten o'clock, and I'd go home about six in the morning. I did that for three months, because it was so hot. I was going crazy. I didn't know when I was supposed to be doing other things. I knew when I was working, but I didn't know if I should sleep or have dinner when I got home from work. When do I sleep? I was sleep-deprived, because I was also taking care of a five-year-old kid. It was hard to work at night. I was really glad when it cooled off. I wanted the bread to be fresh for the day, but I thought, The bread can be fresh at noon instead of at six, and it won't make any difference. I don't make donuts. I shouldn't have to come in and work at night. That way, I can socialize, too. That's when people are there. That became a pattern. Socializing at work was the thing I did. It was great for that. I met all kinds.

Robin Devine

One of my strongest memories is of Nan in the bakery. That's indelibly imprinted in my mind. For one thing, you were so brave. You had to brave such amazing crap to make that thing happen.

Dan Bentley

You were always so cheerful.

Robin Devine

Oh my God, I remember the health guys were such buttholes. Oh, they were so terrible. You couldn't even believe they were real. No, somebody paid you guys to act like this. It was a joke.

Nan Renbarger

I think some of those health inspectors thought it was a passing thing. Yeah, yeah, we'll let this young whippersnapper start this bakery. It'll never last. Whole grains breads weren't mainstream at all.

fran beier

Oh no. I can remember standing in the very back of the co-op. I don't even remember why I was there. Maybe Molly pulled me in on this or something. The health inspectors were going to be there. She wanted . . .

Robin Devine

Witnesses.

fran beier

Yeah. So we're following these guys around. A loaf of bread's sitting there, and they're talking amongst themselves. And the one guy says to the other, I don't understand why they don't just eat clay pots. That was their perspective on the food. To them, it was like, blech. Don't they understand how white this could be, how fluffy this could be? Why would they want to eat this? I also think they were coming into a foreign reality. It was hard enough on the older people of Lawrence just living with the young population at that time, but when we had a building, we were really trouble.

Nan Renbarger

Then there was also Bokonon. There were head shops at that time.

fran beier

Right. It was frightening to them.

Nan Renbarger

They had good cause to be frightened.

Robin Devine

But doing a bakery was a lot more elbow grease kind of work. They couldn't really even relate to what might be involved in running Bokonon, but a bakery was something else. They would have thought, Wait a minute, I know that that's really work. These people can't be for real if they'd be able to do work. I felt like you had to come up against a lot of unsympathetic antagonism. A show-me-if-you-can-do-this sort of attitude. Do you remember it that way?

Nan Renbarger

Yes, I do.

Robin Devine

Okay, it wasn't just my imagination. I was thinking, How can you even stand this? And it seemed to go on forever.

i: How do you think people perceived you here in Lawrence?

Definitely, in the days of the ice house, the co-op was clearly considered a focal point of radical, subversive . . .

fran beier

Social unrest . . .

Robin Devine

That was a rat hole of the terrible Kaw Valley Hemp Pickers and communist firebombers. That was why Nan was catching so much flak from the health department. We were perceived as this totally undesirable element by those people. Sometimes you would run into a different attitude, but not often. I'm quite sure that was where the health department people were coming from. And another place they were coming from was that they resented the hell out of the fact that this young woman was doing this.

fran beier

And would have the guts to do it.

Robin Devine

That was like, Hey, we're not letting you through; we're going to give you a ton of shit. See if you can stand up to this. That was part of the outside view of things. You didn't run into that very much, interestingly enough, in dealing with rural people. Rural people did not take you that way. Though they thought you were a little weird, it really didn't matter to them. They were more like, We're people of the earth, and we have to teach the young ones how to do stuff, how to come along. They recognized that as their communal duty, and they fulfilled it.

We were helped continually in many respects by those people, those older people with rural roots. We moved out to the country with about thirteen other people, and we all lived in this house. We had to count on many different older farmers to show us how to make the water point work, how to do a whole lot of stuff. They were always willing to help us. That carried through in making connections to get food from people. The rural people were different.

i: What was the name of your mill, Robin?

Sadhana Flour Mill.

i: Where was it and who ran it?

North of town. We'd taken over this old farmhouse that no one had lived in for a while. We set the mill up in one of the outbuildings. The man I was married to at the time, Arch Naramore, was pretty much the main operator in all respects, except I made deliveries of flour or wheat. Archie had these two stone grinding mills. He'd never run a mill before in his life or had anything to do with machinery like that. He figured out how to install that

stuff and set up these mills and started trying to find out how different grinds had different effects and which went with certain wheatberries—just a whole world of stuff. We had no idea.

Nan Renbarger

And a variety of wheatberries, too. Soft and hard, high protein, low protein. It's definitely a learning process.

Robin Devine

And different grinds for different ones. If you grind it different, it made it different, so that it would bring some howling baker out after you with a rolling pin.

We milled the flour for Nan, for the Cornucopia, for the Mercantile, and for another grocery store that was up in Kansas City. That was a trip. As it turns out—I don't know, Nan; you tell me if you agree with this—the most difficult thing to do consistently over time is produce a good whole wheat loaf of bread.

Nan Renbarger

Yeah.

Robin Devine

And we had no idea. We thought, Hey, you just grind some wheat, and they'll be fine. God, nothing could have been further from the truth. We didn't know how to guard the grain for consistency, particularly. We didn't know about any of that. We'd grind up three hundred pounds of flour and take it up to one of these bakers, either Nan or the guy who was doing the baking up in Kansas City or the Cornucopia, and later they would call us, and they would be livid. Not that Nan ever did. I don't remember Nan ever being livid, but some other people really were, because the flour wasn't the same, and it was fucking up their whole thing. God, I got to where I was afraid to answer the phone. What are you going to say? We really didn't know. We didn't know how to chase down that wheat.

I think one of the coolest things about those days at the mill was that it put us in touch with some really awesome farm people. It really did. Remember Benny Unruh?

Dan Bentley

He was in Kansas Organic Producers. I hung out with him.

Robin Devine

Oh my God, what a guy. Those people that used to have this thing called the tofu chili dinner, and they lived out in the country, and he was part Indian. He had white hair from

very early on, like in his mid-twenties, tall and thin. He and his wife were around the Mercantile all the time when we were on Maine Street, particularly. They were a connection for us to some sort of organic produce or something. There were a lot of neat people from the land that we met because of that whole thing. It was awesome.

And the man from up on Stull Road that the Mercantile bought honey from a lot in the very beginning. We just called him the honey man, so I can't remember his name. He was a great guy. I remember when we got flooded, he called us up and told us, Don't let it bother you so much. If you bought a place somewhere else, a tornado would have knocked you down.

Nan Renbarger

It's always something.

Robin Devine

It was like, It's going to be one kick in the face after another, so you might as well not sweat it. Just keep on going. It was very encouraging. He was a great guy.

fran beier

It was certainly a Kansas farmer way of looking at things.

Robin Devine

i: How long did you have your mill?

I can't remember when we gave that up. Natasha was born in 1979. Does that sound right, frances? So we must have given it up in '83.

