

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

**Q:** Start at the beginning and tell me about how the co-op community got started in 1956.

**A:** May Valley Co-op Community which we endeavored to make and we considered and were accepted as an intentional community and it continued on until '77. In the latter years from 1970 on people became gradually resistant to and refusing to honor the right of the May Valley Co-op to purchase their property when they left at the limited equity price. So, the Teramanto community was formed in '74 after having been developed by an education organization for the purpose of developing intentional communities from 1970 on. That development was primarily by fellowship of reconciliation members including a number of ex-ministers, ex- and present ministers who were of the more radical type and Protestant. So, we gradually got going though with more practical types except for the Affolter's in '74 by buying a part of the unplanted land of the May Valley Co-op and so Teramanto was the child of this education organization which we had called "A Pacific Group". This was a take off from "A Quicker Action Group" in Philadelphia known later as "Movement for New Society".

**Q:** Can I get you to back up a little bit and tell me about the origins of the May Valley Co-op Community in '56? How it got started? Why people came together?

**A:** Well, it was really a result of an expression of the cooperative movement, cooperative housing in other words. My family and I came to Seattle in '49 and very shortly after that started the Seattle Co-op Housing Committee, later to be the Seattle Co-op Housing Association. Our purpose was to develop a housing cooperative whether with the adequate land on the outskirts of Seattle, we were much influenced by the cooperative movement. We were part of the Cascade Cooperative League which was the local educational federation of cooperatives and also we were affected from '52 on by the existing intentional communities scattered throughout the country also by visit by the Bruderoff to our FOR here, the Seattle FOR and to our housing meetings. Bruderoff was prospecting out of Paraguay for members in the United States and for places to immigrate to. So that affected a number of our people there and as a result they didn't wait for us any further, they joined the Bruderoff in the East in New York State. My family and I visited a number of Bruderoff communities in a trip to Northwest Minnesota in 1954. We spent probably 10 or 12 days in those communities finding out how they operated, all the way from Montana to North Dakota to Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

**Q:** Oh, so you went to the old order Hutterite Colonies then?

**A:** That's what they were, right. What had started us off was a visit by the Bruderoff people. Now, do you have any particular questions?

**Q:** Well, I'm curious how many people there were at the beginning and if you went ahead and bought land or how that all worked out?

**A:** Yes, in the Teramanto community we decided that we'd need at least five to subscribe, and that had been the number that started the May Valley Co-op Community. Although of those five who put in money to get an option in 1955 on this land here, the short 40 acres actually 37 acres, only two out of the five ended up actually building and living here. Then one or two others of the early ones also joined in by moving here to or taking lots and we're the only survivors of all those. The same was true of the Teramanto group, none of the others who started the A Pacific Group in 1970 stayed with it very long and others who were more practically inclined and did not have the religious background that the FOR

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

members at the start did, they entered in but they didn't stay and this partly financial or mostly financial. We had no place to live here, we had bought a part of the cleared undeveloped land of May Valley Co-op and we planned a planned unit development as it is called here which would include the six-plex community building and a storage building. Then the membership of May Valley Co-op changed due to new people coming in and these new people had different ideas they didn't agree with those who had sold us the land on a mutual ownership contract that is on a cooperative ownership basis. And so they refused to give the county the required May Valley Co-op signature that would enable us to go ahead and at the same time they, without going through any legal process or having any from our standpoint legal right to do so they foreclosed on our purchased acreage which was an acre and a half because they wanted to pasture their horses on that ground. We have not resolved that issue yet but they at least admit that we claim the ownership although it's not fee simple ownership that we can claim, it's rather the cooperative ownership which is a kind of a perpetual lease along with equity investment in the May Valley Co-op Corporation. Then we got these other lots as they came up for sale by individual members of May Valley Co-op and starting with our house and lot developed resident membership of the Teramanto community.

