***Transcription sponsored by Cuyahoga Valley National Park***

**Emily Crompton** [00:00:03] Alright. Hello, this is Emily Crompton. Today is March 23, 2011, and I am interviewing Robert Grether for the Cuyahoga Valley Agriculture Project and Cleveland State University. Could you please state your name for the record and spell your last name for us?

**Robert Grether** [00:00:21] My last name is Grether, G-R-E-T-H-E-R.

**Emily Crompton** [00:00:29] Now can you tell us a little bit about yourself, starting with when and where you were born and where you are living now?

**Robert Grether** [00:00:34] I was born in Akron, Ohio, and when I was six years old, I moved to Stow. I went to school there for six years and then moved to Northampton. Then, yeah, Northhampton. I think I was 13 years old when I moved to Northampton. Went to Northampton School for two years and then went to Hudson High School for four years, graduated from Hudson High School, but I lived in Northampton all the time because we didn't have a high school there.

**Emily Crompton** [00:01:32] Are you still living in Northampton today?

**Robert Grether** [00:01:34] Yes, I'm living on Bath Road. Well, it's Cuyahoga Falls now but it was old Northampton.

**Emily Crompton** [00:01:42] How did your family begin farming in the Cuyahoga Valley?

**Robert Grether** [00:01:46] Well, my great-grandparents' farm there was mostly a family farm and they raised a few cows and chickens and mostly vegetables. Stuff for the animals and for the house, they canned a lot.

**Emily Crompton** [00:02:15] Do you know exactly which crops they grew?

**Robert Grether** [00:02:17] Well, it was corn, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, green beans and onions. Tomatoes. Did I say tomatoes? Yeah.

**Emily Crompton** [00:02:41] Were you able to visit this farm or was it out of their possession by the time you were old enough to visit it?

**Robert Grether** [00:02:47] I was about only about three months old when they were doing that. But after we moved here, we done a little bit of farming, we raised vegetables for the house and stuff, but then I went to work at Bender's farm when I was 14.

**Emily Crompton** [00:03:21] Were the Benders friends of the family? Is that how you got to work at Bender Farm?

**Robert Grether** [00:03:24] Yeah, they've been around a long time. We knew him and he was looking for help.

**Emily Crompton** [00:03:36] So how did these earlier family members approached farming? Was it a lot different than the practices that you applied at the Bender Farm?

**Robert Grether** [00:03:43] Well, I did work one year for Ben Hardy, and we used horses back then. We made hay, raised sweet corn, rye, wheat, few tomatoes, garden vegetables and I worked there one year and then I went to work for Bender Farm.

**Emily Crompton** [00:04:23] What about the farms that were owned by your grandfather, Otto, and your great uncle, Ed? What do you remember about those?

**Robert Grether** [00:04:30] They were eighteen acres, each one. My grandfather, my great uncle Ed, and Howard Grether and Charles Grether. Now Charles Grether had an 80-acre farm on Bath Road where he farmed with horses and he raised corn, wheat, and hay and he had dairy cows.

**Emily Crompton** [00:05:16] What relation are Howard and Charles to you?

**Robert Grether** [00:05:16] Howard Grether was a great uncle and Charlie Grether was a great uncle. They were all brothers.

**Emily Crompton** [00:05:34] Did you get to spend a good deal of time on their farms as you were growing up?

**Robert Grether** [00:05:40] Yeah, I just helped on those farms a little bit.

**Emily Crompton** [00:05:49] Could uou describe the landscape of these farms to me, any memorable landscapes on the farms for you?

**Robert Grether** [00:05:56] About what part of it?

**Emily Crompton** [00:05:59] Anything you remember about any of these farms belonging to your relatives, is there anything that really pops in your mind when you think of them?

**Robert Grether** [00:06:07] You mean like the family farms or the...

**Emily Crompton** [00:06:09] Yes.

**Robert Grether** [00:06:11] Well, [laughs] the family farms we had, Charlie Grether had the biggest one, and we rode horses and helped make hay. That was the biggest thing, and then they had thrashing back then. All the farmers went together and they had one thrashing machine and they'd all get together one or two days and thrash the wheat and rye and stuff at that farm and move on to the next one. But most of it was done with horses.

**Emily Crompton** [00:07:00] What would be an early and very important memory for you at the Cuyahoga Valley?.

**Robert Grether** [00:07:06] Well, I remember swimming in Yellow Creek and we couldn't swim in Cuyahoga River because it was too polluted. And couldn't fish there because the fish wouldn't live in there. But it was wide open, there was a lot of things to see down in here. We had Indian mounds and found a lot of arrowheads and pottery from the Indians.

