

Sustainability Family Style: Documenting the Lives of Growers, Gardeners, and Family Farmers in Northwest Ohio

A project of The University of Toledo Urban Affairs Center



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Photos by University of Toledo Photographers Jack Meade and Dan
Miller



The following pages contain excerpts from interviews conducted in July, 2009 with Northwest Ohio farmers and growers from six families. The aim of our project was to explore how growers and family farmers have coped with changes in the business of agriculture and the diversification of the area economy. We believe that the results highlight agriculture as a sculptor of family life, revealing the balance struck within agricultural families between economic sustainability and social and environmental concerns. Our interviewees come from multi-generational family farmers and greenhouse business owners. These excerpts allow us to glimpse the contributions, outlook and values of individuals who currently represent family-based agriculture in Northwest Ohio.

We have divided the excerpts into perspectives on the past and plans for the future. For more information about the project, contact us at 419.530.3591.

Hard Work and Accomplishment / Remembering the Past

With his family, including son Greg, John Barrow operates Barrow's Greenhouse on Northwood Avenue in Toledo.



John Barrow

Greg Barrow

John Barrow: My great-great-grandfather started the business, approximately 1893. Our first greenhouse was on Dorr and Detroit, and from there we moved ... to Dorr and Monroe Street, across from the old Swayne Field ballpark. Then they moved the greenhouse down to ... Monroe and Central... Years back ...they had a flower shop there...And we used to grow our own cut flowers ... we haven't grown any of that kind of stuff in fifty years probably. So now ... we grow poinsettias at Christmastime We grow all the spring bedding plants. ...our spring business ... used to be 100% wholesale, now we're ...working our way towards 100% retail. And in the fall we grow hardy mums, and year round we grow houseplants, we have houseplants to sell for the public.

“My great-great-grandfather started the business, approximately 1893. I'm the fourth generation, my children are the fifth generation. Things are getting harder.” John Barrow

I'm the fourth generation, my children are the fifth generation. Things are getting harder, there's more people going to the box stores So wholesale overall is going down ...And the box stores I don't want to deal with, so we figured we'd go retail. And we enjoy it, it's enjoyable. Little different hours, but...

Greg Barrow: I've been in the business... my whole life ... probably about 1989 I started really getting serious. I graduated in 1986 from high school and worked a few other odd jobs here and there and eventually came back here. I like the atmosphere, and we were pretty much all wholesale back then, and then in about 1992, I tried to convince

my dad to do a little more retail. He wasn't really keen on it, he gave me a little space. And then he went on vacation, and while he was on vacation I took down the first 100 feet of benches to make retail space while he was gone on vacation so when he got back he didn't have much choice, because it was done.

...most of the time I find the challenge is making sure that the product is available when it's supposed to be ready and pricing, because there's a lot of competitive pricing out there, and we've got Canada, which comes in with their lower dollar, you know, it's a little bit harder to compete with some of those guys... I think most of the people (customers) appreciate that you're up front and honest with them, and told them to wait if they're planting too soon, not to plant it. But over the past few years with energy costs, it's getting harder and harder to make a profit, and you slowly raise your prices and you get a lot of people that complain.

David and Cindy Bench are the owners and operators of Bench Farms on Jerusalem Road in Curtice.



“We plant a seed, we grow the crop, we sell the product and so, it's not a lot of jobs that you're in it from start to finish.” Cindy Bench

Cindy Bench: My mom's parents farmed...so I did my share of hoeing in soybeans and corn... grandpa's was an 80-acre farm and we had a blast...But ...the commercial farming is another end of it, rather than just the corn, beans and wheat kind of farmer. My grandpa had ...a few tomatoes, a few pickles, cows, sheep, pigs, the whole nine yards.

...his father's dad worked at Jeep... so he was not raised on the farm, but he had uncles who farmed and just caught the bug. And married his sweetheart who was a farmer, and so, my mother-in-law farmed her whole entire life. They did it the hard way. They worked hard, physically hard back in the days, they did pickles and beets.

