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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A Taste of Houston

A Part of the Culinary Crossroads Project

UH Center of Public History

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***NOTE: This transcript has not been edited or corrected.*

Abstract:

Pamela Walker is an educated, author, activist and one of the founders of Houston Bayou City Farmer's Market.

Pamela Walker was interviewed on September 30, 2010. This interview was conducted by Andrew Reiser on behalf of the Oral History of Houston Project, Center for Public History, University of Houston. The interview is available at M.D. Anderson Library on the main campus of the university.

AR: This is Andrew Rieser here today to interview Pamela Walker September 30th 2010. Please state your name.

PW: Pamela Walker

AR: Where were you born?

PW: Dallas

AR: What year?

PW: November 6, 1949.

AR: Where did you attend college?

PW: Austin College in Sherman, Texas.

AR: What did you study?

PW: I was an English major.

AR: The first question that I am going to ask you is when you were in college did you imagine you would become an activist, author and college instructor?

PW: I imagined being an English teach either in high school or college. That was my initial thought, but after I graduated college I wanted to become a college professor. Literature, English and teaching have always been interests; I was interested in reading and writing. I did not imagine to be a farm or food activist. Even though I was always close with my grandparents, always.

AR: What did your grandparents do?

PW: My maternal grandparents were sharecroppers. My grandfather was born in Travis County in 1906. My grandmother was born in Williamson County in 1905 and they farmed cotton and ended up, well for a while they were in North Texas in the Seymour Texas area. But then in my lifetime they were in southwestern Oklahoma, Jackson County near Altus Oklahoma. I grew up mostly in Oklahoma City which was only about 150 miles from where they lived and I spent a lots and lots of time them in the summers and holidays and vacations. They lived until my mid 30s. My children got to visit them.

They never owned land. They lived on a farm. They rented a house for 10 dollars a moth. Until I was 21, there was no indoor plumbing. We went to the well for water and there was an outhouse. In a warm weather we bathed in a galvanized tin tub on the porch and in the cold weather we bathed in the galvanized tin tub in the kitchen. We heated water in a kettle. We got to play outside and roam freely. They always had a vegetable garden. My grandfather after they quit farming sometime in the World War Two. The life of a sharecropper was no paradise. He graded roads for Jackson County. So he had a big caterpillar parked and sometime drove us on little rides down the road in this road grader and I thought they were just the most wonderful people on earth. When I was about 5 or 6 because of cousins in Oklahoma City who had grandparents lived in Oklahoma City, I discovered not everyone's grandparents lived in the country, and that they didn't let go bath in the tin tub on the porch and couldn't walk to the well for water and I thought how horrible it is, for people who didn't live in the country the way my grandparents did. So just had a huge impact on my connection with food. I have always known where food comes from. My interest

in gardening, as an adult; I've always had an organic vegetable garden. I have always had a compost pile. I have always cooked.

AR: You might have answered this already. The farm you grandparents had was rented?

PW: Yes.

AR: Was it organic?

PW: No, and they didn't farm in my lifetime. They grew vegetables without chemicals. Just a garden, but it was just cotton and wheat, but I am sure the owner used chemicals.

AR: You left your grandparents, the experience in the interested in farming and food.

PW: Right, I never not paid attention to farming food because it had been a part of my life since before I can remember.

AR: So you go from college interested in English and Literature. Where does the author and advocate come from? How did you get there?

PW: Yeah, well I have a master's degree in library science and a PhD in English from Rice University. I did teach at the college level for a while. I taught at the University of St. Thomas as an adjunct for several years. I taught at Rice as a graduate student in the freshmen English program and for a while in the humanitics program. I taught at San Jacinto Community College for several years. My last paying job was from 1995 – 1999 and I was the staff administrator in an interdisciplinary humanitics research center faculty at Rice. It was a part time job. Many years ago, in my graduate work, I developed an interest in writing fiction and so I published one short story in 1982 and worked on a novel and short stories, but no other publications and so I always been interested in writing and what happened was, the way the two intersected, after my husband and I purchased our farm in 1997 and I was still working on fiction and had my administrative job at Rice for a couple more years, I got involved in Farmer's market organizing. Also I should say reading about agriculture has been one of my reading interests. In the late 1970's I read Wendow Berry's the Unsettling of America and that had a big impact on me. Since then Wendow Berry has been one of my heroes and agriculture became my reading interest. So we get the farm in 1997, I am still working on fiction and then I really get involved in farmers market organizing.