Nan Renbarger

i: And Nan, you had been receiving your flour from Sadhana?

I had. The whole thing of grinding the flour is one thing, but then you have the responsibility of mixing it up. I remember the time that I forgot to put yeast in a batch of dough. I made this huge batch of bread one day. I waited for it to rise, and I waited for it to rise and waited for it to rise. I went back in my mind and realized, Oh no, I forgot the yeast. Of course, it was a big batch, for that time. It probably would have made thirty-five loaves. It was a lot of dead dough. I thought, What can I do with this? It was against my principles to throw it out. I thought, What can I make that's flat? Pizza crust. So I made twenty pizza crusts. They were an instant success, even though they didn't have yeast in them. When they had yeast in them, they were even better because they were a little fluffier, not quite so hardtacky.

That's how pizza crust got made. I can remember Archie just going ape over these pizza crusts.

Robin Devine

He could be encouraging at times, couldn't he?

Nan Renbarger

I think he was humoring me.

Robin Devine

No, he probably really liked them. It would make sense that he would. He could probably eat five platefuls in one swallow at that time in his life.

The dust from the flour mill. I mean, we had no idea. Oh my gosh, Arch would just be solid wheat this thick. He had real long black hair then, and it would be totally white. He'd have to wear things over his face.

Dan Bentley

Terrible.

Robin Devine

It was. He'd be out there late at night because he had to do another job besides that. That was just like what we were trying to get together. He'd be out there all night long in the flour mill turning white.

OZARK COOPERATIVE WAREHOUSE

fran beier

I went to Arkansas, and for the whole first year that I was there, there was all this turmoil because it was becoming evident that the only cheap way to buy would be to buy by the truckload. While I was there, Thom Leonard came to Kansas and picked up a truckload of wheat and brought it back and started to mill it and sell it to other food co-ops. That was the seed of the Ozark Food Co-op.

By the next year, they had made enough contacts with different food co-ops to decide that there would be a way to make a cooperative warehouse. That was the only way it was going to be cheap enough for people to buy good food, without buying it with that next markup.

Thom Leonard

I have no idea what year it was, but primarily John Newman, myself, and Danny Kelly, all people who were from Fayetteville at the time, were working together with some other people in running the retail Ozark Food Co-op.

John Newman

I got involved with the Fayetteville co-op in August of '74, started co-managing it with Dan Kelly.

There were two—at least two that I can recall, maybe there were one or two other—cooperative wholesalers in the country at the time. We're talking 1974. Both were called People's Warehouse. One was in Tucson, and one was in Minneapolis. The manager of the Ozark Food Co-op before me, Dan Kelly, visited those warehouses and said, Let's start a warehouse.

The other thing that planted it in our mind, I guess, was that the main natural foods wholesaler that we were buying from was Arrowhead Mills in Hereford, Texas. Arkansas is a very big rice-growing state—number one or maybe number two after California in the country, I'm not sure. Brown rice being one of our major foods in those days, we realized we were buying Arkansas rice that was being shipped to Texas and then shipped back to us in Arkansas. We thought, We could do this.

Thom Leonard

We realized that we were getting Arkansas-grown organic brown rice by way of some warehouse I'm not even sure where. It just seemed crazy. We sold quite a bit because that co-op served not just Fayetteville but a large rural area going two and three counties away. There were a lot of back-to-the-land people there who were buying staples but growing their own vegetables.

Chuck Magerl

Fayetteville was the depot for a hinterland of Ozark culture that had an isolationist, back-to-the-land sensibility to it. The communes and the farms that were strung out through the Ozark hills as a way of expressing their desire for self-sufficiency and isolation were not the same sensibilities that we were dealing with here in Lawrence.

John Newman

Initially, it was just ordering more for the Ozark Food Co-op and letting these other co-ops come and buy from us. I imagine we gave them some kind of discount, although all our prices were awfully cheap anyway.

Most of the trucking that I was involved with was bringing food to Fayetteville. To the best of my memory, when I was doing that, the various co-ops would just come down and pick it up. There were no deliveries that we were doing. Although I'm sure there were instances when somebody that was a dedicated member said, I'm headed up to Kansas City. And we'd say, That's where we get our beans from. Can you pick up a load of beans? There was a lot of that kind of stuff, not just at our co-op but at the others too.

Nick Masullo

The Ozark Cooperative Warehouse began operating in the fall of '75. We incorporated twenty-five years ago, in '76. We were until then a part of Ozark Natural Foods, the retail co-op here. I was at the very first meetings. We had already done some informal trucking before that. Dan Kelly had done runs. Most of those were all done in flatbed trucks, late '40s, mid-'50s Chevy flatbeds and pickups. I wasn't involved in those runs. Dan Kelly remembers more about that period, and he definitely did some of those runs. I think he might have done things like go down to Louisiana to get things, but the warehouse wasn't involved in that part of the country yet.

We began to have meetings with other co-ops to see if they would be interested in putting together a co-op warehouse. It's something that had been talked about in Fayetteville. Dan Kelly, in particular, had spoken about it. I remember John Newman saying that Dan would tell him that we should start a co-op warehouse, and he didn't really know what that meant. His experience was mostly at that point with retails.

Thom Leonard

So we put together an order for a truckload of rice, and in order to get enough volume on that, we called co-ops in Columbia, St. Louis, Kansas City—I think Kansas City—and Lawrence. Maybe Wichita. We said, Look, we can get this great deal on rice if you will agree to buy a given amount, and we'll get it shipped here and then distribute it to you. So that was our first order at the warehouse.

Our second order was organic hard red winter wheat from Benny Unruh in Marion, Kansas. What we ordered didn't fill a full forty-foot truckload, but we ordered a substantial amount, which we'd already had preorders for from individuals and from co-ops. John Newman and I rented a truck and drove it up to Marion, Kansas, and loaded it full of sixty-pound bags of wheat and took it back to Fayetteville and then distributed it from there.

Nick Masullo

John Newman was the first manager of the warehouse. He had been manager of Ozark Natural Foods, and unlike a lot of us, he was much more business-minded. He would later become a CPA and get a master's degree. At the time, we were much more concerned with creating a new kind of workplace and with worker control and with democratic structure of co-ops and with collective structures we were experimenting

with. Not very accounting-minded. John started to go to the University of Arkansas. His folks are accountants, and he began to get more interested in that side of running a business. He was one of the key managers at the retail Ozark Natural Foods.

John Newman

From a business point of view, it was an evolution, starting this warehouse. We started selling some, and then if we had to buy five thousand pounds of rice, which was a lot for us, from the farmer in Arkansas, we would say, Let's go for it. Obviously, we had to promote it and get some buy-in from other co-ops to say they'd buy it from us if we got it. I can certainly remember challenges where we'd buy too much and then it would go buggy. Many of the co-ops bought it, and somehow sold it anyway. All for the cause.