...He went to Owens in the ag program for two years, graduated. I went to nursing school And then I met him and we got married and I worked at Toledo Hospital for about three months and he says, "you're more valuable on the farm, you've got to come back and help me."

The regulations have become overwhelming...And it's all of good intentions, all the laws and all the regulations ... but the bureaucracy just, it's layer upon layer and pretty soon the whole intent is lost. And we've become reliant assuming ... we don't have to worry about anything, the government's taking care of it for us, and perhaps we as a nation have lost a little bit of our sense of freedom because of that.

... we are very fortunate, we enjoy what we do...we're outside and we work in beautiful conditions and meet lots of neat people so we're very, very blessed ... We plant a seed, we grow the crop, we sell the product and so, it's not a lot of jobs that you're in it from start to finish.

Dave Bench My dad started farming about 1939...my mother's parents raised tomatoes and sugar beets and pickles and melons and ... used to take melons all the way down to Columbus. ... it was just an evolution. My dad raised a few cows and he said something had to leave, the cows or the tomatoes, so he raised tomatoes for Heinz and Hunt's and Stokely-Van Camp... And we raised sugar beets until they shut the plant down too, same way with tomatoes, they shut most of them down so we quit.

We've always raised vegetables... And always had a fruit stand ... since about mid-'60s. ... we're on a major route, that really helped us for our fruit stand. People going by here to go to Detroit, Cleveland, and then Cedar Point came along.

...we used to raise like 80-acres of tomatoes for, like, Hunt's or Heinz or...then it was the 100 and some acres of sugar beets and stuff like that, and things really have changed. They say you're going to switch jobs and actually I have, really. You know, even in farming.

They used to throw stuff on semis by hand with big forks. They really did it the hard way. (*Dave*) That would've been mama doing all that. And ... they hoed with little short hoes. It was physically exhausting work, and you just worked to exist then. And so it's evolved to the point now where now you hope to have a little something left over to live on and enjoy. (*Cindy*)

Jeff and Eileen Creque, with sons Tom and Brian, operate Creque's Greenhouse on West Sylvania Avenue in Sylvania.



Jeff, Eileen, and Brian Creque

“...hard work and dedication do and will pay off in the end...”
Tom Creque

Jeff Creque: My grandfather originally came from Ottawa Lake and when he got married he came over here and bought this farm ... and started farming here. Back then they grew a few hogs, chicken like they did back in the old days, then they got... out of the cattle business, and then we got into the strawberry business and tomato business and pickle business. And then when I was in high school I grew some melons and vegetables and that kind of stuff, and...this gentleman decided to retire and he didn't have no sons to give it to and his daughters really didn't want to take it over on their own, so we made a deal and bought the place and got into the greenhouse business. ...we pretty much covered the wholesale part of it, but like the retail, it was the second year ... We had a lot of pansies ... bloomed and we didn't have no market for them, so we decided to put them on a wagon and put a sign out front and (our oldest daughter, Sarah, six years old) sat there in the wagon and sold pansies. And it went pretty good so the next year we built the first three greenhouses here and got into the retail business. And that's been a real good move...we've got the two sons and we kind of split up responsibilities... I'm in charge of growing the seedlings and the plugs and the cuttings and all the first stuff, and she's in

charge of the ordering for the seeds and the cuttings and that kind of thing. .. our son Tom he's more or less in charge of the seeding, and we all kind of get together the scheduling, and our oldest son Brian, he takes care of all the maintenance and the spraying and the watering and that, so we've all kind of got our own little specialties. We do pretty much... all our own building of the greenhouses and our own plumbing. We get a little help with some of the electric sometimes, but even most of that we do ourselves, so pretty much family self-contained. And we still do some farming, not like we was, but my son Tom, he runs a little vegetable thing during the summertime and grows some produce and stuff.