**Emily Crompton** [00:07:57] Tell me a little bit about when you started learning about agriculture and starting to work on the farms.

**Robert Grether** [00:08:01] Well, I went to work for Benders and in the wintertime, we'd start the vegetables in the greenhouse. Plant 'em and then when they were probably a couple inches high, we'd transplant them into rows and then keep them in there until the last frost. After that, then we'd transplant them into the field. And then we started the sweet corn in April and usually was around July, first of July, maybe the last of June, we'd start picking our first sweet corn. We have usually a patch of sweet corn coming due every week until clear in October. And it was all hand picked sweet corn, we used a horse and a skid. And then the tomatoes, the muskmelon, we raised those, we'd pick all this stuff, we'd sort it and basket it up, and take it into the farmer's market in Akron. It was three times a week, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. We'd get in there about 5:00 in the morning.

**Emily Crompton** [00:09:46] And how large was the Bender Farm?

**Robert Grether** [00:09:54] I think it was 275 acres.

**Emily Crompton** [00:09:57] Could you describe what the farm looked like for me?

**Robert Grether** [00:10:04] Well, the house was up on the hill, it was a two-family house, and it had a three-story barn with an inside silo, and it had... When I first went there, we had a horse barn and an old garage. And then later on, we built a new shop and garage, tore the old horse barn down, and then built a new greenhouse and we worked on the top floor of the barn. We built a bridge across to the top floor so we could drive in from upstairs. The bottom of the barn was used for the cattle in the wintertime. The cattle were out in the pasture all summer, beef cattle. And then in the fall, we'd bundle up what was left of the corn and put it in a barn for feed during the winter, and then we'd make hay probably a couple thousand bales of hay for the winter, put that in the barn. And later on, as we got more business, we leased more land, some across the river on riverview and some down further towards the peninsula. And the one year, we had 275 acres of sweet corn and hand-picked all of it and started selling more at the house and it got to where we didn't even have to go to the market. Everybody come out to the house to buy it. Like I said, we raised a lot of muskmelon, tomatoes, and then later on, watermelon and pumpkins and different types of corn for decoration that was sold right there at the house. Then I got older, so I went to work in a shop, worked for myself for a while.

**Emily Crompton** [00:12:49] And what did you do in the shop?

**Robert Grether** [00:12:52] I was a machinist for a while, for about three years.

**Emily Crompton** [00:13:04] As far as the buildings on the Bender farm, were they similar to that of those on your family farms or were they a lot different?

**Robert Grether** [00:13:11] The buildings on which?

**Emily Crompton** [00:13:14] On the Bender farm. Were they similar to the ones you had on the family farms?

**Robert Grether** [00:13:19] No, they didn't have any greenhouses on our farms. They had the barns, but they weren't as big. This barn on the Bender farm with a huge barn; it had an 80-foot inside silo, which is very rare. It was a bank barn and it had three different levels where you could go into it and it held a lot of hay. Earva got a hammer mill and he started grinding some of the corn and a few oats for the cow feed. In the wintertime, we spent most of the time redoing and working on the building, working on the greenhouse, redoing the tractors. We had an old F-12 tractor, old iron wheeled tractor, and there was a Farmall H and a Farmall M. And Earva's brother Frank had the farm next to him where Towpath Village is now, and he raised vegetables there and we helped him. One year in the spring after he got everything planted, he rolled a tractor over on top of him and broke his hip. We had to run both farms that year.

**Emily Crompton** [00:15:08] And how large was his brother's farm? How large was the brother's farm?

**Robert Grether** [00:15:17] I think he had probably 40 or 50 acres.

**Emily Crompton** [00:15:26] Did he raise the same sort of crops that Mr. Bender did?

**Robert Grether** [00:15:27] Pretty much, he raised a few more garden vegetables like peppers and squash. He raised sweetcorn, lot of tomatoes, eggplant, stuff like that, but he sold it at the market too.

**Emily Crompton** [00:15:53] When did Mr. Bender make the switch from going to the farmer's market to just selling from the house?

**Robert Grether** [00:15:58] It was probably somewhere in the 1950s, late '50s.

**Emily Crompton** [00:16:13] How was he able to switch like that? Did have to advertise to people first or did they just know?