Also, there were meetings going on about how this co-op was going to be organized. In my mind, it already existed as a business, but it was just the Ozark Food Co-op doing this wholesaling. It was like a division or a part of Ozark Food Co-op. At this time, I was managing both of them, and it got to be pretty crazy. So we started thinking that the wholesale operation should be a separate co-op. I have a vague memory of at least one organizational meeting up in Kansas. I don't know if it was in Lawrence. I don't know where it was, but certainly people from Kansas were involved at that stage.

Molly Hamaker

We were part of starting the Ozark Cooperative Warehouse, which I think was already kind of started, but then it became a regional co-op warehouse. I think originally it was just a local thing, and that's where Charlie Gardiner was involved. I think he lived in Topeka and had been involved in national co-op stuff somewhere else and hooked up with us. He was involved when we were having meetings about making the Ozark Cooperative Warehouse a regional warehouse. I vaguely remember going to several meetings around all of this stuff.

Nick Masullo

So we had representatives from co-ops, and the representative from Community Mercantile was Charlie Gardiner, and he brought a unique perspective to those meetings. I remember that despite his long ponytail he seemed so much more businesslike than anyone else. He carried a calculator, which was amazing. They were expensive and more advanced than what a laptop would be today. It was just not something a lot of hippies carried around. Yet whatever we talked about, he'd punch something into the calculator and say that it would work or maybe it wouldn't work. I remember him being a real mature voice of reason at those meetings. Maybe he was a couple of years older than us. I was twenty-four then. Charlie was much older. He was probably twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He was an old guy.

Charlie Gardiner

In a group that's involved as food co-ops are in a product there have to be people who pay attention to both the group and the bottom line, the business. Especially in the formation of a co-op, a great deal of energy is going into helping the group discover and define itself, and too many times the actual business is either ignored altogether or left in the hands of one person or a small group of people, and at some point, that is going to lead to problems, because there is just too much of that kind of a very real control that's been focused onto too small a group. It's hard to get a large group of people to understand and analyze and take fiscal responsibility for the business end of the model. Again, that was something that we had to work with. We had far more people that were interested in the social and political aspects of the co-op than were interested in the business. But somebody had to be there with a calculator in hand and a head for figures to say, We can do this, we can't do that, or we shouldn't do that or we should, or to give some idea to the group of the realities of operating a business, because that was not something that most people were into at the time. We didn't have a whole lot of MBAs running around saying, Let's start a co-op.

There was definitely a strong political leaning against not simply big business but business period, anti-capitalism. It was an ignorant position, but it was strongly held by most of us, not least of all myself. And it was something that we needed to work with and work around if you wanted the co-op to be there next year. At some point, you had to realize that you don't have to make a profit, but you do have to exercise fiscal responsibility both in the material resources that you have, as well as in planning for growth and for downturns and for everything else. There really wasn't anyone around that could—or at least I don't think we found anybody that did—teach us those lessons. We had to teach ourselves as the years went by that it really did make a difference and that you couldn't just buy anything you wanted at the moment. It had to be planned for and justified.

Bob Marvin

I don't remember when we started dealing with Fayetteville. That was a big deal too, because there was an investment we made. I think we borrowed money to buy a share to float them, essentially.

Chuck Magerl

There had been a meeting in Wichita where the folks from Fayetteville had shown up and were filling us in on the move to establish regional warehousing. Folks from Fayetteville showed up at this meeting in Wichita to basically describe what they were doing at that point, which was developing a warehousing structure behind the food co-op as a way of storing and backstocking additional foods because of their buying patterns. There were people who would come in out of the hills and buy five hundred pounds of rice and two hundred pounds of rolled oats and four hundred pounds of whole wheat flour at a time and load them into the back of their 1954 International and disappear back into the hills. If you're running a little retail shop and you aren't prepared for that, all of a sudden there

goes what you're planning on selling to the people coming into your door for the next two weeks.

So they were developing a warehousing structure to satisfy that buying pattern and came to the meeting and said, Here's what we're doing already, and we're expanding this. If you want to get in on it, come on in and we'll work something out. If not, go ahead and do what you're doing, but you're probably going to be replicating what we already are doing, and we're eight months further down the line. Even though there were some people who had a personal interest in trying to say, No, we want to do our own warehouse, the sense was, everybody's busy with what we're doing in our own little location, so, sure, we'll start trading through Fayetteville. That's how the support was thrown to the Ozark warehouse in Fayetteville.

Charlie Gardiner

There was a warehouse in Austin for a while, but I don't remember for how long or how big or how developed it got. It was not part of New Destiny. Those of us in the northern part thought, Wouldn't it be nice to have a warehouse in Kansas City? One of the reasons we kept things open was the hope that as business grew we would be able to have not a satellite warehouse but a second warehouse and perhaps even a third to serve the southern part of the region, just because the region was so big.

Thom Leonard

i: Do you recall if there was ever discussion of other warehouses, other sites for the warehouse?

Yeah, there was talk of having a northern warehouse as well as a southern warehouse. I vaguely remember that Lawrence was a site for that, and I think that one of the Missouri co-ops thought that they would be a good area for it. But I think logistics and the expense of setting up a separate facility kept that from happening.

Nick Masullo

So we did agree that this group wanted to own a co-op warehouse. People weren't sure they wanted it called Ozark because people in Kansas and other places didn't necessarily identify with that name, so we created a name by committee, which was the New Destiny Federation. Like a lot of names by committee, it didn't stick very well, and everyone always called us Ozark or OCW. Eventually, we reincorporated under that name because that's the only name anyone ever called us.

Charlie Gardiner

From the beginning, they were separate organizations, New Destiny being seen as a federation of food co-ops, and Ozark Co-op Warehouse as a distribution service that served co-ops. That has changed as the years have gone by, but we did keep the two

separate to a degree. That was born of mistrust. To some degree, it was born of a wish to keep our options open for having more than one warehouse for the area. The area that we served ran from Louisiana to Missouri to Kansas, Oklahoma, and into parts of Texas. I'm trying to remember if we got over to Alabama at all. I don't think so. I think Mississippi was as far east as we got. It was a huge geographical area, much bigger than any of the other warehouses served. The truck routes were thousands and thousands of miles, a week longer than any of the other warehouse truck routes.

Although I was one of the people who initially had pushed for a federation of co-ops that was somehow separate from the warehouse itself, it was my feeling by the end that if we were to continue to exist we needed to spend at least as much if not a little more time minding business than we did sorting out politics, that we needed to put our energy and effort into the warehouse, and if that meant the New Destiny Federation per se slipped into oblivion, that was okay. As far as I know, that is what finally played out. I don't think the federation now exists as a separate entity. I think everybody thinks in terms of the Ozark Co-op Warehouse.

Thom Leonard

We did work cooperatively with other co-op warehouses once we got into doing more products and getting California products. The Tucson warehouse had a forty-foot trailer that was running regularly between the coasts and the center part of the country, and we'd share loads and share purchases.