I organized a farmers market in Schulenburg in 1999 and 2000. In 2001 it fizzled out. A small town like Schulenburg cannot really support farmers market that is professionally managed and successful enough to support commercial growers. It did not last, but it was a good training ground for me and through that work I got involved in grassroots organization in Texas. The Texas Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, the ones that I mentioned in the introduction. Holistic resource management of Texas, Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance. That work enabled me to draw on business I made for many years whenever I was travelling to farmers markets in different parts of the college and focus my agriculture reading into how do local markets develop? In 2001 the Schulenburg market pedals out. Urban Harvest, which I been a member of, but not actively in then made one of its projects organizing a farmers market. I was asked to participate in the effort. The board member whose idea it was really did not have sustained interest in the project and I did so I ended up chairing the market organizing committee and overseeing the initial development of the market. Most of the time only 1 to 4 people worked on that market. I was always the one person working on it. I had the passion to see it through completion and the professionalism to study successful models of markets all over the country and I was always working in Houston, but beyond Houston.

AR: Well you gave a lot to ask from that.

PW: (Laughter)

AR: Let's go back to your farm, which you said you purchased in 1997.

PW: Right.

AR: How did you find this farm?

PW: I knew the area little bit. Its halfway between Houston and San. Antonio, Schulenburg is. That means it is like 100 miles were of here. My husband and I like going west, open country. We spent a lot of time backpacking and hiking travelling in New Mexico, Colorado. Sometimes Arizona, California and Alaska. Years ago I had friends who had a farm out in the area our farm is. I got to know the area little bit. I liked it. It is a good distance from Houston. It is not too far to drive, but is far enough out that you are actually in the country. We looked in local newspapers and Houston Chronicle for adds and connected with realtors and looked at a number of properties. Ours is 48 acres. We picked it because one it was within our budget (laughter), which is always helpful. As long as we kept this house which I love and I love the neighborhood and I love Houston as deeply as the farm, we couldn't afford to build a house so we needed a livable house. The house at the farm is small, but comfortable little house. There is a beautiful old barn. It is about 40 acres in grass. There is an old pecan orchard some beautiful live oaks. It also came with 100% mineral and loyalty rights. That was important to us. Not because we wanted to drill, but because we did not want to drill. We did not want other people who own those rights to have drilling rights outside the bedroom window. These were the things that led us to buy a farm. It was 13 years ago in October that we bought it.

AR: What did you guys grow?

PW: It is a hay farm basically. I have a large vegetable garden. This year it has been a different type of vegetable garden. My husband died on January 14th and I had a wonderful winter garden, but when it played out, I did not have the heart of the time to put in a regular spring or summer garden so I planted black-eyed peas which I love and that improve the soil. Fixes nitrogen in the soil and gave me a good crop of black-eyed peas. I had to do other things. Ordinarily though I have vegetables year round. Each season I grow many varieties of vegetables. In the winter in the cool seasons I grow a lot of lettuces, kale, Swiss chart, I have a little asparagus patch, I grow garlic. I did get a crop of garlic. You plant garlic in October and harvest in April. I was able to harvest a nice crop of garlic in April.

It is a hay farm. A typical arrangement in the area, which we follow, as if you don't have livestock yourself which we never had because we never lived there full time. Also I do not know how to take care of farm animals. I would have a lot to learn. I just don't have time or my interests are not in that area. A typical arrangement is you lease your land to a neighbor or someone in the area who wants to cut hay for his/her cattle or who wants to graze their cattle on your land. We tried grazing for a while, but did not like the way particular people grazed cattle. We had different ideas. People in the country do not want Houston lady telling them how to graze their cattle. So that did not work. What I have now is a very nice man who lives part time in Huston, but most of the time in the country and raises long horn. We have a bartering system. He cuts some hay for his cattle and does some work for me on the place to about equivalent to what we would owe me if he had paid me money. I need labor more then I need a thousand dollars. We are not talking about a lot of money here. A typical leasing figure, and I use the term leasing and renting very loosely. Sometimes people have written agreements and that is a good idea, but often it is a verbal agreement. A typical rate would be 25 dollars an acre. I am owed about a thousand dollars every year. I need a thousand

dollars in labor more then I need a thousand dollars because I would have to pay 4-5 different guys to do 4-5 different things. I prefer to pay one and work with as few people as possible, especially since I am not there all the time. So it is a hay farm and a large vegetable garden.