**Q:** Now I'm not sure I quite understand the difference between the May Co-op and the Teramanto.

**A:** The May Valley Co-op has turned to completely private ownership, individual ownership, an individual is unrestricted in selling the cooperative community also has no option to buy. In Teramanto it is all corporate ownership and an individual may only sell out to the corporation and ownership is either by the Northwest Preservation Trust, which is a non-profit tax exempt group formed by Teramanto and others outside for the purpose of providing low income housing and conserving natural wild open space - in other words we added to our objectives an active role in preserving the environment.

**Q:** What does Teramanto mean?

**A:** It means loving earth in Esperanto, we ran out of English and Indian, of course most of the Indians don't have a written language.

**Q:** Well now, in the early years did people in the May Valley Co-op do things together like eat together or ?

**A:** Yes, we had occasional meals together. We had picnics in the summer and we had meetings at least quarterly, membership meetings and we helped each other build our restrictive houses although we had to call on outsiders also for that. Now our house was the first one that was built from the ground up, the other two early houses were moved in here and then added on to later.

**Q:** During your meetings did you have a particular way of running them? Did you operate by consensus or just majority rule?

**A:** Well, original Seattle Cooperative Housing Association recommended consensus and the rest of the by-laws of May Valley Co-op but we ended up compromising at the start by saying that decisions would be made by consensus if possible otherwise by two-thirds majority, so in practice ended up just two-thirds majority. I don't know if that answers your question. In Teramanto however, since after the start of May Valley Co-op some of the members wanted to be able to get individual ownership but with a

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

deed restriction that would give May Valley Co-op the opportunity to buy the property if it were to be sold. It was first option at a non-profit limited equity kind of price and since they wanted that, why only four months or so after we started that was put forth into a meeting and voted in. And this was of course was a split vote, but it passed by more than two-thirds so in Teramanto when that started we decided that that was our fatal mistake and we provided that all business meetings had to be -, or all decisions had to be by consensus in the regular meetings.

**Q:** Now in the May Valley Co-op did you have any sort of work sharing agreement? Did you have to contribute a certain amount of time for chores or anything?

**A:** No, that was done informally between members just one on one they would kind of exchange labor. There wasn't any compensation by May Valley Co-op to anyone for let's say their annual assessment that they had to pay to cover the taxes on the land and that kind of thing. But in Teramanto labor and cash payment are treated equally, that is it's either one or the other or both.

**Q:** Oh, so a person can work off some of their taxes, is that what you are saying?

**A:** They could work off all of their -, in Teramanto because the ownership is corporate the taxes are all corporate you don't pay property tax as individuals and you can as an individual member pay for your housing entirely by work.

**Q:** Oh, that's nice.

**A:** But most have not done that, that's been done by a few. The general tendency has been for persons to pay by both means, kind of maybe fifty/fifty or less.

**Q:** Now did the original group have any sort of common religion or maybe comp-shared ideology?

**A:** Well I do have some literature on that, maybe Tim got that at the 1993 conference but I can give that to you. I guess we have some here, we have some of our literature -, well I can get it down there. We developed in the Seattle Co-op Housing Association initially a set of principals and they included the Golden Rule, "Always treat others as you would be treated" and I have some of that here and you can take this if you would like. This is a rough copy of what I gave Joe Peterson, have you been in touch with him?

**Q:** Oh I have, in fact I'm going to go see him this evening.

**A:** Well, he is editor of the coming issue of the Reader's Magazine contacted us for an article which is to be in his presentation of Christian Communities and those who are if not Christian trying to do at least what Christians are supposed to be doing. So we included, anyway as you'll see in our literature, these principles and this was out of our experience with the intention communities of that time in the fifties and our reading on the subject. For example there was a Wendell Kramer that we followed quite a bit, he had developed a cooperative farm in Modesto, California. He being a Methodist Bishop more than a minister of course infused it with all of his ideas in particular his survey that he had made of intentional community throughout the country in order to get his degree, this was in some eastern university. So that impressed us as well as the experience we gained with the Bruderoff person here and with our visit Hutterites. Those principles were faith, that is faith in the superior force whatever that is or God or

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

whatever a person calls it and the Golden rule, treat others as you would treat yourself and cooperative principles, cooperative principles would include of course cooperative housing entirely limited equity. All that is in this and if you want to take this, this is the rough draft of what I sent him but I would need it back.