Nick Masullo

We knew of the people at Community Mercantile. We knew them as a sister co-op. My first direct experience with Merc is that I began here as a truck driver, and that was in February of '76, while we were still a part of Ozark Natural Foods. The route that I delivered went to Springfield, Missouri, and then St. Louis, and then Columbia Community Grocery, and then the Merc, and then Wichita, and then Tulsa, and back to Fayetteville. That was our entire territory. That one loop was everywhere that the warehouse went.

When I started, we were renting yellow Ryder trucks. They weren't refrigerated. They didn't really need to be. We would do the run and then reconcile our expenses, and whatever was left was the driver's pay, which in the beginning was about seventy-five cents an hour. That was only my first run, I think, and then pretty quickly I was earning a dollar an hour. It stayed that way for a while. I remember hearing once that the folks at Merc had made a decision to earn minimum wage, which we thought was pretty revolutionary. It didn't really occur to us that we were entitled to that, though minimum wage was pretty low anyway. At some point, however, we started paying ourselves minimum wage.

The first work I did at the warehouse was strictly as a truck driver, starting in February. In fact, the first run I did was going down to Carlisle to pick up rice with Mari Spehar and

bring it back here to Fayetteville. I drove with all of our drivers. I drove with Gary and Peggy and Norman Cohen and Christine Ceba. We had a commitment early on when we first started this to train women to drive, and one of our first drivers was Peggy.

I drove with Thom Leonard for a while. That was interesting. Thom would fix these little Japanese feasts for us. He actually didn't want me to cook or fix anything for the road if we were going, because it would surely not be up to his standards. Thom did all the cooking. We would stop by the road somewhere in Kansas and eat these little elegant Japanese meals with miso soup. He would make these brown rice balls with umeboshi plum in the center to preserve them—'cause we didn't have refrigeration—and wrapped in nori sheets. It was great driving with Thom. We certainly ate well.

We were really inspired at the beginning by Tucson Cooperative Warehouse. They'd been in business for two years, which was an amazing amount of time. So they were really our big brothers and sisters. They knew everything, and they had those big tractor-trailers.

i: How much contact was there between you and them?

A fair amount. They started delivering to us, and we also had contact with another co-op warehouse, which was then called ICC, which is today called North Farm. They were the Intracommunity Cooperative of Madison, Wisconsin. We had contact with those two, and we said to them, Our dream is to start a co-op warehouse here. North Farm gave us warehouse prices on peanut butter and cheese. Tucson started delivering to us as we started to create something of a warehouse, which was originally a pretty funky room next to the co-op. Not great conditions. It was an old funky warehouse.

i: How large a room?

I was going to say it was about five times the size of this office, but that's not very useful. It was pretty small. Was it a thousand square feet or two thousand? It wasn't very much.

Actually, the warehouse was started by a personal loan from a man named Mose Oppenheimer, who lives in Colorado now. Legend has it, it was an extremely large loan, like \$1,000, which at the time was a phenomenal amount of money. Over the years, that amount has grown, and people have thought of it as being bigger. When I ran into Mose this summer in Colorado, I was talking about it, and he remembered it being \$500. At any rate, it was a lot of money at that time. We bought a truckload of rice with it.

Ozark Natural Foods actually operated so profitably that it created a surplus of some thousands of dollars. It seemed like it was about \$4,000, which was a lot of money. That's how the warehouse spun off of Ozark Natural. The first people that worked right away over there, as I recollect, were Thom Leonard and Tracy King and Jim Hawkins. I worked half at Ozark Natural Foods retail and half-time driving a truck for the warehouse. The trucking department was started by a small group, including Gary Tabor—one of the key people—and Laura Peggy Martin, who's now an international

doctor with Doctors Without Borders. Charles Friedlein was involved, but he never actually drove a truck. He was intrigued by the idea.

i: Where did you get your products? Where did you get your wheat germ? Where did you get the rice?

In the beginning, it was challenging. Sourcing products was really an art. I remember that Dan Kelly was one of the pioneers of that. When I found some of these sources, they really weren't so exotic, but just finding people that had a clean product that met our standards was difficult. Originally, we had only two products, long- and short-grained brown rice from Lone Pine. Lone Pine is in Arkansas, and we still have that rice today. Lone Pine was started because Paul Hawken, who was at Erewhon at that time, had come to Arkansas to talk to them about growing organic brown rice. The famous Erewhon brown rice was Lone Pine rice. The bag even looked fairly similar, but the logo was different, and that was from Carlisle, Arkansas. That's the rice that all the macrobiotics in New England were eating at that time.

The fella at Carlisle had developed a rubber roller for hulling the rice that didn't damage the bran. That was an innovation that helped make brown rice more available at that time. Carl Garrich, I believe, is his name, and the way his family grew was essentially what young people were later calling organic. He had never grown up with chemicals, so it wasn't such a big deal to him. Even though after World War II there was a lot of chemicals, he remembered his family farming without them.

That was the first product that we had, and that was the only product the warehouse had when we started. Then we started adding some other products. I think our first wheat germ was from ADM, before we had an organic wheat germ. A lot of those plants were really set up to sell animal feed and highly refined bleached product, and we were actually buying the product that they didn't want, things like wheat germ and wheat bran. Until we found organic sources for those products, which, of course, we always did as soon as we could, we did sell some nonorganic.

We got our beans from Aileen Quirk & Sons in Kansas City. I don't know that we actually picked up anything in Lawrence. We would just deliver to the Merc. We did have pickups on that route, though. From Lawrence, we would go on out to Larned and Garfield, out to Martin Eddy's, to the Eddy brothers, and pick up the organic wheat out there in burlap bags. He had this funky scale he had hooked up with barbells that would weigh each bag. Often we got there and the wheat wasn't bagged up, so we'd sleep at his place, and then he would weigh up as much bags as we needed, and we would hand-load that up into the truck, which took quite a while.

Thom Leonard

During that time, we bought an eight-inch stone mill, a Meadows flour mill. We were grinding whole wheat flour for these co-ops, putting it in bags, and taping the bags shut. We didn't even have a bag stitcher.

Nick Masullo

We sold a lot of wheat. Everything was whole wheat then. Pasta was whole wheat. When we first started to carry pasta, all we had was whole wheat pasta. We certainly didn't carry unbleached white flour. One of our big products was organic wheat berries. Later, we set up a milling operation here, and we would grind all that wheat into wheat flour. I ran the mill and hand-dressed the stones for a long time. For a long time, we ground all the wheat that we sold. We used real granite stones in the mill, and the stones would get worn and clogged, so we'd go in with a chisel and a rock hammer and renew the grooves in the stone and renew the bevel. It was quite an art, not that any of us were proficient at it, but there was an older gentleman around that still knew how to hand-dress stones. We had him come in and teach us. You want to keep them level so that they're not wobbling. It would take a long time to master, but we did well enough to grind whole wheat flour anyway.

We had that mill going all the time. We would do something else while it was grinding. We'd pour peanuts into the peanut grinder and make peanut butter, or as we added more products, we would be bagging up another product that we carried, such as nutritional yeast, while the mill was going all the time. I did have a system to draw the dust out of the room. It would collect it out to a catcher outside, because it's not healthy breathing that flour dust all the time. I don't know when we first started carrying a flour that someone else milled.