I guess my biggest thing (lesson learned) would be, is dealing with the wholesale customers, the big chain stores and stuff, just about the time you think you're in with them good, and things are going good, they just cut you out for a few cents, and you just can't believe people will treat people like that. We've been with pretty near every chain, we started out with Meijer's and was with Wal-Mart and K-Mart and Lowe's and every one of them treats you about the same way. You're just a number on a piece of paper and for a couple pennies they'll trade you for somebody else, no matter if you've got good quality or you don't. It's just hard to figure out and hard to get used to, but it's just part of the dealings I guess.

That's our biggest accomplishment, our two sons are still working with us, and our two daughters, they worked with us, until they got out of college and went on their own, but when they come home they jump right in and help out if they can... we've been fortunate enough to be able to do it.

Eileen Creque: I grew up on a farm. Dad had chickens, we probably had about 2,000 laying chickens and we sold eggs at our house. We had sugar beets, so we had to hoe a lot when I was growing up, so...I knew at a very young age I wanted to become a nurse, so I became a nurse. And no way did I want to marry a farmer. No way. But we met at the big Dixie Electric Company...we had gone to grade school together, so I knew Jeff. But he went to Evergreen, I went to Sylvania, so we kind of parted ways. And when we saw each other it was like, well, we just didn't stop talking, there was just, like, so much in common to talk about. But I didn't think too much of it. That was back in the day where we might have went to that place like three times a week. You just—and there he was again. All right, I'll talk to him again. Then we went out on dates and I just had a really good time, but I always kind of kept back in my mind, is this the direction I want to go, because farming is a really rough life. So after a couple of kids it got harder to—I was a pediatric nurse—it got harder to go to work. He was running tomato trucks to Heinz, if the truck broke down drivers would call him in the middle of the night, we had the two little kids, I'm working at the hospital, he's got to get his mom or somebody to come and take care of the kids, it just got...it was another one of those things that was harder to do. And I was just more needed at home it seemed like.

Well, I guess the business started when Jeff and I got married, but we were part of a family business... we were married in '76, and at that time he just did grain farming, tomatoes, strawberries, and pickles. And ten years later when we had four kids we were

still looking for something that could be just ours, and we also needed a house because we lived with his grandmother, and it was getting very crowded. So the man across the street who lived here—because we lived at the big house across the street over there—decided he was going to have an auction and sell the place. So he came home and said “so what would you think about running a greenhouse operation?” And I said “if it comes with a house that’s just fine.” ...And right after the auction away we went.

We had to sow seed, he didn’t know what most of the seed was. So we weren’t fortunate like many people in the greenhouse business here to grow up in their family and always be surrounded by the planting techniques and what you did, I mean, we had to learn everything right then...I just remember he was so excited when we were planting pansy seeds and when they finally bloomed, just really excited that something that we planted finally bloomed. (we) had a very good, successful first year, and then things just got a little rough with trying to find somebody to sell our plant material to because we didn’t like the previous owner’s broker, just had a lot of trouble with that.

So in our third year, a big greenhouse operation out of southern, well, middle Ohio called us looking for somebody to grow flats for them and Jeffrey went down and talked to them and pretty soon we were growing like ten thousand flats for this other greenhouse, so we were off and running. Growing plants for the greenhouse in southern, or middle Ohio...So in the meantime, these guys still kept growing tomatoes out in the field, and the industry started to pick up where they were starting to grow tomatoes in tomato plugs. And he said “I want to do that, instead of getting all the plants from Georgia.” So we grew some for us... that went well, so then we grew some more and every year we kept growing more plants for Heinz and then pretty soon we became growers for Hunt’s farmers and their contracts, and the place was half tomatoes and half flowers. We were probably about two acres then, maybe about two and a half, really...Every year we kept taking one of the previous owner’s old houses and knocking it down and putting up a newer, taller, bigger, nicer greenhouse... The tomato industry left Ohio then, so there we were again without a contractor to grow for. One of the local Toledo-area greenhouses was growing for another big box store, so they asked us if we would grow for them. So we started a little with them and pretty soon we got really large, growing a lot of bedding flats and hanging baskets. In the meantime, our retail was increasing all the time...added on another house to that and started to grow geraniums, more hanging baskets, just kept looking at fancier planting material and different things that we had to buy in instead of just growing from seed. And as the kids got bigger and started to be more involved in the operation. .. just been trying to teach the next generation what we know and what we do...