**Q:** Okay, I could copy it and return it to you, that would be wonderful.

**A:** When we got to the Teramanto Community we were a little more practical, for example including consensus and including only cooperative ownership. And then in our articles of the corporation we included personal growth as to assist the personal growth of each member, and in gender a more equitable, humane, free and non-violent society in other words we believed in social activism. I can give you that if you want.

**Q:** Did you ever visit the Philadelphia Life Center people or the Movement for New Society?

**A:** No, they had some people here and they visited us as I recall.

**Q:** Can you tell me a little bit about membership, how one becomes a member? Maybe first with May Valley then now with Teramanto?

**A:** May Valley was simply putting in five dollars because we had no land, we were not living together. In other words we bought this farm here to move to from Seattle, most of us were living in Seattle. Then later we changed that to provide that a person had to have a contract or ownership of a lot along with this deed restriction in favor of May Valley Co-op or cooperative ownership and some capital investment otherwise in May Valley Co-op. Well no, you had to have that ownership either cooperative or individual, which would include the limitation in favor of the organization. That came in between '68 and '70 I think and then later we changed that to say that you had to be a cooperative owner not just an individual owner with a deed restriction in favor of May Valley Co-op. That was in '74 that we made that change much to the consternation of a few of the May Valley Co-op members which is what part of what created the backlash later to change it entirely to a Home Owner's Association.

**Q:** Now have individual families always lived together or have you had sort of communal households as well.

**A:** No, May Valley Co-op had no sharing of houses. For one thing the land was cheap then and so there wasn't so much of a need for it. But, Teramanto has had that sharing from the very beginning. From the very beginning we had just the Affolter House which we shared the basement, that is someone else would have the basement. Then we got a house, bought a house that someone was selling in the Co-op and so that was shared between a number of single individuals before a family moved into and became the member there. They are still there and there are three generations of them there. They moved in in 1976.

**Q:** What have your relationships been like with your neighbors over the years?

**A:** Our relationship with our neighbors? Well, those outside of May Valley Co-op which has 23 home sites which about 20 or 21 have been built on, those outside of that have had limited contact with us and has been generally favorable. This is because May Valley Co-op had not only this eleven acres out of

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

the 37 the eleven acres was the plat, but they saved the rest kept it in the woods it was originally and we gradually came to think, many of us as a buffer against outside development which were coming in. Others who had included some of the originals though differently, they could see land prices going up and to them this would be a great bonanza that they should cash in on by selling it for development. So we had too few of us in the May Valley Co-op who didn't want to see that happen, it was mainly those of us in the Teramanto. So we went outside to all the neighbors all around us who of course enjoyed the buffer and would not gain by May Valley Co-op making a profit and we got all of them to join us in what we called Neighbors for May Valley to join us in trying to persuade May Valley Co-op Board and Membership to not vote to sell, because that would take a vote of the membership. And then, when they did give an option to a developer to buy over our votes against it and he had to give annex to Renton, the nearby city here in order to get sewers so he could put in more lots, we got the support of all these neighbors in persuading the Renton City Council which was a hearing body to turn down the annexation which meant that he couldn't get sewers because we're in the unincorporated county here. So we came to be well acquainted with them that way and they were -, but we did have to go to Court on that against May Valley Co-op simply because of we were unable to persuade May Valley Co-op by just defeating the annexation. They had yet to decide finally to sell to the developer and the developer was going over his allotted time to exercise his option. The thing we sued May Valley Co-op for was to insist they follow the by-laws in taking the vote on the sale, they were not. They were using, from our standpoint an immoral means to force certain members to vote their way that is for the sale for development, but we lost that suit.

**Q:** Oh no. Was that a big disappointment?

**A:** Well, yes. I mean everybody put in money, all of our neighbors had put in money to pay for that suit and so it was quite a disappointment.

**Q:** Did the May Valley Community ever garden together or do any activities like that together?

**A:** Yes, and we can see the community garden. We started that at around '67 or '68. Yes, everyone living in the May Valley Co-op could have a piece of the garden, their own piece. For the past year or so, for most of the past decade the only people that have used it have been those in Teramanto and once in awhile some other person here has and at times we have opened it up-, rather recently we have to all neighbors outside May Valley Co-op also but only one or two or so have taken advantage of it.