Linda Gwaltney

i: How important to you was the Ozark Cooperative Warehouse in Fayetteville?

We wanted people to grow organically, but telling a wheat farmer to grow organically and telling him that we'll buy a couple bushels of wheat wasn't practical, so it became obvious that we had to come up with some sort of food distribution system so that people could actually make a living growing food the way we wanted them to. So we came up with this idea of a warehouse, and that way all the co-ops in Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri could get the kind of food they wanted to order. Plus, back then the kind of food that we're used to now at the Merc was just not available.

COMMUNITY MERCANTILE CREDIT UNION

Nick Masullo

I guess the first place I delivered at Community Mercantile would have been on Massachusetts, before they moved to Maine. I think that's the first place I remember them. We'd pull that little truck up there, and there'd be people to help us unload. Everything was unloaded by hand. We didn't have loading docks. We didn't have

unloading equipment, so it was a matter of carrying every unit to the tailgate and then hand-unloading everything and carrying it in.

We often slept on people's floors. I usually stayed at Chuck's. Sometimes, we'd sleep in the truck. We'd try to pick up something soft to sleep on, like wheat germ, because it was a lot better than sleeping on beans. Wheat was better, and wheat germ was the ultimate to sleep on. We never stayed in motels. I don't know if I ever stayed in a motel the way our drivers do now. I often stayed at Chuck's. I don't know how it worked out that way. Chuck worked, I guess, both at the co-op and at the credit union.

Chuck Magerl

i: What brought you to Lawrence?

Going to school. I completed two years of premed study at KU and decided that my interests were a little more broad than were going to fit within both the confines of that study practice as well as long-term confines of that business practice. I didn't see the model to allow me to have the breadth of experience that I was desiring.

After two years, I quit going to school and was involved in a couple of part-time jobs. One was a building, one of the earlier musical enterprises here in town, which was, at that point, called Off the Wall Hall. It later became the Bottleneck, a music-performing space. Building the stage, helping to get that business open and going.

In that same time frame I founded the Community Mercantile Credit Union. The idea behind that was an extension of cooperative business practices. Probably the first inspiration for it, I suppose, had come about from an article that I had read in one of the *Whole Earth* catalogs from a place called Isla Vista, California, which was just outside Santa Barbara. During the early '70s in some of the anti-war protests, one of the major events that happened was the burning of the Bank of America in Santa Barbara. The development of a credit union in Santa Barbara and Isla Vista as part of the alternative community was seen as a way of replacing that structure that the Bank of America represented with a people's-owned, cooperative financial operation.

That was a common theme with what was going on in businesses at that time. There was a sense that there was a need to replicate the structures that existed in the dominant culture with alternative structures that would allow a lot of those same functions to continue to happen but in a less—I don't know that "domineering" is exactly the word—the operative word at that point was "the military-industrial complex." There was a sense that the business structures of the time were integral to the imperialistic aspects of American culture that resulted in the war in Vietnam, the attacks on what was seen as a more traditional culture in Vietnam, as well as the attacks on the individuals, the guys from our hometown, that were being shot and killed in the jungles half a world away. The idea of replacing the military-industrial complex paradigm with businesses that served the functions but served the people as well was a real important sense of what we needed to do.

So the development of the credit union in Isla Vista prompted the development of other credit unions similarly in other places, particularly other cooperative community settings. So I instigated that here in Lawrence.

Shirley Scheier

There were so many other things that developed around the food co-op besides just food. It became a community center. When the credit union was set up, we were called "economic deviants" by the city council.

Primarily, Chuck was behind the credit union. People were afraid to put their money in there to start. It was like, If I put this money in here, Chuck, am I going to have it next year? There was a realization that all the money that we kept in the other banks was loaned out and accessible only to certain people. So I think the little credit union truly fostered a lot of the small independent businesses that started in the early '80s around Lawrence.

Molly Hamaker

In addition to Nan's bakery, there's the credit union that Chuck Magerl was the founding father of. I guess Dick Dunhaupt started it too. I know Chuck was really excited about it. I have lots of fond memories about long conversations with Chuck about how to take our shared political vision and turn it into reality. Like, How can we create institutions that reflect our vision of how the world could be? I guess you could say we were very idealistic. Chuck wanted to make things happen. I remember him talking a lot about money, of course. We started with food, which is primary, but money is equally a daily thing. I think his vision about the credit union was that we, as a community, could control our own money, and then we could use our savings to support the institutions that we were trying to create, like the co-op and, a little later, the restaurant.

Chuck Magerl

The first time I met Dick was at the initial organizing meeting for the credit union, which was in the meeting room at the public library. Dick came up to me afterwards, and then we spent what seemed like hours over the course of the next couple of days talking about it, because he had been spending quite a bit of time thinking about the same type of scenario, in terms of a credit union designed to serve the cooperative, tying into the same social networks and the same community structure. Dick had already informed himself and had quite a bit of theoretical background not only in credit unions but in issues of community economics. He was an immediate strength and ally in the process of getting the credit union started and took on a huge amount of that organizing effort. Shortly after the credit union was getting off the ground and going was when I became involved in the management of the Mercantile, so my time availability shrank quite a bit, and Dick was right there to take the whole process and ride it on through. So he was the initial manager

and set up a lot of the formats and structures and got the furnishings and equipment. Dick was a key person in that whole process and continued to be so for many years.

Mark Maher

I think it was fall of '75 when some posters or flyers announced that there was going to be an organizational meeting for a credit union. As I recall, it was on the main floor of the Ecumenical Christian Ministries building. The call went out for an organizational meeting for the credit union, to find out what it was about. I'm sure it was pretty much all Chuck's energy behind it.

It seemed like a necessary extension of the food co-op.

I suppose there were about thirty people, certainly twenty, heavy on the couples, at that first meeting. I think Arch Naramore might have been there. John Naramore might have been there, if he was in Lawrence. Boles and Burford, and I think Anna. Anna was to become Burford's wife. They were there. It was a comfortable bunch. There was hair down below the shoulders on the guys and flouncy flower-print dresses or gorgeous wraparounds on the women.

It was nice being with people who wanted to be responsible for their own banking business and not give it to Bank of America or Commerce or whatever. I'd had a really bad taste in my mouth '71 through '74 dealing with banks advertising against each other in Lawrence. I think this was before the real push for bank acquisitions and mergers. There were these freebies. Get a checking account with us, and we'll give you a toaster or a clock radio. My wife was all for ripping them off and taking advantage of the series of presents. I think we probably had three banks in two years. As a student, I had used Bank of America in Isla Vista as my first bank, which, of course, was torched the night William Kuntsler came and spoke to half a stadium full of students.

At the organizational meeting for the credit union, we signed up as charter members. My household was numbers twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. I'm still number thirteen under the new organization. There were going to be plenty of committees. In fact, there was enough committee work for everybody who was there.

Marilyn Roy

After the Merc had been up and running, the credit union got started. My number in the credit union is number eighteen. I was active with the loan review committee at that point in time.

