

To better understand the origins and purposes of the (Minnesota now) Midwest Elderberry Cooperative, join me on a brief autobiographical wandering through its founder's background to provide context. Christopher J. Patton grew up on an 8-acre hobby farm located a couple hundred yards from the Massachusetts border in rural Nashua, NH during the late 50s -early 60s. His family grew much of their own food. He raised quail, ducks and geese, trained Weimaraner pups to hunt birds, and wandered himself through the woods and hidden meadows of his neighboring hundreds of acres in both NH and MA.

J H Patton & J R Simplot

According to a 1990s article in the Idaho Falls newspaper, my great grandfather was the first farmer to plant russet potatoes for J R Simplot in 1904 soon after he arrived there from Missouri. They were so big, that everyone started growing them the next year. Many people recognize J R's name because he went on to build a potato processing juggernaut, but not many know about J H the farmer. Agricultural profits are divided similarly: farmers only receive a very small part of the consumers food dollar.

Not only does a cooperative provide educational and networking assistance to its grower members, but its business structure should also give farmers the opportunity to access and participate in a broader part of the crop to consumer supply chain. That might express itself as on-farm value added products made for and sold directly to neighbors to a share in the cooperative's business activities like the aggregation and processing of berry and flower crops into valuable US-grown quality ingredients of high nutritional and culinary value.

Ellwood Patton

J H moved to New Sweden, south of Idaho Falls, because his wife, Mellacinda, was sick with TB. Unfortunately, she died in Blackfoot, ID (1903) just short of reaching their new home. My grandfather, Ellwood, was only 7-8 and too young to work in the fields, so he was placed with a Blackfoot Native American family for daily care, where he learned much about indigenous ways to live with the land. His older sister, Beulah, took her mother's place in the home.

Ellwood joined the US Army at the beginning of America's entry into World War I. He was designated as an ambulance driver but never served in that function for long. First, he suffered severe allergic reactions to all the shots he was given before being sent to France. He missed his boat and endured life-long lung damage from that illness. Shortly after arriving in France, he came down with the Spanish Flu and spent most of the rest of his time overseas in the infirmary. Coming home he married his Swedish American sweetheart, bought a farm, farm equipment and rented land from two other farms to grow seed potatoes.

When the price of potatoes crashed, he lost those farm operations. After struggling for some years and suffering increased poor health, he sold his farm in 1929 and moved to Tucson, AZ. By 1932 he had his naturopathic certification and began a holistic health practice out of his home combining healing herbs with Swedish Massage. Retired General John J Pershing, his World War I supreme commander, was his regular patient for years until the general's passing.

Christopher J. Patton MA, MBA

My mother was born in New York City but preferred spending time on her grandmother's sheep farm in VT, so a preference for rural living with natural foods was something that my parents shared and led to the NH homestead. I grew up reading Rodale books and magazines as well as books about the environment, nutrition and healthy eating, but my parents divorced in 1964, which sent me down a different road for many decades before coming back to my love for the land and how healthy soil and holistic organic farm practices produce healing foods.

The educational system's bias at the time pushed me towards the study of astronomy and astrophysics, but in 1967 my interests turned towards early cultural history and prehistory, so I ended up spending my 20s to 32 as a professional archaeologist living in Jerusalem for about

five of those years, where I earned my MA in those subjects from The Hebrew University and first contributed to and then directed a summer archaeology and history program for foreign students in conjunction with HU's Institute of Archaeology.

Coming back to the US, I found less appreciation for my academic training when it came to getting work, so I spent about 20 years working in a number of enterprises experiencing a couple colossal fails, a painful divorce, and several modest successes in financial services, marketing, advertising and public relations that finally brought me to Minnesota and The Pillsbury Company from 1995-2000, where I worked as an information technologist, Lotus Notes developer - the first two years in the Engineering Department and then in International R&D managing ingredients and research data warehousing as well as giving primary support to Haagen-Das International. I was laid off in 2000 with about 746 other people as part of the early stage preparation for eventual sale to General Mills. During those years I earned my MBA from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

My Journey to Elderberry

From 2001-2015 I taught adults at night as an adjunct faculty member for two universities. I covered a wide range of college classes from world history & cultures to business management & marketing for short 5-6 week contracts, on average a little over 2 nights per week for 4 hours a night. The pay was low and irregular, and I was supporting a full-time mother/home educator and three young boys, so I often picked up other short term projects.

At the same time I began to think about retirement and a return to working the land. I spent ten years taking courses in permaculture and commercial agriculture from college classes and special educational programs to conferences. While attending the 2011 MOSES Conference in LaCrosse, WI I heard Terry Durham from MO speak about the commercial potential in growing elderberry, and I was immediately intrigued. At the time I was exploring the purchase of 65 acres in central MN to farm sustainably and become relatively self sufficient. I needed a good cash crop to make that work, and I thought native elderberry had that potential. Besides Terry was farming not too far from Fulton, MO area where my father's family had farmed, having moved there from Fleming County, KY in 1826. Prior to the Revolutionary War, they farmed in Pennsylvania.

In June of 2011 I attended Terry Durham's Elderberry Workshop. As a result, I realized that I did not have the resources to farm elderberry profitably, successfully on my own. I decided to explore marketing his River Hills Harvest brand elderberry products outside of MO. As a result, I introduced US grown native elderberry products and ingredients to the broader US market, to both small and large companies, through venues such as EXPO West, the Fancy Food Shows, KeHE Distributors national shows and regional conferences in the Midwest. A number of those companies have introduced elderberry flavors or skus into their product lines. Unfortunately, most of them are sourcing imported elderberry ingredients due to the lack of US grown supply.

At the 2012 MOSES Conference I met Paul Otten at Terry's River Hills Harvest booth. Paul managed Natura Farms, a private school farm near Scandia, MN. Paul and I farmed something over 1.5 producing acres of elderberry together at Natura Farms for six years until his death. Besides learning a great deal from him, he introduced me to Cooperative Development Services, which led to my founding of the Minnesota (now Midwest) Elderberry Cooperative on September 11, 2012 and the first round of grants for feasibility studies and business plans.

Paul Otten was an internationally known proponent of soil health and berry nutrition as well as a licensed nurseryman. Paul and I developed an educational outreach program of on-farm, hands-on workshops and presentations at conferences and the events. We grew our friendship as well as elderberries. By hand we picked, destemmed, packed and sold them in bulk as well as the flowers, cuttings and plants. I learned much from him, but there is so much more to learn about elder as a plant with many cultivar presentations and as a sustainable, regenerative, commercially viable, native specialty crop - both for its flowers and berries.