**Q:** Have you ever done anything for kids like starting a school or had a child care co-op or anything like that?

**A:** Well we did have playground material for the kids in the pasture area, the open ground owned by May Valley Co-op in common when we had a lot of little kids. We have little kids now but the land -, the ownership is under dispute still between Teramanto and May Valley Co-op so we can't do it as well. We sold some of that open land that was suitable to the developer, so that part that we had there was gone. We had such primitive things as ropes to swing on and things like that in additions to some picnic tables and an outdoor fireplace. But we also had ball games, we had baseball mostly and then later volleyball but that's been obstructed now by the fact that we sold part of that pasture to that developer.

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

**Q:** Would you say a particular type of person has been attracted to joining May Valley Co-op?

**A:** Well, May Valley Co-op at first attracted the families with children primarily who wanted kind of an outdoor spacious area in which they could play and wanted to live simply and cheaply by building their own house. In other words they wanted to be back somewhat in the country. We're no longer as rural as we used to be however and now persons that come in don't have to do all their own work in order to have someplace to live because the community does it for them to some extent. Well, they still have to participate in the work if their going to have housing reasonably soon. And, let's say starting around 10 years ago we seemed to attract persons who knew that we had woods that some wanted to sell and would mean a big dividend to all the lot holders possibly then so we attracted a few that were looking for a personal profit.

**Q:** How about did the Teramanto community?

**A:** Well in Teramanto we tend to attract those who would like to more in the country who would like to be able to work for their housing, who want to live simply, who appreciate the spiritual basis of Teramanto although that hasn't been formalized in any sense and, who like to grow their own food and have a place in some cases to have their own enterprises.

**Q:** Now does Teramanto basically consist of this house?

**A:** And the Affolter House and then that first house we bought across the street which we'll see and then we're building a fourth house now.

**Q:** So how many people does that include?

**A:** Well, in that house across the street they're a three generation house there must be six or more, nobody in the new house yet, and in this house there is seven adults plus three kids and then in the house I'm in three adults.

**Q:** Do you do things together, like do you ever eat meals together?

**A:** Yes, we make a practice here of doing that once a week. It really involves only the house I'm in and this house, the other house across the street those have been here so long they don't cooperate with us closely. They have such a big family that that's really their community, the head of that house is in his seventies.

**Q:** In the 1960's when a lot of the young people were becoming interested in community did you have some of the young students, did they visit you and want to join here at all?

**A:** Yes, we had a good rate of growth in the Sixties right, but they were generally mature people more than the young ones.

**Q:** So it wasn't the Hippies then?

**A:** No, not mostly I guess we did have a few. But no this called for a more serious and long term investment here than they would be able to put up, except those that were married a little older in other words and had children.

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

**Q:** Do you have any rules, I'm sure you must have by-laws, but are there rules about conduct for example?

**A:** Yes, we have a rule for this house a set of rules that would apply to well, the Affolter house or will apply to the new house. No inebriation, that is no excess of alcohol, no drugs at all or possession of it, no smoking in the house, no weapons in possession or anyplace on the premises and generally vegetarian fare that's not a rule but it is our general practice. At our community meals vegetarian only, by that I don't mean Vegan.

**Q:** Has the community attracted people who have been artistic?

**A:** Yes, in one sense it is not attracted some of that nature because it hasn't given them as much privacy as they want. But on the other hand if a person is really kind of hippie type, that is kind of rejected by society, radical we have some who are artists of that nature. As we can see by some of the work here, now that wooden arching there for example that was the first family and I guess they were in their thirties, they were not hippie types but they were artists. They built the Gazebo outside there.

**Q:** Do you heat with wood?

**A:** We do, yeah. It's part of our simplicity, I mean economy.

**Q:** Do you do other sort of energy saving type activities?

**A:** Yes, this house was built to be solar we weren't able to persuade our neighbor to cut his trees which shade as we'll see here the green house too much. So we have not been able to use that and we did not ever get around to putting in the solar heat exchanger for the hot water system here, but we have the space for it and we have the glass wall that is needed to be there for a solar heat exchanger and my house, that roof was also a solar roof.