**Robert Grether** [00:16:16] Word of mouth. We had good stuff and they come and bought it.

**Emily Crompton** [00:16:24] Of the crops that you mentioned that you grew up, were there any challenges associated with any of them, or was it pretty much straightforward farming?

**Robert Grether** [00:16:33] Yeah, it was just regular farming, you know. We stuck to, the biggest one was sweet corn and tomatoes, and the melons, the cantaloupes, and the watermelon was just sort of an extra thing. We usually put in about five acres of tomatoes and about five or six acres of melons. We grew a lot of flowers for up around the house to they had probably six flower beds in the yard up there. He had an orchard there, it was probably 25 apple trees on it. But the cows got mostly the apples.

**Emily Crompton** [00:17:44] What sort of animals did they have? Was it just cows and horses or did they have other things like that?

**Robert Grether** [00:17:48] They had one horse that we used for pulling the sled to pick the sweet corn and the rest of it was beef cows. Anywhere from 15 to 35 beef cows at a time. They lived off the pasture and the hay and stuff in the winter, and then he'd sell them off every five, six years, sell off and then restart again.

**Emily Crompton** [00:18:23] Now the flowers that were up by the house, did they sell them for decoration or were they just decoration for the house itself?

**Robert Grether** [00:18:29] The vegetables and stuff or the corn?

**Emily Crompton** [00:18:33] The flower beds that were up by the house that you mentioned.

**Robert Grether** [00:18:36] While the corn, tomatoes and melons were sold mainly at the house and then later on he started selling down by the road, that was the pumpkins, squash, corn, the decorative corn and stuff like that.

**Emily Crompton** [00:19:00] Were those common crops for farms in the area? Did he have a particular reason for choosing those crops?

**Robert Grether** [00:19:06] Well, most everybody around here grew that stuff. Just as we've done it for commercial use. Well, it's like Szalay's sell now. Are you familiar with Szalay's sweet corn farms?

**Emily Crompton** [00:19:26] I am not.

**Robert Grether** [00:19:31] They have a big market down here now. I forget the name of that road, there on Riverview and there's a short road across. It's near Everett there, but they sell quite a bit of stuff there now. We were the two biggest ones, Szalay's and Bender's. And Szalay's mostly pick their corn with machines where we were hand-picked it all.

**Emily Crompton** [00:20:06] How long did it take to handpick a crop?

**Speaker 1** [00:20:10] Well, we'd pick the patch of sweet corn, take about a week. Pick it out and go to the next patch, pick in there for a week. On the tomatoes, there was days we picked a five hundred pack of tomatoes and then sort those and take them to market. There was a lot of market days when we would be working till 2:30 in the morning, sort and unload and get it all loaded and head for market.

**Emily Crompton** [00:20:52] What was working with you at this time? Was it just you and the Bender family?

**Robert Grether** [00:20:57] Bender didn't have any kids, it was me and my two brothers. We worked there.

**Emily Crompton** [00:21:05] And what were your brothers' names and ages?

**Robert Grether** [00:21:08] Dick Grether and Tom Grether.

**Emily Crompton** [00:21:15] Were they your elder siblings?

**Robert Grether** [00:21:16] I'm the oldest.

**Emily Crompton** [00:21:25] Now, did you all start working there at about the same time or did you start several years before them?

**Robert Grether** [00:21:28] Pretty much. Pretty much.

**Emily Crompton** [00:21:33] Can you tell me what a typical day at work would be like for you?

**Robert Grether** [00:21:36] Well, you usually start about seven or eight in the morning. With picking corn, you usually started at seven. You had to wear rain suit for the dew until about ten or eleven and then take that off because it got too hot. And then we'd usually pick corn until probably one and then after that, we'd get it all sorted and up to the house and then we start on the tomatoes. Pick them all afternoon, sort of them, basket them up, load them up, and head for market.

**Emily Crompton** [00:22:26] Were you there year-round working or were there certain seasons that they had you come in?

**Robert Grether** [00:22:31] Well, the sweet corn you started, like I said, around the end of June, early July. Tomatoes were towards the end of July. Tomatoes lasted into September and then the sweet corn usually lasts until the first frost in October. The melons, they come in in probably late July or August and they only last about a month or month and a half, then they were done. But the tomatoes, we'd picked them until it got too cheap. Then we let people come and pick their own for a dollar a bushel. They used those for canning tomatoes.

**Emily Crompton** [00:23:23] Did you help with the canning process at all? Can you tell me about that?

**Robert Grether** [00:23:32] Well, I used to can when I was younger, but I didn't. I was only about seven or eight, nine when I done the canning.