Thirty-three years, there’s a lot of people who say they wouldn’t be able to do that. And I can’t say that we haven’t ever had a disagreement, and sometimes the employees feel like they’re working for two different bosses. But, just that this was ours and that we started over, for me it’s just bringing it this far. And kind of happy to see what the next generation can do. ...the compliments that I get on ... our baskets, just brings me great pride and joy and listening to people come in and say in the retail setting “oh my gosh, everything looks so healthy!” And just knowing that the family in the background who’s

taking care of everything... makes me and the other people working in retail look good. So I would say for me that just keeping the business going and... I feel like we're a pretty good team.

“the compliments that I get on ... our baskets, just brings me great pride and joy.” Eileen Creque

Tom Creque: “I’ve pretty much been working since I could work... probably six to eight years old, doing just small jobs, putting pots together, cleaning, sweeping... And then ... we learned how to run more of the equipment, skid steer loader, forklift, even at a pretty young age, and proceeded to work from there. We do field crops, corn, wheat, soybeans, strawberries, sweet corn...and then we’re up to about four acres of greenhouse, right around there... vegetables, perennials, annuals, hanging baskets, and containers, with the majority of the crop being annuals.

I went to college for two years at Ohio State ATI in Wooster, the Ag Tech Institute, and got a two year degree in greenhouse production and management. So from that point on I pretty much knew what I was going to do.... I did an outside internship at another greenhouse and still came back to work here... ..hard work and dedication do and will pay off in the end. We’re definitely not lazy, we work a lot of times of the year seven days a week, you know, twelve hours a day...I just know it’s a lot of work, but if you stick to it you’ll be rewarded.

***George Dabrunz, with sons Tim and Scott,
operates Schmittuz Gardens on Port Clinton Road in Fremont***

Scott, George, and Tim Dabrunz



Tim Dabrunz: ...at one time in Fremont when my great-uncle was running a route here, there were 52 grocery stores, and he was the only one supplying vegetables to them. And it’s easy to make a living if you’re selling every grocery store two pecks of tomatoes. You know, 100 pecks a day, it’s easy... we only have two grocery stores here in town that will buy stuff from us anymore... you have to go through their warehouse.... it’s dog eat dog at the warehouse, where ‘I can buy it cheaper from somebody else, ... cut me a deal’... But now... you’re fighting Wal-Mart, and you’re fighting K-Mart, and the grocery stores we sell to are independent grocery stores, ... they’re fighting all the other stores. Right. They’re just dumping it. You’re losing money, and everybody’s got so much money invested in every flat, and by the time you figure out your dirt, your flat, your plants, and

your heat, and your fertilizer, and your time, you know, you just, you can't give it away.

... vegetables out in the field, it's the same way. You've got all this money in spray and fertilizer and... everything's expensive... you start ... stuff out in the field, and then, you get a hard rain...and you lose all of it, which happened to us this year. I mean, this greenhouse was flooded. We had four inches of rain in an hour and a half.

... people don't realize how much farmers take a beating. I mean, they're taking a beating. And the bad thing is, is grain farmers get a subsidy from the government, and the poor old vegetable farmer gets nothing... I've worked out in the field for six months and gotten nothing.

...you know, the government's helping the big people, and the small people are getting nothing. .. It's not fair, whatever's good for the goose is good for the gander, if you're going to help the grain farmers you should help the vegetable farmers. And that's it.”

