

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Robert Allard by Tessa Desmond
Conducted on September 27th, 2023 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **Tessa Desmond:** Today is September 27th, 2023. My name is Tessa Lewinsky Desmond. I'm with the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project conducting interviews in Farmville, North Carolina.

Thank you for sitting with me today for the Oral History Project. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us things that feel important to share?

[00:00:22] **Robert Allard:** My name is Robert Allard. I've been with the project gardening project since 2016. That's very important to me. I incorporate my Boy Scouts in with the gardening. And they get time for eco projects and conservation time, and they get to learn the old ways of doing things when I double them with the older gardeners.

[00:00:48] **Tessa Desmond:** That's a lot about what this project wants to accomplish is building a bridge between young people who are learning to garden and farm, with folks who are, who know the older ways. It sounds like the Farmville Community Garden has been a really important center for that kind of work. Can you tell us about the history of the garden?

[00:01:10] **Robert Allard:** Started in 2016. It was originally named Rooted in Community, and then we changed the name to Farmville Community Garden. We've gone from first job, we plowed the land, and that didn't work so well, so we went to raised beds. We put in some bigger raised beds. We've had the scouts come in two different projects and added more double beds, so that way people, seniors do not have to bend over. They could just reach in and do what they need to do. We've made some modifications where if they want to sit on the side of the bed itself, they can do that. We've added a shed. They've added an orchard. We've added a berm. Um, there'll be a new, pavilion put in shortly within the year, and there's other projects that can be done.

[00:02:02] **Tessa Desmond:** How did you learn to garden? Why, how did it come to matter so much to you?

[00:02:07] **Robert Allard:** My grandmother. I lived in Coleraine, Massachusetts in the mountains. And she was an avid gardener. She, she would use the dandelions in the front yard. She would take the whole thing out, the root and all, and take the root, and dry it, and grind it up. And that was the substitute for coffee during the Depression. You used the greens for supper. You'd take the flowers and make wine with the flowers.

She would take potato peelings and dry them out, and use it to take the creosote off the coal pipe. The old cold stove.

She wasted nothing. She grew everything except for the flour and the meat that she ate. And she, but she grew everything else, blueberries, tomatoes, carrots, Swiss chard, whatever,

whatever you could think of, was in her garden. And, she did flowers as well. She actually gave me a reader's Digest book of flowers and vegetables and in it, she wrote down what to feed it, when to feed it, how much to feed it, what to feed it, to get more produce out of it. And that's what I went by. That's what I still go by.

[00:03:24] **Tessa Desmond:** Are there dishes that you remember smells from her kitchen?

[00:03:30] **Robert Allard:** Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. It was, I mean, every day was a different thing for her. She'd have a dozen pies ready for the restaurant by 7 o'clock in the morning. Everything from blackberry to gooseberry to dewberry to strawberry rhubarb.

Everything was from scratch. Nothing, nothing was box made. Everything was from scratch. The smells just, she had a pantry and it was everything you could think of. Hanging onions, she would, she would take old pantyhose and take onions and tie a knot. Put an onion, tie a knot, and that way when she needed one, all she did was clip it. And she kept it down in the cellar.

She did a lot of canning. She was the old ways of doing things. And to me, I learned from that. And then my first job was being a gardener for the next door neighbor, which I didn't realize, but that was her teacher when she was young. And she was bedridden, and she said if you don't know what it is, you bring me a slip of it, and I will tell you what it is and how to take care of it.

And she had everything from A to Z, and that's where I learned flowers. And from a grandmother, I learned vegetables. And to me, that was exciting to see something grow from a seed. That makes me happy.

[00:04:52] **Tessa Desmond:** And with the flowers, was that in part about medicines?

[00:04:57] **Robert Allard:** Some of it, yes. Yes. I mean, you could mix it and make certain teas, make balms from it for different medical reasons. Eucalyptus. She had a eucalyptus tree in the back and she would take the leaves and dry them. And then use them in a steam bath for when I had asthma. Things like this. And that was part of it.

[00:05:22] **Tessa Desmond:** So where did you grow up?

[00:05:23] **Robert Allard:** I grew up, on top of a mountain, on ten acres, in a log cabin in Coleraine, Massachusetts.

[00:05:31] **Tessa Desmond:** And how did you come to live in Farmville?

[00:05:34] **Robert Allard:** Ah, I was getting out of the service. My wife worked at Brigham Women's Hospital just outside of Boston. And she had 13 resumes sitting on the counter. And she said, pick one. I read through all of them. And I said, Greenville, North Carolina. She said, wow, how do you know?

I said, because I would spend time down here with the boys from North Carolina since I was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia. And we would go fishing down here every other weekend or so. I said, they'll hire you. And they did. And that's when we first moved, 1986, down here.

[00:06:10] **Tessa Desmond:** And you referenced being in the service.

[00:06:12] **Robert Allard:** Yes.

[00:06:13] **Tessa Desmond:** Do you wanna, do you wanna say what service?

[00:06:15] **Robert Allard:** United States Navy. I spent four years on the USS Mount Whitney, which was at that time the Admiral's flagship for the East Coast. We traveled halfway around the world. I got to see the gardens in England. I got to see Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall and went to the Arctic Circle. I went, I've been to the Eiffel Tower. London, Big Ben, all the Caribbean islands, been to Mardi Gras and um, I, I, I was one of those, I went to the museums and to, to the, different shows that they had for plants and so forth and the art, art museums and, but we would also search out the bakeries and the best restaurants to see a fish market, their fish bigger than this table.

And I mean, we've never, I never experienced it. And we went, a friend of ours, one of our guys has been in the service for 20 years, and he took us to this one guy. He sold us a fish that was maybe five foot long, the eye as big as a, as a grapefruit. Teeth on it. He said they're from a mile down. He said go to this restaurant and they'll, they'll, they'll prepare it for you.