**Emily Crompton** [00:23:46] Tell me about the different techniques and technology that you used while you were working.

**Robert Grether** [00:23:50] Well, like I said, we used horses. We had old tractors, we had Farmall F-12. Well, I think that was about a 1930 and the Farmall H I think it was '47 or '48 and then it got stolen, so he went and bought a Farmall M about 1950 and used that until he quit farming.

**Emily Crompton** [00:24:38] How many changes came to the technology over the years?

**Robert Grether** [00:24:43] We never changed a whole lot. We did go from two-bottom plow to three-bottom, and then as he got the bigger tractor, we went to a hydraulic disk instead of the old trailer disk. And far as the planning and cultivating, we used the old F-12 all along because it was set up for that. That's what we use it for with iron wheels. You couldn't run it on a road.

**Emily Crompton** [00:25:27] Tell me a little bit about how the Bender farm got started.

**Robert Grether** [00:25:32] Well, as far as I can remember, Earva bought it for taxes. Now I can't remember whether it was his family-owned at one time or whether the Jim Brown family owned it then, but anyway, he bought it for taxes in the '30s.

**Emily Crompton** [00:26:04] How large was it when he first purchased it?

**Robert Grether** [00:26:07] Well, it was the same size, about 275 acres.

**Emily Crompton** [00:26:15] Now you got spent a great deal of time in various farms over the years. Could you tell me about what sort of changes you saw as you were working on these different farms?

**Robert Grether** [00:26:25] Well, there wasn't a whole lot. The only changes that I started was probably late in the '50s and started in the '60s when they started to get more machinery. They started getting in the hay balers instead of breaking the hay and put it on the wagon and take it up stored in the barn. They started getting hay balers and then a bale it right in a field before they put it in a barn. But when I was on the Hardy farm, we done it all with horses, no baler and hands shocking the rye. And you know, running the combines, they started getting the self-propelled combines probably in the '60s. But we never got in it, we were done farming by then.

**Emily Crompton** [00:27:43] And about when did they stop farming?

**Robert Grether** [00:27:48] You know, I'm trying to remember. It was around '64 or '65, somewhere in there. Earva was getting too old, and he... The family that was living there, the Darsts, they helped him a lot. But he got Alzheimer's and couldn't work it anymore, so they couldn't farm. They started renting the land out, Szalay's started renting it and raising sweetcorn.

**Emily Crompton** [00:28:40] Did they remain on the property? Did they still live there after they stopped farming?.

**Robert Grether** [00:28:45] They had to put Earva in Manor Care and then Katherine lived there for about three or four years and then she went to a nursing home. And I think the park bought it then.

[00:29:11] What sort of changes came to the property when the park bought the land?

**Robert Grether** [00:29:14] Well, they didn't do anything with it for quite a few years, and I noticed this past year they rebuilt the barn. I haven't been up, I can't get up to the house, but the house is still standing and don't look too bad. Another thing, we had the gas well there and every about every three years we had to bail the water out of the gas well. We'd done that with an old bailer and Farmall tractor, it was 1500 feet deep. That was a winter job bailing that and that took about three or four weeks to bail the water out. When you bail the water, the gas pressure builds up higher because the gas well run the two furnaces in the house, two fireplaces, the forge in the garage and the shop and run the greenhouse.

**Emily Crompton** [00:30:24] About how large was the greenhouse and what sort of crops that you keep in there? Was it [inaudible]?

**Robert Grether** [00:30:29] The greenhouse was probably thirty feet long and probably 20 feet wide.

**Emily Crompton** [00:30:43] Did you help build the greenhouse or was it there when you started? Can you tell me a little bit about that process?

**Robert Grether** [00:30:49] Well, the old one was wood and it just got dilapidated. So we put up concrete foundations for the new one and then from about four feet up was all glass. That was another winter job.

**Emily Crompton** [00:31:22] Can you tell me a little bit more about your family farms? What years did they start farming and when did they stop?

**Robert Grether** [00:31:29] Oh, they farmed probably starting in 1880. Somewhere in there, I can't remember because I wasn't around. But most of their farming was done early in the early years. It wasn't a whole lot after probably the [19]40s.

**Emily Crompton** [00:32:08] Was your family's first farming experiences in the Cuyahoga Valley or had they been farmers previously?