AR: And it is funny, when I was reading your book, which we will get into a little while, labor is one of the biggest issues farmer's face.

PW: Right.

AR: That is amazing. I never would have thought of that. When did you, or did you from the start, decide to go organic?

PW: Well I always had been an organic vegetable gardener. You know I came from the age of 60s, as I told you I was born in 49. My parents did not use chemicals on their vegetables. So it was already just not part of my mindset. Then, the alternative culture that developed in the 60s and 70s was very compatible to things I already thought. Organic emphasizes the health of the soil. I do not see how you can get around that, by reading, the kids of thinkers and writer who's work on agriculture and farming emphasizes the health of the soil, animals and people. It was never a question.

AR: You mentioned something and I saw it in an article too, that people wanted to drill your land.

PW: Oh right did you see it?

AR: I did, yes.

PW: It was a nice picture of barn that is all I can say

AR: Would you elaborate on drilling? I assume you are referring to oil.

PW: Yes, oil and natural gas. As I understand it, in fairly recent years because of survey instruments that can go to greater depths then before. Drilling and energy companies have become interested in extracting natural gas from beneath shale and the way they do that is sometimes going in horizontally and going in at those depths using water and sand and unspecified chemicals to break the shale and then extract the gas. I think because we live in lax regulatory environments that there is not enough to oversight. Not enough is known about the risks. There is not enough regulatory oversight to protect people from risks of drilling. Those are my concerns. What I think is happening are people see an easy way to make a quick buck. They hope companies they lease with wont drill, but it's a gamble. If they do drill then we are at the mercy of lax regulatory environment. Sometime small energy companies; that don't have the sophistication or the incentive to carefully manage what they are doing.

AR: Have you personally received any pressure?

PW: Yes I have, from neighbors primarily. Good intentions, they do not want me to miss out on economic opportunity. The other thing is some of them are helping the leasing companies to put together a certain block of land. So it is not entirely a selfless on their part. They want a certain block to make so that they get leasing income from the agreements. One of the things I looked into when I began hearing about the leasing opportunities in our area is a SMU professor, our mineralist, who is not the head of the regional EPA studied air toxicity in north Texas during the past several years. The air toxicity during all the drilling in the Barnett Shale which is a formation in the Dallas/Ft

Worth area, and he found more air toxicity is attributable to the drilling then to looking at that hardly anyone is looking at.

AR: Just for the transcript, SMU, what school is that?

PW: Southern Methodist University.

AR: How do you go about refusing these offers?

PW: I just say no.

AR: You just say no, OK. Is this still going on? When did they make these offers? When you first bought the farm?

PW: Now, I am out of the information loop. Unless I ask neighbors what is going on. The word is out that I do not want to sign. No one is contacting me now. So I just say no and I express my concerns about what might happen to the water, air and peace and beauty of the area and also talk about the economics about it. Almost everyone can use more money, but we are not talking about large amounts of money considering the risks. The best offer I heard would had given me 1,500 an acre for 5 years. Now this is pre-taxed. That would be something like 72,000 dollars over 5 years. It came down to 14,000 a year, 12-1400 a month before tax. That is not a lot of money. I am not interested in any amount, but if you look at what people are risking for a relatively small amount of money pre-taxed, it does not make sense. I think if need more money I should get a job, cut back on expenses or sell one of my two properties. I do not think I should risk the health of water, soil, air and that of my community for a few bucks.

AR: How do you split your time between Houston and you farm?

PW: Until my husband died we were there half of the time and here half of the time. And I hope to resume that way of living. I had so much death relating business in Houston and then maintenance work to catch up on. I feel rooted deeply in both communities.

AR: Do your children see it as part of their home too?