Scott Dabrunz: We're a retail/wholesale operation, we've been going to the Toledo Farmers Market since '67. The business started back in 1913, and from there we expanded from the Toledo Market to the Detroit Eastern Market, which we go to the Eastern Market too. We raise bedding plants for in the spring that we retail and wholesale, and we have a wholesale and retail business as far as selling produce through the summer and fall.

My great-uncle, my dad's uncle started the business. Well, my great-uncle, when he started this, we had the huckster truck here yet, and he used to go around to the grocery stores, and that's how he started the business, selling produce to the grocery stores here in Fremont. How many was there, forty some?

Forty-three grocery stores in Fremont here that he went around to each store every day, six days a week and sold produce, and then by accident they started the greenhouse business. That was just an accident they started this. Noticed it quite a bit in the selling the retail on Saturdays, in Toledo and the Detroit Eastern Market, it's that the younger generation of people, they don't understand buying the produce. Some people don't even know what it is anymore, the younger generation when they come to the market. They don't know how to prepare it, to fix, and they don't buy it because they don't know how to cook it. (laughter) So that's the real, biggest challenge, is um, the public.

“... people don't realize how much farmers take a beating. I mean, they're taking a beating.” Tim Dabrunz

Evelyn Keil is the daughter in law of the late Louis Keil Sr. and the widow of Louis Keil, Jr. Her sons and nephews operate Louis Keil and Sons on West Central Avenue in Sylvania.

“I have learned that farm life is a very hard life.” Evelyn Keil



Evelyn Keil: Well when my husband came out of the service ... he decided he wasn't going to farm with his uncles, because his dad and two uncles farmed together. So his dad bought this 80-acre property, and when we got married in 1955, then we built our house and continued to live here. In 1958 they decided to put up some greenhouses, so we started out with two, and it just multiplied after that. 1986 we had a fire

which took down six or seven of the greenhouses, which was a blessing in disguise because then they could put up the greenhouses the way they wanted to instead of just here and there, and it's just progressed since then.

I have learned that farm life is a very hard life. It wasn't until it built up in this area that we had all these floods, and I think it hurts me worse than it hurts them when I see everything under water, but, it's a hard life. They have to put in a lot of hours.

Andy Keil operates the Andy Keil Greenhouse on North Wilkins Road in Swanton



Andy Keil: Farming's in my blood...when I started in the greenhouse, I worked for a company, I delivered produce... I went to ... all these little towns, and the ma and pa stores all sold a few plants. So I started my own route of delivering plants to these stores. I'd get them from my dad and then take them out. I had property here and I was growing some stuff in the fields, so I put

up one greenhouse to grow my own plants in the field, and the next thing you know I'm putting up a second greenhouse and growing a little bit of what I'm selling, and a third and a fourth, and it escalated from there.

I still do a lot of things the old-time way. I don't have none of the fancy equipment... I fill all my flats by hand ...everything in the field is harvested by hand. ... my newest tractor is a 1965 and my oldest one is a 1949, but we use it all the time ...But my stuff's all paid for too.

“My achievement is just watching things grow, I like watching, putting something in the ground and picking something at the end. That makes me proud and excited.” Andy Keil

Walt Krueger owns and operates Lakewood Greenhouse on Lemoyne Road in Northwood. His son Michael Krueger is General Manager of the greenhouse.



“My dad told me that during the depression, I think they were selling geraniums for about five cents apiece.” Walt Kreuger

Walt Kreuger: My grandfather came over in about 1890 from Germany...with another brother, and the two of them were about 18 years old, and they ended up settling in Chicago. They were from an agricultural background, and they ended up working for a large cut rose grower in Chicago. ...And he worked for them for two or three years...and they decided to strike out on their own. And they came back to Toledo and built ... retail greenhouse ...which they operated for several years, I think up until about 1905. ...And by 1905, the immigration wave had come through... the entire neighborhood was totally built up, and there was no room for expansion. So they bought this property here, which

was totally in the country at that time, on Lemoyne Road. ... They kept their location in town, but they built a new wholesale cut flower facility here that was built specifically to grow cut roses, which is what they had had their experience with in Chicago. And so that's how this range got started in about 1905, and it evolved into the different types of crops that we grow today, and of course it's been totally rebuilt since that time. We just have four or five of the remaining houses that were here in 1905.