**Robert Grether** [00:32:13] Me or them?

**Emily Crompton** [00:32:15] Your family.

**Robert Grether** [00:32:16] No, I don't think they were farming previously, they lived in the city. When they moved out here, they farmed and then, you know, it was mainly to keep your family going. They had milk cows, farm for vegetables, and had the horses and raised hay. Just so they could survive. But the early days was rough back then, they had big families and my dad's family was nine kids. And my great grandfather had, I think six or seven. I think it was four boys and three girls. And well, the Hardys was down there, my great aunt married one of the Hardys and they had trucking and they raised corn down there too, that was on Riverview side. And some of the boys they had, well, Hardys had trucking and the boys would load sand to railroad siding, there at Bath and Riverview Road. And they built the disposal plant back probably in the '30s, early '30s, '29, somewhere in there.

**Emily Crompton** [00:34:15] So why did your family decide to move to the Cuyahoga Valley and where had they lived previously?

**Robert Grether** [00:34:21] Well, we had our place. You mean my original family?

**Emily Crompton** [00:34:28] Yes.

**Robert Grether** [00:34:28] That I don't know. They just, I guess they moved out of the city because they needed to get out in the country. Probably if you talk to Gary Grether, he's got a lot of the old information. He's got a lot of the history on the Grether family.

**Emily Crompton** [00:34:53] And what relation is he to you?

**Robert Grether** [00:34:57] I think he is a second cousin, something like the second or third.

**Emily Crompton** [00:35:04] Did you grow up with him?

**Robert Grether** [00:35:07] Well, my grandfather and uncle Ed lived side by side, and Gary was uncle Ed's grandson. And we lived up on top of the hill and they lived down on Akron Peninsula Road.

**Emily Crompton** [00:35:38] Can you tell me when the Nation Parks Service began in buying out properties? Do you remember any changes when that came?

**Robert Grether** [00:35:44] That was probably late [19]60s, early [19]70s. Speculators started buying some of the land and the park bought it all. Seibert, Darryl Seibert was one of those who come in and buy land and sell it the park. But my aunt that just died two years ago, she was 98 and a half. She lived on the old Grether farm till she died. In fact, her old house is still standing there. And her husband was a World War One veteran and she was one of the last living widows of the World War One. She lived on aunt Grether's section of the old farm.

**Emily Crompton** [00:37:03] Did she do any farming or was she just on the property?

**Robert Grether** [00:37:07] No, she was domestic help, her and her husband. With all Grethers on that whole farm at one time. There was well, there was one Williams, Thelma Williams, she was one of the Grether's girls, but that was the only other one that wasn't a Grether. Her husband was away, but they'd done a little bit of farming, not much. He was a barber. But let's see, there was Ed, Howard, Charlie, Thelma. There were about 90 or 100 acres there that was the farm. The original old farmhouse was right there in the corner of Steels Corners and Akron Peninsula Road, but it finally give up the ghost a few years ago. But Howard Grether still lives there. That's young Howard.

**Emily Crompton** [00:38:27] What does he do?

**Robert Grether** [00:38:34] He's retired now, retired from the army as a major, and he went into ministry for fifteen years. He's retired from that now. But that's about all I know about it.

**Emily Crompton** [00:38:57] So when the National Park Service came in, there weren't any real changes made to the land?

**Robert Grether** [00:39:02] There wasn't?

**Emily Crompton** [00:39:04] Any real changes made to the land. Did they leave it as it was?

**Robert Grether** [00:39:12] They made some changes down at Everett. They rebuild a lot of them old houses down there. I guess they use them for offices now, but they tore down most of the houses and just everything just grew up in Everett. I've noticed the last few years they started mowing a few of the fields to keep it so the grass and grow and the deer have something to eat. But other than that, they haven't changed a whole lot. Just letting things grow and go back to nature.

**Emily Crompton** [00:40:11] What about the community itself? How has it changed over the years that you've been here?

**Robert Grether** [00:40:16] Well, in 1950, they were 5,000 people in Northampton because my mother took the census year. And back then, we knew just about everybody. I'd say most of the people that I knew back then are all passed away by now. There was the Herbruck farm, Hardy farm, Bier's, Meyers' Farm, Himelright Farm, and the Charlie O'Neil farm. That was most of the farms.

**Emily Crompton** [00:41:29] Are any of those families still in the area?

**Robert Grether** [00:41:32] Meyerses still do some farming. They have a few horses and they raise some grain and hay. All the Erbanks were around back then, too. There's only one or two of them left. But it's changed a lot, becoming very populated. It's growing houses now. But when the park moved in and started buying everything before we moved, merged with Cuyahoga Falls, there was only about 900 kids in the whole Northampton Peninsula school district. But now there's probably over 2,000.