PW: Well they are old. My older stepson is 47. My oldest son is 38 and my youngest son is 35. It is an important place in our family. The only time all of us are all together, unless someone is sick is between Christmas and New Years at the farm. The farm has made our family. A family in terms of the two sets of sons and grandchildren. For my sons, because they got to spend time on my grandparents farm and slide down the same seller door that I slid down and walk the same pastures and fish out of this creek that sometimes had water, they feel a connection to that farm and farming. Through me they have that kind of rootedness. My sons come at other times usually most years; one is in Dallas and the other in Chicago. My son in Dallas has not always been in Dallas. He has been in California, New Haven, so it is the way families are scattered. So it has been a role, but it is not like a place people come to unfortunately 3 or 4 times a year. But it is special. Like most families on holidays, we have our special foods almost always include barbeque, fried oysters. We smashed a piñata at Christmas even though we are all grownups. We smash at least 2 piñata. One big and easy One and one really small one. It has made a difference in connecting our family to each Other in other ways we would not have connected. When we gather there people love sitting on The porch, drinking beer, d inking wine, taking walks and visiting each other. I take the kids on a 1988 Mazda truck and drive them slowly through the pastures and they love that. We take them down to the pond. Whereas if we gathered here(Houston) people would want to call up their old friends, they would

want to go to restaurants, they would want to meet somebody somewhere, whereas there we are just there visiting each other. That has been very nice.

AR: Wow.

PW: I give you more answers then you would like.
AR: No, wow, well you are making me hungry. You are well known in that you have helped Establish or solely establish Schulenburg a farmers market.

PW: Right

AR: Am I pronouncing that right?

PW: Yes Schulenburg.

AR: Not a specific farmers market, but, how do you start a farmers market? How do you do it?

PW: Well it is very hard. It is much more complicating then people who just look at a farmers market and like a farmers can imagine. One of the things that I recognized early and tried to emphasize to everyone I worked with or spoke with in the course of organizing or even answering phone calls asking how to start a farmers market, a well-run professional market that will serve commercial growers and serve customers who want the best in local fresh food is a retail business. So I would say to people, tell yourself that as many times as you can stand it, a farmers market is a retail business, it is a retail business, it is a retail business. Just to get some sense of how daunting t is to start one because if you do not approach it that way it is likely to fail, and it might fail anyway. You can't just find six growers and say to them just show up at 9 o'clock on a Saturday morning. You have to, especially think about start a retail business with no money; you have to have professional rules of operation and professional management just like any business. You would not start a restaurant or any other business without rules of operations, some kind of management and certain goals. So the same is true of a farmers market. You have to study successful markets elsewhere and visit them and talk to managers and see what makes them effective. As you organize a farmers market you also have to find a site that can be extremely difficult. You need a location in places where people drive cars. Parking cannot be an issue or a market will not work. You need to have a highly visible market because you cannot afford a lot of publicity so you want the presence of the market to advertise itself. So finding a site can be especially difficult. You want to start working with growers to get them involved with the market when it opens. That can be very difficult.

Even now that farmers markets are more popular now then 10 years ago in Texas, even working at the Urban Harvest market from 2002-2006, there aren't enough growers to meet demand. Identifying and recruiting growers can be a problem and now that markets are so popular growers are invited to so many markets that they can't go or if they go and the market does not deliver the customers then they are not going to comeback. If your make a living in farming and selling directly to the public, you can't stand around for four hours and go home with only 100 dollars. You have to identify and work with growers.

You also have o develop your clientele and even though farmers markets are popular now or more popular than they were, only a small number of people actually go to farmers markets. What we still need to be doing is a larger version or a maybe a more consistent version of what you do when you

develop a farmers market. You want enough customers that the farmers sell to customers but not so many customers that there is a sellout within the first half hour. So you are developing your customer base and your supply base at the same time. As markets become more common and successful their existence and success create more markets and give incentives to more people to go into commercial farming. But that takes time, a long time.

AR: That is fascinating you basically described the formation of any kind of business

AR: That is fascinating you basically described the formation f any kind of business.

PW: Right a retail business.

AR: I will be honest when I was living in Washington DC, I just assumed people came from down the road, set up some tables and sold a few crops.