My father took over the operations when he graduated, he was a graduate of the Ohio State University in their floriculture department, which was one of the best ... in the country at that time. He eventually changed the production into mostly cut carnations and cut mums, and pom poms, which were popular all through the 1950s and '60s up into the early '70s. I started in 1976 and at that time we had already converted most everything into potted crops. We did still have a few houses with some cut flowers, but the cut flower market really had moved out to, Colorado at that time. Denver, Colorado had much better light than we did here in Ohio, so the carnation business really moved to Colorado, and, ...so we ended up moving into all what we would today call the holiday potted crops.... we are still primarily geared around the major holidays: Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, and we do also a year-round business with the production of weekly crops for the florist trade, all retail florist shops and garden centers, and also some grocery/food distribution stores.

Yes, they had a retail location there (at the original location) ... downtown, up until the 1930s I think, and during the depression I think they had as many as eight or ten retail outlets around the city because they were trying to find more people to purchase their products. My dad told me that during the depression, I think they were selling geraniums for about five cents apiece. Running a nursery business is a lot of work outdoors, and it kind of takes a different expertise than ... an indoor greenhouse ... it was just simpler to concentrate on the wholesale greenhouse end of it.

I grew up here... from the age of eight or ten...I can remember talking to the workers and actually working right with them...They liked to have the company, and we used to talk about the old days ... I even worked here during the summers while I was at college. I was never pushed into coming back, but it seemed like it was a good business, I knew a lot about it, and I was anxious to assume a greater role...

We managed all of our own stock bases here for years and years...We used to have thousands of stock plants here, and most of those ... have moved offshore. Many of the countries, Mexico and Costa Rica, all of the countries down in the tropical area have become major producers of the cuttings that we now end up rooting and growing here. But we are purchasing in hundreds of thousands of cuttings from offshore, and mostly because we really find it difficult to compete. It's less expensive for us to purchase those cuttings than it is to maintain a workforce here year round and try to do it ourselves, particularly with the cost of fuel and everything else.

Michael Kreuger: Ever since I was probably six or seven years old I've been here working in my free time or during the summers, or holiday breaks...I enjoy working

here, I enjoy working with the people, and just facing all the challenges, that's what makes it enjoyable, having something different to come into each day, as opposed to sitting at a desk and looking at a computer screen and answering the phone.

... when I was little everything used to be done by hand, whether sowing seed or transplanting plugs into larger pots. Technology has really changed in fifteen, twenty years. So we have an automatic transplanter that can transplant a lot of the plugs, you know, seeders to do the seeding, so it's definitely made the processes a lot more quick and efficient than they were

...The biggest lesson I've probably learned since being here is that it's all in the details. Just everything, just getting all the details right is the most important part or putting pot covers on or just making sure the order's accurate, it's just all about the details. The biggest challenge is going to be adapting with the ever quickly changing business environment that we're now presented with, not in our industry, but every industry. And just trying to overcome that. For the time being it seems like it's more of just a regional and a local competition. I mean, we're competing with growers in Michigan and Ohio and Indiana."

“The biggest challenge is going to be adapting with the ever quickly changing business environment that we’re now presented with, not in our industry, but every industry.” Michael Kreuger

Adapting to Change / Planning for the Future

John Barrow: Well, I always think there will be a place for local business, I think people want to shop local. I know a lot of the people who come in here ... they like the variety of stuff—we can carry a lot of variety... or you can go the other way, you can be a little niche grower, and grow just certain things that people know they can get that from you, so there's, as far as I'm concerned, a good outlook for family, small family businesses from now on.

And there's also personal care...people walk into a box store, and you're lucky to find anybody that knows anything, absolutely nothing—if you can find somebody. So I think there's a good outlook for the business. But people have to get into their little niche ... and do certain things, but customer service is going to be very, very important."