**Emily Crompton** [00:42:59] Thinking back over your years in the Valley, what is the strongest memory related to farming that you have?

**Robert Grether** [00:43:03] Working day and night. They were long days. We come home from market about seven o'clock. We have a few orders to pick, do that, and then we go home and go to bed. That will start the next day, picking again and keep the cycle going.

**Emily Crompton** [00:43:33] What about during your school year? How did that conflict with the farming?

**Robert Grether** [00:43:38] Which?

**Emily Crompton** [00:43:38] During your school years since you were on the farm quite often.

**Robert Grether** [00:43:43] Worked and went to school, that was about it. They didn't have much time to do anything else. In the wintertime, we'd done a little bit, we belonged to the Grange, the Northampton teenager group in the church, and that was about it.

**Emily Crompton** [00:44:16] Could you tell me a little bit about the Grange? About the Grange, could you tell me about it?

**Robert Grether** [00:44:20] I was mainly in the juvenile grange, and then when I graduated up to subordinate Grange, I went in the army. But the Grange used to have—well let's see. What was the last year we had that Northampton festival? Hmm. It was, I don't know, when we merged. I don't know. I can't even remember when they merged with Cuyahoga Falls. It's probably been ten, maybe fifteen years ago, no way it could have been longer than that. I've been retired twenty years, maybe twenty-five years. That was probably what, in the '70s? Maybe the '80s, somewhere in there. We had a Northhampton festival where anyone wanted to come in, they could set up a booth and Krieger's would donate to sweetcorn and we'd have an auction and some shows. Everybody just had a good time and then the falls, when they merged, wouldn't let us do it anymore. They told us we could do it up at the shopping center, but we had to charge twenty-five dollars per booth and have insurance on everything and we just give it up. It was just a fun thing for everybody that wanted to do something up there. It was right there at the town hall, the old town hall where the fire station is now. The town hall, the Falls says they'll leave it there as long as the Grange is around because the Grange has been in there forever. The Kaiser Farm that town hall is on now is all in the park now. Well, that's in the Cuyahoga Falls park. She donated the Kaiser farm to the city of Cuyahoga Falls. But they used to have a fair there at the town hall, they'd bring vegetables and corn and rabbits and chickens, pigs and have them judged and give prizes.

**Emily Crompton** [00:47:34] How many people in the community were involved with it? Was a lot of your family involved?

**Robert Grether** [00:47:37] Yeah, they were. There was probably a hundred people.

**Emily Crompton** [00:47:57] Was it usually farmers who would participate in this or was open to the general public as well?

**Robert Grether** [00:48:00] Anybody that wanted to bring stuff in. The Grange put most of it on. When the Grange quit doing it, then four or five of us got together and just started having it on our own. Just to have a good time.

**Speaker 2** [00:48:24] Who were those four or five? What families were the ones who put it on after the Grange?

**Robert Grether** [00:48:28] It was Grethers, Olivers, Krieger's. I can't remember, all of them. Gerringer. There's a couple that helped, Reds. A lot of the old families.

**Emily Crompton** [00:49:03] Did the gatherings grow smaller after the Grange or were you able to maintain the sort of size that they had established?

**Robert Grether** [00:49:08] It was a little bit smaller. We used to rent a tent, a big tent, put it in a parking lot there. That's where they'd have an auction and a show. Anybody wanted to put on an act or something, come in and do it.

**Emily Crompton** [00:49:35] Could you describe the layout of the gathering for me? Was it all on like a plain or a big building?

**Robert Grether** [00:49:43] The valley?

**Emily Crompton** [00:49:44] No, the gatherings that the Grange put on and later your family.

**Robert Grether** [00:49:49] I still don't understand.

**Emily Crompton** [00:49:51] The gatherings that the Grange would put on.

**Robert Grether** [00:49:53] Oh.

**Emily Crompton** [00:49:53] Could you describe the layout, booths, and everything like that. Tell me a little bit about what you remember.

**Robert Grether** [00:49:57] Well, a lot of the booths and the judging was done in the Grange Hall itself. And then the food booths were outside and the ladies served dinners down in the basement. Most, well the animals were all outside. But it was inside and outside.

**Emily Crompton** [00:50:35] Is there anywhere special at any of the farms where you spent time over the years, or even in the valley itself, that holds a lot of meaning for you? Anything that comes [to mind]?