PW: Right and you have issues with health departments. You also have funding issues. To pay a manager that requires fund raising. Urban Harvest and other nonprofits can raise money to support a market ,but that can be very daunting to raise enough money to pay someone an adequate salary to manage a market. Rice University took over the Houston farmers market. Houston Farmers Market actually opened before the Urban Harvest Farmers Market, but it had a very poor set of operating rules and very poor management. When it eventually moved from Christ of King Lutheran Church to the Rice campus, Rice University began to take a greater interest in it necessarily because it was lending its property and the prestige of the association really so it ended up taking the market over to a means of community involvement and make it a more affective business. As long as they were going to be involved in it then they wanted to meet a certain standard.

AR: What is your relationship with the Urban Harvest Farmers Market?

PW: I am a customer.

AR: You are a customer?

PW: Yeah.

AR: Tell me about the market you helped establish in Houston.

PW: Well that is the Urban Harvest Market, so what can I tell you about it?

AR: Was Houston asking f or a farmers market at the time, what finally made you help establish the Urban Harvest one, what finally did it?

PW: Well it was m y own passion for farmers markets and local farming and food communities. I think some people in Houston were onto it. But no, it was not like the whole city was clamoring f or a farmers market. I wanted one h ere because I knew from my travels just how wonderful they were elsewhere. I often thought if only I could have a farmers market like the Santa F e farmer market or the Union Square Green Market, why can't we have that here. Or markets I have been to in California. That is what drove me.

AR: That is a good reason.

PW: Selfishness.

AR: Yeah, why not?

PW: I want this good food in my back yard and I learned so much with the Schulenburg market that t felt like I was the right person at the right time. That few people would care enough or bother to learn enough to do what needed to be done.

AR: Did you receive support from community leaders, politicians or social organization?

PW: From some, there w ere a lot of expressions of interest ,f or example from Ann Olsen, the Buffalo Bayou project, she called me and other people would call and say, "would you put the market there, or downtown. "Jamie Brewster who was p resident at the time, I don't know if she still is of the Upper Kirby Chamber of Commerce. People in Houston were beginning to pay enough attention to markets that they wanted one somewhere". Could you have a farmers market here once a month?" Not realizing a retail business does not open i n a different location every other w eek. I would get that kind of interest. The kind of well meaning, but not well informed interest i n the project. Within Urban Harvest itself, I made the mistake i n assuming that the Board itself was more k knowledgeable and had a greater commitment to the market project then i t did. I discovered that most of, that the board member who initiated and drove the project was not consistent in his promotion of the project nor was he knowledgeable. But I realized those things about that board member and the board as a whole when I was a already far into it that I was not willing to back off of it.

AR: I was just curious, who made up the board, was the board for the actual market?

PW: No the Urban Harvest Board of Directors

AR: Oh Ok I am sorry.

PW: So I think there was a lack of, the board itself, the executive director at the time and the board member who spearheaded the project really had no idea what they were getting into. So I actually experienced a lack of support from the organization itself. But it was the kind of organization that I saw a lot of potential in so I went ahead with working as hard as I did at the market and I worked very hard. Sometimes 40-60 hours a week working on market organization. My hope was that the market would set a new standard of professionalism and contribution to the Houston community, that the organization itself would then come up to that level and because Urban Harvest as a resource for school gardeners and community gardens. It is primarily an education resource. I saw this as a way for urban harvest to actually, if the board chose to, to do more than just be an educational resource, not that it is not variable, it really is, we need as much local horticulture knowledge as possible, but having a market would be a way to foster school gardens involvement in just growing some produce, but coming to market, bringing it to market. Some of that has happened. Actually an organization that I think, in Houston has become the strongest model for connecting community growers with eating what is grown and markets is recipe for success. Are you familiar with that? I think maybe Gracie Cavnar, who founded it will be interviewed by someone. I like what they are doing. I think when you have food gardens; if the food does not make it into cafeteria you might as well forget it. Why bother? The children might as well plant petunias and I have nothing against petunias. I have a lot going in terms what I think about food. so what I like about recipe for success, and I have not had enough time to be involved with it yet is that the children are involved in growing, the parents and children are involved in nutrition classes, chefs come in and the children

cook and one of the organization's longer term goals is a kind of a city farm. there is a city farm in Chicago and other urban areas so that you connect farmer education, horticulture education and school gardens with actual marketing opportunities.

AR: You mention the word community. Where i n Houston is Urban Harvest?