**Q:** What has been the best part of being or living in a community over the years for you?

**A:** Well, I suppose that differs between people but for me it has been a means of personal growth and a means of improving the society in general. I mean, I just think of intentional communities as a evolutionary development of our culture that is something that will tend to give people more security especially in times of recession. It also provide a better basis for raising children so they are able to fend for themselves and are more self-sustaining or prosperous and so on.

**Q:** Did you raise kids here?

**A:** Yes, two.

**Q:** Was it a good experience for them do you think?

**A:** We thought so, we think the results indicate it.

**Q:** What were some of the benefits of community living for the kids as they were growing up?

**A:** Well, for one thing we stopped moving and we've been here now for 39 years and before that we were moving at least every five years or less. The last house was five years, we owned that in Seattle before that it was far less than that that we lived in one place. So they have had the assurance, the

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

satisfaction of growing up in one place and keeping the same friends all the time. My son, for example still knows about his high school friends he associated with he is -, well even going back to our experience in Seattle even knows some of them because being one place all the time so that has been advantageous for him. And the same for my daughter.

**Q:** What's been the hardest part of living in community? What would you say the down side of community living is?

**A:** Well, it's coping with persons who are quite different and finding out how to adjust to them and how to cooperate with them are the disadvantages.

**Q:** Would you consider the May Valley Co-op a success or a failure?

**A:** Well, I consider it was a success for some years but a failure over all because it's come to the general materialistic pressures of the time. It was successful insofar as it provided the basis for starting Teramanto and I consider Teramanto as more successful than May Valley Co-op, it's expanded more and it has I think more potential for the future.

**Q:** If you could do sort of the May Valley experience over again are there things you could of done that would've maybe made it last?

**A:** Sure, I think so. If we would've originally adopted the policies that Teramanto later adopted like provided for consensus voting only and for only cooperative ownership of property. It would've delayed the start of May Valley Co-op a year or two or so and meant more turnover when the early May Valley Co-op people -, even though there was quite a bit of turnover as it was but I think it would've been possible to start May Valley Co-op better.

**Q:** If you were going to offer to advice to some people who wanted to start a housing cooperative what advice would you give them?

**A:** I would say whether you call it a cooperative or an intentional community or whatever, if you're looking for long term endurance and economical, simple living the only way to go is to have it a pure cooperative and not a hybrid.

**Q:** And by a pure co-op, what do you mean by that?

**A:** Well, only cooperative ownership. In other words all title held in the name of the co-op and the individual having a limited equity investment in the cooperative, which you are familiar with I'm sure. Are you familiar with the York Center near Chicago?

**Q:** No, I don't believe so.

**A:** Well, it's west of Chicago it's in Evanston, I think that's the name of it. We visited there thirty three years ago. We followed them to some extent that was with the cooperative ownership, they had only that. They had a lot of difficulty on that matter of resale.

**Q:** Do they still exist?

**A:** I don't know, it was sponsored by [end of tape].

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

**Q:** Evanston and but the only people I interviewed there were the Reba Place people. Are you familiar with them? The Mennonite Church folks.

**A:** Yeah, this York Center was straight west of Chicago and Evanston is more northwest isn't it?

**Q:** Oh, okay. I thought you said York was in Evanston.

**A:** Well, I may be wrong. Maybe it was not Evanston.

**Q:** Have there been many other communities like May Valley in the Seattle area?

**A:** Well, I don't know of any that had quite the same history there are many that followed individual ownership and that's what you have -, what we have seen with co-housing of today. On the other hand pure cooperatives all that I've seen of them have been, well nearly all of them have been government financed, that's by FHA under their loan program. We did consider and tried to get that kind of financing but we were not large enough for it and my understanding is that some of those who did in different parts of the country, get that financing on a purely co-op ownership basis have when they have paid off the FHA mortgage they have reverted a very commercial kind of co-op housing which is not limited equity. Our experience has been a little different than that since we were never government financed that way or any way.