Mark Maher

This appealed to me, doing something from scratch. Although at the time there was no ability to offer checking accounts, it was a place to save money, and I had just a few months before started working full-time, and I was living with two other people who

were working full-time. Our farm payment was only \$300 a month, and we wanted to pay it down fast. I thought, Why put our money in a savings and loan or bank and then pull it out every so often to make it a loan payment— 'cause we were buying the farm on contract—when we could keep it in the credit union, and the money could be loaned out to fellow credit union members immediately who would then pay a little bit of interest on it and give it back and we'd roll the money over? This sounded grossly more sensible.

Chuck Magerl

i: Where was the credit union?

Initially, we operated out of the back end of the Mercantile when it was at 615 Mass. We were tucked into the back end of that, just like Nan was with the Verbena Bakery. People were coming in at all hours to try to make that space possible for everybody.

i: Can you talk about the state credit union association's attitude toward this small credit union?

They hadn't been organizing a lot of credit unions prior to the point when we called them up. They were more used to the role of closing down credit unions and merging them with other entities than they were with helping somebody get one started. We were decidedly a different field of membership than what they were used to dealing with. In fact, at the first meeting, when the fella from the Kansas League of Credit Unions came to help us look at all the paperwork and documentation that was necessary, one of his first comments was, If I had known what this group was going to be like, I wouldn't have had to worry about my suit and tie. Which was certainly the case. I'm sure nobody else that showed up was wearing a suit and tie other than him. They found us a curious bunch, but at the same time, we were the only sign of fresh blood coming into the credit union movement in Kansas, and they were willing to try to give us a go and help us out and provide us with the structures and the forms that we needed to get going. Even though we were seen as being the odd kid on the block, we were still supported real well within the organization in Kansas.

The credit union format is fairly strictly defined, so it wasn't as if we had a huge amount of leeway to be rewriting the rules. It was a very regulated entity. Our reporting requirements to the state and to the credit union league were very strictly delineated. We may have been able to carve our own design in terms of what our office appeared like and how people involved themselves, but in terms of what we did with the money and how we insured people's trust, those were all pretty strictly defined.

Mark Maher

There was a general acknowledgment that Chuck and Dick knew what everything was about, and we just had to hang around and learn slowly from them, and if you made a mistake, then someone else would catch it, because you have to close the books. Ideally, everything gets checked, double-checked every twenty-four hours, but as luck would

have it, with all the volunteers we had pushing paper, mistakes would be made. I can't imagine anybody that volunteered didn't do marijuana, but they weren't smoking on the job, and I don't remember people lighting up in meetings ever.

Our supervisory committee was supposed to be responsible for making sure the officers and the other committees—the loan committee, the teller staffing committee, the board, and the manager—do everything by the books, that everything is documented appropriately and balances. But simple things wouldn't balance. You total up the value of all the member shares in each member's account. You go to their individual accounts, and you get a total, and you see that all the actions taken place in the month that were entered in their individual accounts add up to exactly what their account is at the end. So it's all correct.

But then you go to the credit union's master account of member share, what all member shares added up to equals, and it's different. So for the first year and a half, two years, it seemed like rather than learning how to audit the rest of the credit union, the supervisory committee volunteers, which I quickly got sucked into, were trying to find simple mathematical errors. The people who discover the problem do the work initially, and then eventually they say, I've spent ten or fifteen hours trying to find a \$30 mistake; help. You'd go in, and sometimes a fresh set of eyes would find it, or you'd cut it down; you'd get eighty percent of it fixed, end up writing off the balance after a hundred hours of volunteer time.

This was pre-computer. By then, we had an adding machine or two. There was always a sense of feast and famine. Things would go real good. You'd make loans that you thought would give us income to pay Dick's salary and the rent, and then other loans would turn sour. Annually, or more frequently if necessary, the state or the insurance company that insured the credit union would be really concerned about the percentage of delinquent loan balances to the total loan balance outstanding—a high percentage, like eight or ten or twelve, rather than the preferred four or three or fewer. We'd get these guys in suits come in. It was always guys. It was years before I met a professional woman auditor from the state department of credit unions or whatever this amorphous insurance agency was.

After the second or third year of this happening, they began to see a pattern, and it was unlike all the other credit unions in the state. People had disappeared or clearly stiffed us to the point that we as a credit union were delinquent in writing them off, and they, the auditors, were mad at us for not writing the loan off sooner, so we'd write it off, and then the money would start to trickle in again. This just doesn't happen in normal membership credit unions, where the affiliation is living within the city limits or working for Goodyear. It was unprecedented.

I think we got a warm place in their hearts, and as the professional, whether it was Dick or Lynn Pieschl or Paul Johnson, became better trained, and as the volunteers became better trained, we were making fewer stupid mistakes, nickel-and-dime mistakes, and it was allowing the volunteers on the loan and supervisory committees to actually learn

what they were supposed to do: How do you correctly document a loan and follow up on it? How do you make sure the credit union is running by law and everyone's being at least marginally responsible for their offices? That gave the auditors a second boost, because these were volunteers doing this. This was not a loan committee of businessmen serving on a loan committee; these were food co-op members who maybe were employed or maybe weren't or were still students. I think we had people in law school, and there were undergraduate school dropouts who would decide that we could loan to somebody. And it would work. Somehow, the loan would get paid off.

We would loan on collateral that looking back we probably shouldn't have loaned on if we wanted to save ourselves headaches, because by the time we repossessed the collateral, we would have to pay more than it was worth to get our money out of it, or the member would have trashed it, or it would be something that would depreciate so rapidly, like a \$3,000 professional at-home computer system, that by the time we might have to repossess it, was worth nothing, because something had come out that was three times as fast or smarter and cost somewhat less. It was a slow learning curve. The auditors were excited that we were just folks bonded together out of the spirit of forming and running an alternative financial institution, and someday maybe we'd have checking. Short of that, we could write money orders, or someone could take our checks elsewhere.

We needed office hours, so we had to have times available to take money and give money out. By being in the store—this was on the west side of Massachusetts at 615—we were going to be able to write checks to the member, and they could take it to the cashier and cash it, or they could take it to another financial institution and cash it. My first volunteer positions were being alternate Saturday teller, probably late morning, early afternoon, and member of the board, untitled—board member at large. I might have been the secretary. I have horrible handwriting. I think you never had to do Saturday desk more than twice a month. Immediately, I think there were enough people.

We weren't always alone doing desk duties. There would be two of us, because there was enough business opening new accounts, taking money, recording money. We had to figure out loan payments using little charts. There were interest payments on loans. I think at first we didn't even have a calculator. It was so much fun, as the card numbers got higher and higher, over a hundred, into triple digits, acquiring new members.

I remember the sense of real accomplishment and a rebirth of belonging to something that was going to be around, that was going to stick. It was an in-your-face alternative to these other professional credit unions chartered by the state. I didn't really know how uncooperative so many of the midsized and larger sized credit unions were. They'd gotten to the point where they were professional. They weren't member-managed. Technically, they were, but they really were run by full-time or half-time professionals. We had, as I recall, from the start, a quarter-time professional, until we got the CETA grant, a government program, Comprehensive Employment Training Act, that paid fifty percent of someone's salary while they were in training. I think we were able then to fund a half-time person, which was really, I think, necessary by that point.