**Robert Grether** [00:50:44] Holds a lot of meaning? Well, the Bender Farms, because I'd done most of the work there. I helped the Meyerses some and my great uncle on Bath Road. He had that farm, I worked there. And I did work at the racetrack, Ascot racetrack, for what they run six weeks, I think. I worked there in the summer sometimes. That was early in the spring, there wasn't too much going on, but that was after I got out of school. Swept, picked up papers, and worked on the starting gate loading horses and shooting them out of the starting gate.

**Emily Crompton** [00:51:55] So you spent most of the time farming at the Bender farm, right?

**Robert Grether** [00:51:57] Right.

**Emily Crompton** [00:51:58] How long was that for?

**Robert Grether** [00:52:01] How many years did I work at a Bender farm? Probably twenty-five or thirty. I worked off and on in the later years, you know, when he'd need some help.

**Emily Crompton** [00:52:16] So did you stop at roughly the same time that he decided to quit farming?

**Robert Grether** [00:52:21] Pretty much. I had just bought a business when he came up to see me. He was going to have me go in with him. I just had started this business, so I couldn't do it or I'd have been probably farming.

**Emily Crompton** [00:52:46] So what was your business? What did you start?

**Robert Grether** [00:52:52] I had a paint business, I painted appliances.

**Emily Crompton** [00:53:06] How did you get started doing that?

**Robert Grether** [00:53:06] When I had the gas station there in Northhampton, one of my customers done it and he wanted to retire, so I bought his business. And I've done that for thirty years. Plus, I worked at the school for thirty years.

**Emily Crompton** [00:53:26] Which school did you work at?

**Robert Grether** [00:53:31] Woodridge.

**Emily Crompton** [00:53:47] Can you think of one story that kind of embodies the farming work that you've done over the years in the Valley?

**Robert Grether** [00:53:56] Well, it used to be— we enjoyed because we had good stuff and we were always in competition with a couple of the other growers and we got to where everybody come to buy our stuff, we didn't have to go out and sell it. And some of the other ones had to take theirs to market and find other places to sell it, but it got to the point where word of mouth just sent the people down there. But we enjoyed it. It was hard work, but we enjoyed it. Cows would get out, we'd have to chase them for a couple days.

**Emily Crompton** [00:54:51] Are there any other stories about farm life in the Valley that you would like to share with us?

**Robert Grether** [00:55:04] Oh, not too much. The farming in the Valley was a little different up on the other farms, up in the upper land because in the Valley you couldn't make hay until probably one o'clock in the afternoon because of the dew, the hay wouldn't dry out. Another thing about farming in the valley, it was mostly sandy loam soil and it was easy to grow stuff. Things grew good down there. Well, they still do. Have to fertilize, but it grows good in that loamy soil.

**Emily Crompton** [00:56:10] Did you ever have to worry about flooding when you were farming in the Valley?

**Robert Grether** [00:56:13] About what?

**Emily Crompton** [00:56:14] Flooding?

**Robert Grether** [00:56:16] Yeah we had a couple of floods.

**Emily Crompton** [00:56:18] Can you tell me about fixing up after floods?

**Robert Grether** [00:56:22] Well, mainly you just have to wait till it dries out and redo the ground, you know, rework it. But the neighbors across the river, a couple of times we had to take them out in rowboats. The family over there that lived in one low spot and it flooded there probably every six, seven years. But there wasn't much you could do after it flooded. You just wait till dried out, went back, started working again.

**Emily Crompton** [00:57:07] Did you ever lose a crop to a flood or was the timing such that you didn't lose anything?

**Robert Grether** [00:57:11] Well, usually it was either early in the spring or late in the fall. We never lost, that I remember, we never lost any big crops.

**Emily Crompton** [00:57:24] Carolyn, did you have any questions for Mr. Grether?

**Carolyn Conklin** [00:57:38] Yeah, I have a few questions. Could you describe for us the Benders as people? What were they like?

**Robert Grether** [00:57:44] Did I— oh, the Benders?

**Carolyn Conklin** [00:57:46] Mhm, Mr. and Mrs. Bender.

**Robert Grether** [00:57:47] Well, Catherine was a school teacher. She taught school up until, I can't remember when she retired, it was probably in the '50s I think. They never had any kids. They were nice people, I got along good with them and they worked hard. You know, just keeping that place up was a lot of work. We'd have, at the end of the tomato season when we was all done picking tomatoes and everything, we'd have a tomato fight.