**Q:** Has May Valley or you personally been involved with the Peugeot Consumers Co-op at all?

**A:** Yes, it started here. I was the one who organized it.

**Q:** Oh, you're one of the founders of PCC?

**A:** I'm the founder.

**Q:** You're the founder - wow, that's wild.

**A:** It was organized in our living room December 20, 1960 and after being a buying club which I had organized just to enhance the Seattle Co-op Housing Association. It was primarily to provide buying club for the people interested in the Seattle Co-op Housing Association, and that was started in 1953. Then seven years after it started which was in 1967 it moved to [unintelligible] in Seattle, to a store front and I dropped out that year as manager. I'm back in now but I'm not involved in the operation at all but just as a volunteer on one of the Board Committees.

**Q:** Well, it's gotten huge hasn't it?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** How many stores are there now?

**A:** Seven as I recall. Well, let's see - no I guess six, yeah six.

**Q:** That's really interesting. I have a real fascination with food co-op history so I'm interested by this. Now you didn't by any chance go to the University of Washington did you?

**A:** No.

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

**Q:** You didn't, okay.

**A:** No, I considered it but instead I went to the University of Arizona.

**Q:** Oh, okay. In Tucson, is that where it is?

**A:** Yes, in Tucson.

**Q:** I was just wondering about Washington because I know there were a bunch of student housing co-ops at the University of Washington and I was wondering if you were involved.

**A:** Well, I suppose you might say it was thanks to the more liberal sort of communal inclined persons who settled the state early and who formed the attitudes of people about what the government should do and shouldn't do that caused the University of Washington to really get into housing and to provide competition which was too stiff for the Student Co-op Association here to survive. They did have a number of houses here in the Forties, but they ended up with only one when we moved here in '49. So it was [unintelligible] effective and I don't think it's ever in the news, it's not active now in any of the Co-op educational circles, that one house.

**Q:** But, it has survived from the Forties?

**A:** I'm not sure that it has. I don't think it has survived under that name, I don't know.

**Q:** Interesting. Have you been involved in REI at all?

**A:** No, just as a inactive member. I made efforts to get them involved in the Educational Federation of Co-ops, this was back in the Sixties. They weren't much interested then, they kind of dragged their feet. But, later when we got it organized again as Peugeot Sound Co-op Federation in 1976-1979 they did come in then and have been active since.

**Q:** Seems like the Peugeot Sound area has been a real sort of hot bed of co-ops.

**A:** Well, it's been to a large extent producer oriented. Now for example in group health, we have the Medical Security Clinic which was a doctor's organization changing to a consumer co-op but it was always and it still is - and I'm part of it, my wife has been for twenty years, I've just come back into it I did work for it when we first came - it's been dominated completely by the doctors who have been well organized. So that was one part then as far as PCC is concerned that became early on the employee dominated place pretty much, so that is a distinguishing feature here I think. Along with the fact that there was a pretty open youthful population of this area and pretty open to new ideas like co-ops.

**Q:** Now Teramanto has been around for over twenty years now, is that right?

**A:** Uh-huh, twenty-two years.

**Q:** Twenty-two years. What's the glue that keeps people together, that keeps it going?

**A:** Well, I think it's the idea, philosophy and what not that is attractive. Of course that isn't the glue exactly, it takes a little more than that. We did start early, that is the May Valley Co-op Community got this land cheap back in 1957 and as a consequence Teramanto was able to get its first start reasonably cheap, although they stole it back from us soon afterward. And then it's kind of a matter of the

Interview with John Affolter

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 4, 1996

experience of cooperatives in other parts of the country coming to rest along with other somewhat radical, I would say liberal ideas in this area. I mean people who were forced out in other parts of the country because they were too unconventional would come to the West Coast, and of course we got our share and the climate is very herbituous, second best in the world according to a sociologist geographer, so that's another factor.

**Q:** Well, I think that's -, those are all of my questions. Is there any chance I could look around a little bit outside?

**A:** Sure, let's go do that.

**Q:** Great, I'd enjoy that.