At the time, Chuck was leaving, and I'm sure Chuck was working more than quarter-time and only getting paid quarter-time to get the required paperwork done. We were paying \$2.50, and CETA was paying \$2.50, if we were paying Dick Dunhaupt \$5.00 an hour. For six months. That was all it lasted. And then you had to promise that you would employ the person for an additional six months at an equivalent pay range, which we thought we could swing by then, so long as we continued to add members and grow our member loan obligations, which we did.

Chuck Magerl

The credit union moved into offices at Eleventh and Mass, upstairs, and shared office space with the *Public Notice* newspaper, with Alternative Technology Center, which was tied in with Danny Bentley, Ken Lassman, and some folks that had VISTA grants for providing salaries for people to organize around issues having to do with alternative technology. I think perhaps the People's Energy Project may have had an office space there as well for a while. So the credit union functioned in that location for a while.

Mark Maher

We had three rooms at Eleventh and Mass. It was very comfortable. You could have all kinds of things going on, in terms of a lot of volunteers working at different things at the same time. We'd be working at night. There were no screens, or the screens had very wide grids. The bugs from South Park would just fill the room. They'd be attracted by the lights and get into the room. We'd be breathing gnats and little moths. A lot of late nights.

Chuck Magerl

There have been a handful of people that have been involved as marginally paid staff. Dick was certainly the first one. A woman named Lynn Pieschl. Rod Runyan. Paul Johnson. There was another woman in there who moved to Manhattan, Kansas, and unfortunately, I don't remember what her name was. That was the paid staff over the years.

i: Who have been the board members over the years?

There have been a lot of folks that have been intimately involved with the Mercantile, and some of them are still around. Mark Maher has a long-time involvement in the credit union as well as the Mercantile. Richard Kershenbaum. Denise Kester. A whole load of folks who have really been stalwarts as far as the community has gone.

Mark Maher

i: Did you have a reason why you directed your energies toward the credit union rather than the grocery store?

Money. I think I would have trusted them had I not been involved, but . . . I knew I didn't want to put my money in the alternatives in Lawrence or Topeka. I guess I felt like I owned it. I owned the credit union, as did a hundred other people or, before we knew it, two hundred other people. We had to work together as a credit union. Let me also add that I was comfortable throwing in my two cents' worth, out of ignorance or common sense, whether it was a board meeting or not. I felt like, with the exception of Chuck, and then Dick and Chuck, and then maybe Paul, all of us were pretty much equal in terms of ignorance and slow acquisition of knowledge.

By plugging into the credit union, it seemed like you could do things by yourself or with a small group of people, some of whom rotated out. The product wasn't changing much. You built up a certain knowledge level, and it works. You don't have to keep learning inventory or personnel management or hours.

I went over to the known product, a credit union. Services are well defined by law, yet, dependent on how much slack the state department of credit unions or insurance company will cut you, you can manage it within reason and cut your members some slack or not. We learned by our mistakes. You don't make signature loans to people who don't have an established bond with the food co-op, who would just come into town, join the food co-op, and now they want to borrow \$1,000 or \$500. I think we started out with a \$500 limit on signature loans where you just sign for it and maybe have someone else co-sign. We had problem loans at all levels: to new people and to people who had good reputations among a certain part of the food co-op community. And we made good loans to people who had not such good reputations, but they were responsible, or we just hit them at the right time in their life that they were able to work successfully for eighteen months to get their loan paid off. Had we loaned the money to them a little later or a little earlier, it might have been a bad loan or a difficult loan to collect.

Chuck Magerl

Certainly, we were probably lending money out for a few more odd scenarios than most of the credit unions in the area were used to. At that stage, credit unions, by and large, had been used as finance vehicles primarily for automobiles. This was at the point when there was not a great deal of flexibility in terms of financial institutions. Things were very strictly defined in terms of banks and savings and loans. This was before the opening of the savings and loans freedoms during the '80s that resulted in all of the disasters in terms of savings and loans bailouts. The banking structure was something that was seen as being a bit of a dinosaur. It was something that had survived since the depression era, and credit unions were really the only entity that had much of a sense of flexibility associated with it. That's changed hugely since the credit union was founded. The lines now are being blurred between banks, savings and loans, insurance companies, and brokerages. Just the number of banks that are being bought and sold or merged or moved is something that was simply not seen during the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

Shirley Scheier

The arena of banking was very important within the feminist movement. In those days, women couldn't get loans, and women couldn't start their own businesses. Essentially, women weren't able to activate their own pursuits.

Valerie Kelly

Chuck was really involved with the Community Mercantile Credit Union, which was another benefit to the community. He has a really good head on his shoulders about all of that. I remember joining the credit union early on and getting a couple of loans from it that really helped me out. I actually borrowed money to move from the credit union. I still have some money in an account there.

Thom Leonard

When I was making tofu and bread in the back of the co-op on Mass, I wasn't satisfied with the flour that was available at the co-op that Nan was using. I had found some wheat grown by a man named Martin Eddy in west Kansas farther out than the wheat that was coming to the co-op. At that point, Archie Naramore was milling flour for the co-op, and I arranged with Archie to store some wheat for me. I bought some wheat from Martin. It couldn't have been for a lot of money. Wheat doesn't cost a lot. I probably got a pickup load's worth of wheat. I borrowed a truck from my brother-in-law and drove out and got it. The credit union actually loaned me \$300 to buy the wheat to do this. Where else are you going to find a lending institution that's going to help some guy that has virtually no worldly possessions except what he can carry on his back plus a couple pots for making tofu?

Chuck Magerl

We found ourselves loaning out for a lot of the classic counterculture needs. There were a lot of loans for Volkswagen buses and loans for bicycles and tepees and things like that that wouldn't have been the norm at any local bank, let alone another credit union.

i: Can you think of other examples of loans that you gave out?

We didn't do too many small business loans because we didn't have a huge amount of capital to work with. But Central Soy Foods, for instance, borrowed money. Verbena Bakery/Amazing Grains. The Community Mercantile did have some small loans from the credit union for some equipment purchases. I think we helped some other individuals start up sole proprietorship businesses, things like chimney-cleaning businesses. For the most part, those were the kinds of things we stayed in the range of.

Mark Maher

i: What did people use their loans for?

Used motorcycles, used cars, a lot of vacations, trips to the mountains, trips to the coast, camping gear, upgrading their car, getting it so that it would run again, transmission or engine overhauls. We might even have made a few loans just to establish a savings account. I'm sure we advertised that this is a creative way to get a loan out. Rarely would there have been a new car. I'm sure there was, but if they were borrowing money for a new car, the chances were that the car company could offer them a little bit better deal. There were a lot of times when we were quite competitive on used car loans.