PW: At the time when I was involved i t was off of Washington, I am forgetting the actual address, maybe the 6th ward. It was south of Washington .I t is where the Mecca, an old high school, i t is the acronym f or multicultural education and counseling in the arts and so Urban Harvest was housed in the basement of an old school buildings and now the offices are downtown.

AR: Were a lot of the customers from the Sixth Ward area?

PW: No, oh Urban Harvest offices were there, the market has always been, initially it was called the Bayou City Farmers Market, the market has always been on east side and Richmond. But the customer base, well probably well I don't know, I really can't speak knowledgably about the current customer base. Initially and I am talking six venders and not many customers. The market today is very different. We had more diversity then you might expect. Not a lot and that is an important issue. Who buys food from Farmers markets? For example one woman drove from Bay town almost every week to buy produce primarily eggs and she was not particularly affluent. She was probably middle class, but that is an example of a kind of dedication and coming to the market from a great distance and from a demographic that you would not necessarily expect.

AR: When did you leave it?

PW: The late winter or spring of 2006. It has been over4 years.

AR: But you are still a customer?

PW: Yeah, oh yeah, right.

AR: I am just curious; did you ever sell and produce?

PW: No, I sold some of my produce in the Schulenburg market but I did not. I was working so hard to organize and develop the market here and also for an urban market. I really did not have enough unless I sold it as a gardeners table, which gardeners do, but I just did not have the time Or interest. I love to grow and to cook, but I am really not that interested in marketing.

AR: We talked about community interest, any negative or resistance to the market?

PW: Like which people?

AR: I don't know any supermarkets? Did you receive any pressure?

PW: No, farmers markets are not on the radar screen of supermarkets. They are not competition. They are so different.

AR: There was no Whole Foods or anything?

PW: Well we do have Whole Foods and Central Market which is a special grocery store of HEB, a major Texas chain and Central Market exists and was inspired by Whole foods and it competes with Whole Foods and in fact does a better job than Whole Foods of getting Texas produce in to the stores. No grocery stores at least anyone in grocery store management that has any sense does not see a farmers market as a competitor.

AR: So you grow your own produce you establish a farmers market in one of the largest cities in the country. Where does the book come in? Where did that come from, you seem pretty busy.

PW: We sort of touched on that, I was writing fiction, I had my job, my last job which was at Rice University and then I got involved increasingly in agriculture after we got the farm and farmers market organizing and grassroots organizations and I met so many interesting people including farmers and I thought we needed a book for Texas to demonstrate that. Again this is before farmers markets became as popular as they are. It was also ;I started work before Michael Pollan published his book, the big one, Omnivores Dilemma and the other subsequent food books.

AR: You also have the movie, Food Inc.

PW: Right, yes, so this was ahead of the kind of surge or broader spread of interest. In the course of organizing the Schulenburg market, when I was trying to find growers for that market I worked a little bit with Lafayette County extension agent, whose name at the time was Larry Nickel, and he was an example of the kind typical conventional mentality in the extension system. I would call him or go up and talk with him to tell me what growers in the Lafayette county area and adjoining counties. He would tell me the kid of growers you are looking for don't exist. No one sells at farmers markets anymore. No one can make a living doing that. You might find some hobby growers. And would think, look I have been in other parts of the country, I also been to Austin, I just talked to about 15 farmers who are making a living selling to the public. I know they exist and that this is happening and it can happen. Gradually I just warmed to the idea of writing a book about commercially successful farmers as a way to advocate. One to make it more visible, not only can this happen but it has been happening for at least a generation right here. If other people are interested in independent family farming for a livelihood we have some successful models. I also wanted more people, people who eat which is everybody of course.

AR: Some more than others.

PW: Yes, but to kind of get the back-story of farmers market. When we go out of the way to buy from farmers, the kind of stewardship portrayed in my book is what we are supporting. Just to reveal how high the stakes are, what is involved, that if we want real farming and real food to survive in this country, we need to buy from local farmers and help create more of a market or all of our food will come from China, Chile, Argentina, New Zealand, Australia or Monsanto. Those were my main motivations to show perspective growers that yes this is done and to reveal to people who care about what they eat and care about the survival of farming and good stewardship in our area or whatever a really is we live in that is supporting local farmers i s really an obligation in my view.