**Carolyn Conklin** [00:58:47] Tell me about that.

**Robert Grether** [00:58:48] Well, Earva was a short person you know. He liked to wrestle and he'd have a fight with us three boys. He'd be throwing tomatoes at us and we'd be throwing tomatoes at him. But they were old ripe tomatoes, you know, they splatter all over. We had a good time doing it, but he didn't like to vacation much. I remember one year, he went to Florida for two weeks and he's only gone a week. He had to get back home to the Valley, but that was his life. The farm was what he wanted and that's where he stayed. He worked hard down there. But he's a good person. He was probably, I think he was eighty-four or eighty-five when he died. But Catharine, usually she was up the house, we'd bring all the vegetables up and she'd start sorting them. And then when we'd get everything picked, we'd go up and help finish it out. But she liked her flower beds. Like I said, we had probably six flower beds, had to keep them up. But that was about it on a farm, it's usually all work, doing something all the time. But. No, not too much else. They always had you know, that was a big house. It was a two-family house and they always had renters. The Bruners were there for quite a few years and then they moved out and then Darsts moved in. And David and his wife and all, I think they had two or three girls. They all helped on the farm then too. Of course, that was after I'd grown up. I think I was in the Army '56 through '58, and I think it was about that time that they moved in and was helping him too. But yeah Earva was, he was really talented, mechanically inclined and everything because he rebuilt all his own machinery. I remember one year he said, "we got to paint the barn." So he put pulleys up in the eaves of the bar, run cables down, pulled it up with a tractor with us on it 80 feet in the air. And then the next time we painted it, he designed a scaffold where he got two bicycles and one person on each end pedaling, turning the wheels as you went up to the barn on cables. How'd you like to do that? [laughs] But he was very mechanically inclined. In fact, he told me to find him a Model A Ford because he wanted to build a sprayer and they built a corn sprayer out of that. It worked pretty good. I can't remember whether it was in the sale or not when they sold out. But they used that for a lot of years too. But I can remember when I first started going down there, there was a graveyard in front of the barn where some of the people that lived there before were buried. But the historical society came out and took all them away a few years after that. But that's about it.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:03:47] What was the relationship between the Szalays and the Benders?

**Robert Grether** [01:03:52] Just competitors. Well, it was with Big Jim Szalay was the old man. He's gone, a lot of years ago. The boys run it now. Well, they're boys, they're old now. [laughs] They're like me. But it was just friendly competition.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:04:20] Now, I'm going to ask because I don't know. How how do you make hay?

**Robert Grether** [01:04:25] Well, we usually had clover, Timothy, some alfalfa. He let it get up, until it buds out, cut it down, let it dry, rake it and turn it over and let it dry some more. Then as soon as it's dried enough, you bale and take it in the barn.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:04:56] And you mentioned decorative corn. What is that?

**Robert Grether** [01:04:59] The?

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:05:00] Decorative corn?

**Robert Grether** [01:05:03] Deckers?

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:05:04] Decorative corn, you mentioned—.

**Robert Grether** [01:05:05] Oh, oh. Indian corn, broom corn.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:05:10] And what is—

**Robert Grether** [01:05:10] Different colored corn.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:05:12] Okay.

**Robert Grether** [01:05:13] Yeah.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:05:16] And then my final question is just what did you like about farming? Why did you want to be a farmer?

**Robert Grether** [01:05:24] I enjoyed it. I like to grow stuff. Well, you can see what you're doing. You know, you take these little seeds, buy them, and pretty soon you got a stalk that big of tomatoes. My great uncle used to have the tallest corn, he'd win it every year. Was up 12-14 foot tall corn stalks. That's big. But you get an ear of corn like that, I don't know whether you ever ate sweet corn, did you? Never ate sweet corn? You girls haven't lived. But it's good, healthy. I'll tell you what, you take fresh tomatoes, ripe tomatoes out of the field, there's no better taste. We used to take the melons, the musk melons, get about that big and we had to pick them about every third day. You take the ones right around the stem if it was cracked like this, them were the best ones. They were ripe, juicy, and sweet. When we come in one day, we was selling them up along the road, says "pick me out a good one." I picked her out one of those that had a few cracks on it. "Oh, it don't look good. I want one of them smooth ones." Okay, that tastes like a pumpkin. Got to know what you're doing when you're eating the vegetables.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:07:23] Do you have any other questions?

**Emily Crompton** [01:07:23] No, thank you very much for being with us today Mr. Grether.

**Robert Grether** [01:07:32] You're welcome. I hope I helped you.