Greg Barrow: (I enjoy) the people coming in and telling us that they're telling all their friends to come here because they love the place so much. They shopped around and they like us so much because we're so friendly and give them good advice."

Cindy Bench: ... now we've gone from being a wholesale, production, commercial production farm to more of a retail. We retail our vegetables out the front door and all the flowers and plants go out the front door. Our focus has now changed on the, who's coming in, face to face customers ... instead of selling a whole truckload, you're selling a quart at a time. But then you're also seeing your customer face to face, so that moved us into the higher end, we raise premium sweet corn, premium tomatoes, all the premium crops and the unusual things as far as vegetables and that would be flowers and plants. Because you are looking your customer in the eye and you want them to go away and be happy and come back again and tell their friends what great stuff you have.

“Once you're a farmer you're always a farmer.” Dave Bench

Tom Creque : A lot of the flats of flowers are kind of going to the wayside, people are getting a little more ready to use instant gratification products, which is combination planters, hanging baskets, even perennials that are in larger pots that they don't have to repot in the ground. And I'd say for a little bit there was more of a trend of “do it for me,” people had extra money, they were looking to pay you to plant it for them, and now that's kind of going away again, I think with the economy tightening back up. But, that would be the major trend... more people wanting to do more perennials in the ground and they don't want to plant as many annuals. ... we're definitely going to put more and more emphasis into our retail if we, we did this year and we want to keep heading that way because it's just safer knowing that you have, say, 1200 to 5000 customers than two, you know, wholesale, because they can make or break you.

“I used to have lots of wholesale business. ... But times change ... All my ma and pa stores...most of them are folded, so... I went from filling a quarter acre of greenhouses three times to a quarter acre of greenhouses a half a time. I go to four different farmer's markets. That's where most of my stuff is marketed, at the farmer's markets. ... I have a good loyal following at the farmer's markets.” Andy Keil

Evelyn Keil: Hopefully it'll stay strong. You can't foresee the future, but, people have to eat, and I think more people are going towards homegrown vegetables and fruits rather than store-bought vegetables and fruit.

Walt Krueger : Over the last twenty years we've basically replaced all of the existing structures and built all new, much more energy efficient greenhouses ... If we had not done that and put the investment in place when we did, it would be prohibitively expensive to do it today.

I think the biggest challenge is to try to maintain a presence with independent business owners. We do handle some of the national chains... but we have ... that they can be

very difficult to work with ... it's taken a long time for me to realize that we can't be all things to all people. .. you're starting out... the logical thing is to say yes to opportunities that come along. But they're not always opportunities that benefit us. And I think as we move into the future, that's one of the biggest risks that we have is to try to identify just where we need to be in the supply chain and what can be a profitable niche for us, because that definitely is changing. And we have to work directly with our customers and identify specific needs that they have and find out what we can do to fill those needs and to strengthen our business relationships, and try not to worry about the greenhouses that are ten times our size and that are trying to appeal to a different market. The tendency is to, you know, try to follow some of that and we can't really do both ends. We'd rather be a good regional supplier to stores within a hundred miles perhaps and do a good job for them."

"... it's taken a long time for me to realize that we can't be all things to all people." Walter Kreuger

Michael Krueger: I got a degree in marketing and business so...the rest I've been quickly learning...I guess because I'd kind of grown up working in (the family business)...it interested me from that standpoint. And I've actually worked for some of our customers in the past, so I kind of knew that end of it. But I think, you know, there's a lot of potential in this industry and just the daily challenge, every day is a little different, and it keeps me interested in it.

"...there's a lot of potential in this industry." Michael Kreuger

In addition to the interviews excerpted here, our project includes photos of many of the individuals whose words you have just read. We are grateful for the work of University of Toledo photographers Jack Meade and Dan Miller, the assistance of the National Center for Nature Photography/ Metroparks, and the support of the Ohio Humanities Council.