AR: I think personally one of the biggest strengths of your book, I sound like Wolf Blitzer interviewing an author by the way, but I think it is great you went all around the state. You did not go to one area.

PW: Yeah, no I really wanted as much regional representation as I could. The only people who would not respond to me as a category of grower are the certified organic growers in the Panhandle.

They are so large scale and many of them grow commodity crops and I even met some of them, I couldn't force them. I was sorry not to have the Panhandle, but I did get all the other regions. I also wanted a range of life experiences. I did not want just old hippies I, didn't want all fundamentalist Christians I, wanted a diversity of education experience, cultural values, people who might have grown up on a farm, people who might have had nothing to do with
farming until they got into it, to demonstrate that there is no one way to do this.

AR: And you mention the types of audiences you were trying to reach through your book, possible people who thinking about going into farming. Why would they go into organic farming? What is so different? How does someone decide whether they want to do it or not?

PW: I think regarding organic farming specifically, some people, probably not people who would consider going into it, but some people associate it with a kind of California hippie tree loving kind of thing. So there is that. Also it is harder. You have to think more carefully about what you do. You have to pay attention to the soil. I was at a reading and a book talk once and a woman in the audience who was a vegetable farmer and tried being a commercial grower; she planted a bunch of vegetables on her farm near LaGrange and she sold them for a while at the Urban Harvest farmers market, and her question to me was as a gardener how do you deal with the weeds, she said I just don't like weeding. I said if you don't like weeding you probably should not be an organic vegetable gardener because you got to ho them or pull them, you can't spray them and if you don't like hoeing and pulling weeds then you probably shouldn't be an organic vegetable gardener. Organic growing is more labor intensive I think, but there is also more money to be made because you do get a premium and then there is also the fact that if you really care about the quality and health of the soil, water and the air, then you will not be put off by organics I think. It is for people who get the larger picture.

AR: You mention labor is difficult. You mention your own farm of how labor is worth more.

PW: Then a 1000 bucks.

AR: Right a 1000 bucks right. Who typically makes up the labor? Why is it so difficult to find labor?

PW: Yeah, well of course migrant laborers make up a lot of farm labor.

AR: And I know a couple of your subjects saying it is so hard and they offer pretty good money and it is still difficult.

PW: Farming is hard work. Some people do not want to work hard physically. There can also be, you know, we have so as a culture and this is one of Wendow Barry's great themes, we have so as a culture disparaged farming and the USDA policies have intentionally forced people off of farms so that they can do better things and this country in many quarters prides itself on how few people are left in farming as in who would want to do that, it is nasty work, it is beneath us. So I think that in terms of attracting certain kinds of people there is this is widespread cultural image that anyone intelligent anyone who has better choices should exercise those choices and not do it. Now I think that is changing where people in communities in other parts of the country that have well established local farms and local farm marketing, I think farmers are treated with greater respect. And I think it is changing in certain parts of Texas and that is a good thing. But that takes time. I mean we disparages o many things like women who take care of children, child raising is not thought as one of the nobles things you could o. I mean it is sentimentalized, but it is not...

PW: Right, teaching, nursing, social work there are all kinds of things that are really important that we disparaged and I think farming is one of them. It is one labor issue. And then Labor issues depend on where the farm is. Like Brad Stufflebaum who is in my book is out by Braun and GitaVanwoerden out by Cat Spring. Brad is close to 290 a major road. Gita is tuck away. The access to her farm could be off putting. There surrounding communities are kind of the Schulenburg and that area. They are well established mainly Texas Czech and Texas German communities so people are by large have a working class prosperity. They don't need jobs. No they don't want farming jobs. They are part time farmers. They run cattle. They cut hay and run cattle. There are some you know road crop farmers, but there are not a lot of people in agriculture and if you don't have, like if you are relying on migrant workers, well they are concentrated more in cities. If they don't have a car or not interested in farming, sometimes they want to get away from farming because it is what they had to do in countries they came from then labor in those places can be a problem. However, Boggy Creek in the middle of Austin, and they do have a farm 79,80 miles northeast of Austin, one of the advantages of being in a city is a labor pool. East Austin is traditionally, parts of it are Mexican American and so finding a steady labor force where Boggy Creek has not been a problem. They do pay well above minimum wage and it is a wonderful pleasant place to work. So the labor issues can vary according to where you are.