Even after he was no longer able to be our half-time manager, Dick was our car value estimator. We didn't make a car loan unless he or somebody else who had some experience in valuing cars initialed it as being what the book said it was for the number of miles or the age of the car—that it was okay. Dick would also get so much for repossessing the car. He would be fed information about the whereabouts of the car. Or sometimes he'd been in town so long and knew so many people that he had ways of finding out where things were on his own.

There was one car loan. I think there was stuff from the partner of the owner in the trunk of the car. And it was like, What belongs to who? Who's storing it where? Are we obliged to let people know what we have that's not really our property? As I recall, there were one or two garbage sacks of stuff that would stay in the credit union offices—this was up at 1101 Mass, second story, opposite the courthouse—just waiting for someone to claim it. 'Course, the borrower who had had her car repossessed didn't want to appear for good reasons, and maybe she was hacked off at whoever the stuff belonged to, and she wasn't going to tell. I'm sure that it was stuff that could easily be replaced, though I didn't dig through it.

There was a sad story. It was a nicer car owned by a well-respected man in town who was self-employed or worked on insurance commissions; he might have sold insurance or real estate and got commissions. The family had a string of bad luck, maybe a child's illness. We strung them along and strung them along and had to repossess the car. I think he ended up quitting the credit union. He was just furious that we had stabbed him in the back. It would just exhaust time at board meetings. Every board meeting, we'd go over the delinquent loan accounts. It's not up to the manager to order repossession; it's up to the board to decide what to do on a bad loan, when to write it off and collect the collateral and see if that would cover the balance. This was someone who no one ever thought would default on a loan, but it was like \$15,000 or something, which would have been a tremendous percentage of the loan balance at that time. And we'd gone way beyond what the state was happy with in terms of not getting the right amount of money per month for months in a row, and we had to repo that car.

i: Any uncommon uses for loans?

I think of a loan to the tofu man when he came or when he took over for Thom Leonard. I don't know if there was any exchange of skills, or how that transition from Leonard to this other person, Jim Cooley, occurred. Over and over again, we wanted to be in a position to make business loans. Sometimes we could, and sometimes we couldn't. I

think in Lawrence or anywhere in the Midwest, making a loan for a tofu artist—I don't want to call him a cook; there's more to it; I imbue that with almost monk-like qualities—is pretty quirky. In the surroundings of the Merc, it makes ultimate good sense to have it made locally available, that fresh. And my God, there was a market for it. I think he needed more help or more mechanization or something so that he could keep up with the demand and still have a price that was too low to refuse. It was and is a good product.

Making loans for women who were buying motorcycles is not a very Midwestern thing. We couldn't make real estate loans, and this was at a time when I wanted to populate the rural areas with likeminded vegetarians or cooperative-organic-grower-type people. Not that they could make a living doing this, but any way we could assist in getting them to own some land out here would have been fine with me, but we simply didn't have the principal, the kind of money that you could tie that much up rather than making thirty \$1,000 loans for vacations or computers or bikes when they started coming out for \$500 or more.

Chuck Magerl

A local couple, Tom and Anne Moore, had provided a chunk of cash. Their specific concern had to do with energy efficiency, so they plunked some money down, basically like an endowment, and said, We want the credit union to administer this and loan out this money for energy-efficient uses at a reduced interest rate. They didn't want to earn interest on their money, so, in turn, we could loan it out at a lower rate. That was lent out for things like more energy-efficient refrigerators or hot-water heaters, wood stoves, some solar collector projects, and things like that. That was one very specific target within the credit union as well.

Rod Runyan

i: How early did you get involved with the credit union?

I'm account 205. So I'm an early, but not a founding, member. Dick Dunhaupt, who I mentioned earlier, and Chuck are two of the important founding members of the credit union. There are others: Richard Kershenbaum and Marilyn Roy. I think I joined in '77.

Dick got me involved in the credit union, actually. Dick has gotten me involved in many things over the years. He's been a catalyst in my life. He got me to run for the board of the food co-op when he was getting off the board in the '90s. He was sort of looking for his replacement and designated me, or conned me into running. Then he talked me into joining the credit union a long time ago.

i: How did it work? What was the procedure to join the credit union?

It was easy. You had to be a member of one of the groups, and in this case, with Community Mercantile Credit Union, you had to be a Mercantile member to join or have

family that was a Mercantile member. You put ten dollars in an account and filled out a three-by-five card. They still have all those little three-by-five cards somewhere with all the original people's names and numbers, which was a real nostalgia trip for me as I went through them during my time as a manager. I recalled people I hadn't seen or thought of in many a year.

It was very simple. And obviously, they didn't do much. Shares and loans, basically, is what they did. Interestingly enough, in the early years, they were able to make the sort of loans that they were prohibited from making for many years after that, such as mortgage loans. They made a few mortgage loans and business loans.

i: Do you remember the businesses?

I think they did make a loan to Central Soy Foods at one point. Metric Motors, I think, borrowed money at one point. That was Buraq and Willow, who turned into Charles Gruber and Aaron Blosser. Actually, they turned back into those people at some level or another. Both those guys are still around town, and names you might or might not have run across. Good guys. Charles Gruber is well known in town these days, 'cause he sells real estate, and you see his picture in the paper all the time. This was back in the hippie-dippie Volkswagen mechanic days of his life. Good credit union members.

I think there were a lot of little businesses that just came and went that the credit union made small loans to. And, of course, mostly individual loans. The credit union's bread and butter has always been the used-vehicle loan. Seventy to eighty percent of the loans they've made in their entire existence would have fallen into the used-vehicle category. And small personal loans, which were used for a variety of things.

Ken Lassman

Free State Credit Union started as a natural outgrowth of the alternative community in Lawrence. Part of that was, some people were making money with drugs, and they didn't want to run it through the normal banks. They wanted an alternative economy, a parallel to the mainstream.

Rod Runyan

I'm sure they funded some local marijuana growers from time to time. That's a thread that doesn't—I don't think—have a real big part in Community Mercantile but which has had a big part in a lot of small businesses in Lawrence over the years. There's been a lot of marijuana money in this town. I think the credit union may or may not have inadvertently laundered some of that over the years, but I suspect probably did. You see a lot of businesses in town, a lot of restaurants in town in the '70s and '80s that were founded with marijuana money. Guys who were looking for a way to turn cash into some way to spend it. I don't think that's so much true anymore, but there are still people in town who've made their money that way and who were supportive and tended to be

countercultural sorts just because of that. There's an area where a guy doesn't name names.

Mark Maher

Sometimes, I got the sense that we were having accounts for people who just wanted an account, like as a reference or maybe an ego trip. I got a call once from someone who wanted to deposit a lot of cash, \$30,000. He wanted to know what kind of CD arrangement we could make on that. Chuck had just educated us as to the requirements for receiving over \$10,000 cash. It had to be reported. I was able to focus on the field of membership. This guy was calling from out of state. I'm sure he found us in a directory. We were using the name "Free State," which maybe meant something to him in terms of looseness. I'm sure he was a businessman wanting to move cash away from auditors in Florida.