AR: That is fascinating. It is almost like the rural aspect of a lot of these farms labor wise, almost hurts them.

PW: Yes that is right.

AR: Because you have a limited population..

PW: Right, yeah, so if you could be closer to urban areas or in an urban area, sometimes that helps you. It also, like Tecolote, I do not know if you remember that chapter, but Katie and David hire young pre-professional people. They aren't migrant workers. They don't want migrant workers, not that they won't hire, sometimes, but they want employees who are interested in food, interested in farming or maybe interested in becoming chefs or going into food in some way so that they take more of an interest in how food is grown. And because they are in Austin and Austin is such a cool place, then you get, there are I have learned in the course of writing the book, throughout the country there are lot of 20 something's who are thinking about food or farming or they want to maybe travel before the tie down. They want to do something out of the ordinary and so they are interested in farming jobs. And I do think farming is attracting more young people. I meet, as I have continued to work in the grassroots organizations I meet more and more young people in their 20s and 30s who are going into commercial production and so that is good. It is not just all old people or baby boomers, like me, who when they retire, you know getting into farming. Food is very popular right now (laughter).

AR: No, it is funny, it is almost now becoming hip if that is the word?

PW: Yes, it is very trendy.

AR: Yep.

PW: Now of course that does not mean that people who are drawn into it by the trendiness will last, but some people will. For them it won't just be a trend. They discover that they just love it then I think that will help bring more young farmers in to it.

AR: So let's recap.

PW: Sure.

AR: You have the great childhood memories of your grandparents that basically inspires you to buy the Schulenburg, your farm.

PW: Right.

AR: You established the Schulenburg farmers market, and then you established the one in Houston, you wrote this amazing book.
PW: Thank you.

AR: What is next?

PW: Well I would like to write another book and I begun in many general ways thinking about it before my husband got ill and died, and I would like to get back to those thoughts. Right now they are very general. But I would like to write a book about local farm and food communities and not just focus on farmers. Farmers are key obviously; if we don't have local farmers we can't have local food. But I would like to take a look at other players in the scene, journalists, food writers, non-profit organizations. I would like it to be a more analytical book. I would like it to talk about the kinds of local infrastructure we need to develop if we are going to really have well-established local farm and food communities. For example, local or somewhat local regional distribution systems distributors and distribution systems. Farmers can't go everywhere. They can't be growing and running around taking their food to 20 chefs. They can't have all their CSA customers or all the chefs who buy from them who show up at one place once a week.

So we need to work on, how do we get more farmers, but how do we get the food of the farmers we have into more varied local markets. Not just farmer's markets, but chefs, restaurants, schools, institutions. One of the single best organization resources we have in Texas and I think it is also a model nationally, The Sustainable Foods Center in Austin; which runs farmers markets, and community gardens and nutrition classes, has really pioneered, kind of a cliché work in Texas, but in establishing farmer marketing relationships with some of the state's agencies in Austin. A kind of s farm to fork marketing. One of the dining halls at UT Austin and a couple of hospitals. So we need to develop local farm and food communities. We need to go beyond farmers markets. Dear as they are to my heart.

AR: But make them more like, it is part of life.

PW: That is right.

AR: Right.

PW: Yeah and also make it more accessible. We need, as in Austin and other places, I forget what is called, the Wick, we need to bring low-income people to farmers markets. It is not just the matter of money. It is the matter of education. If you have 10 dollars and you have a grocery store and you buy potato chips and cheese whiz, you don't know how to buy food. It is not just a matter of getting low-income people into markets, but a general education. Not that low-income are the only people who will buy cheese whiz and potato chips.

AR: Right, Right.

PW: But just educating people. If you buy real food how far money can go. Most people do not complain about how expensive junk food is, but it is very expensive. If you took the same amount of money and bought vegetables or fruit you would be getting nutritional value and food.

AR: Well, you have such a rich life story. Your message is great and I am definitely one of those who buy's that bad food (laughs).

PW: Me too actually (laughs). I have to say, I love potato chips!

AR: I wish you a great success on your future book hopefully and endeavor. We definitely need you.

PW: Yeah well thank you Andrew.

AR: That concludes our interview.

PW: Thank you.