That was one of the best fish I've ever had. Sweetest, sweetest tasting fish I've ever had. And nothing like cod or flounder or anything like that, but it was very, very succulent. Very, very great tasting and never had anything like it.

[00:07:48] **Tessa Desmond:** So when you moved to Farmville.

[00:07:50] **Robert Allard:** Mm hmm.

[00:07:51] **Tessa Desmond:** When did you start gardening?

[00:07:52] **Robert Allard:** I've always gardened. I mean, when I was, when I was a boy, I did the same thing. I grew tomatoes. I tried a little bit of everything, but tomatoes were my favorite. The different lettuce I like to grow. Grow squash of different types, peppers, and I'm more into peppers now, but I mean tomatoes I like.

[00:08:12] **Tessa Desmond:** Tell us some of the names of the things that you like. It sounds like there are particular squash, or.

[00:08:17] **Robert Allard:** There's, tomatoes were like the tiger stripe. Or the snowball, which is an all white tomato. The veners tomato is only the size of a baseball, but a very, very, very juicy tomato. Which you can't find anymore. I would love to find some.

But, I grow purple Cherokees. That's one of my, my wife's favorites. So I, that's what I grow. I grow a number of different peppers. Some Puerto Rican adoduche. I grow the regular green pepper, which I wait until it turns orange or yellow or red. And like today I found a new one, a hot lemon pepper, which I'm going to try.

I'm always trying something different. I'm always trying new, new seeds of different varieties, or old seeds that I've never seen before. I'll try growing them, just to see how they turn. If I can use them in my cooking, and then I spread the word from then to my scouts, and let them experiment with that.

[00:09:17] **Tessa Desmond:** Do you save seeds?

[00:09:18] **Robert Allard:** Yes, I do. Yes. I found some zinnia seeds where half the flower was, was red and the other half was yellow. So I took some of the old seeds from that same plant and I'll plant them next year to see if they come true or if they go to a different color or maybe a different shade. We'll see.

[00:09:37] **Tessa Desmond:** So when did you start working with the Boy Scouts? I know that's an important part of your life.

[00:09:42] **Robert Allard:** I've always been a Boy Scout. I've always been. I grew up from Cub Scouts and Weeblos and I was a scout. I was, I was a star scout when I got out, then I went into police explorers and then when my son was born and when he became of age, he joined this troop here.

He was previously in this troop in Vermont where we were living, but he came down here, they camp every once, once a month. Every month, they go to summer camp. He eagled out about 12 years ago. We've just this past year, we had 12 boys Eagle out, which is unusual.

[00:10:25] **Tessa Desmond:** What does it mean to Eagle out?

[00:10:27] **Robert Allard:** Eagle out means you've, you've, you've gotten the highest rank in Boy Scouts. Eagle is one of the hardest, less than 5 percent in the nation achieve it and to have 12, 12 is, is a rare number because it's hard. It's, it's, you gotta, the boy has to plan what to do, has to make sure that you have everything on paper from how many nails you're going to use in your project, whatever it is.

You're going to make, build your project, they have to make sure the prices are right, where to get it from. It has to have to be approved by a council. Once they approve it, you do the project, you include all your Boy Scouts, because they are the supervisor. That one boy is the supervisor of all those boys.

And then. And once it's done, you make sure you take pictures and everything else, you go on to the final board, and they approve it, and then you're given your award, and later on that year, you have a ceremony where your parents are involved, and it's, it's, you have so many merit badges you're required to have at that time, and it's, it's quite a task to do that, and many of

these boys have worked hard, and that's, to me, that's epitome, because if, if many companies out here in the United States, they, what do they want? They want an Eagle Scout because they know how hard it is to get it. One of the managers at the hospital said if I see Eagle, I stop an interview and I hire him right there. So that's, I mean, to me that's, I mean that, that's telling them how good a person can be. We take young, young men, young boys and turn them into men with leadership skills.

Um, they were learning CPR last week. I mean all this, and that's what we try to do.

[00:12:20] **Tessa Desmond:** So, your Boy Scouts, the troops that you work with, mm hmm, have played an important role in the community garden.

[00:12:28] **Robert Allard:** Yes, yes. They do a lot of community service. They do conservation hours. They do the eagle projects in the garden. They help assist the gardeners at times. And that way, the history of that gardener will not be lost. It'll be, it'll go, be retained within that scout because I will send them with their older, older gardener and I'll come back and I'll say, what did you learn? Well, they, they do this and that might be the only thing that one thing that gardener might be the only one that does it, but they've learned that, that from them and that history is passed on.

That's a problem. A lot of history like that is being forgotten. Or not learned, and it dies out with that one gardener. Because every gardener does something different, for whatever reason. We had one scout that learned how to take a Coke bottle and use it to make a hole. And then that gardener puts a tomato plant in that hole.

That way, that was the easiest way for her to do that, and that's what they do. To take a rake, instead of using the tines, turn it upside down to smooth out. Not to just rake them. And every tool has two sides. One you're just supposed to use, and there's another side where you might be able to use it for something else.

And that's what these boys are learning. They're learning how to grow food, how to use proper tools, safety of the tool, and if I can get them to do that, if I can teach them to grow, and then how to cook it, then I know they won't go hungry.

[00:14:09] **Tessa Desmond:** What are some of the projects that the Boy Scouts and the Eagle Scouts have done in the garden?

[00:14:16] **Robert Allard:** They've built the tool shed. They put in an orchard of six trees and three bushes. Which was a goji berry and two raspberries. They put in two horseshoe beds. They put in 10, 15 raised beds. They put in a new berm. They put water barrels on the back of the shed and they put up some bird houses. And some bee boxes, and a couple, a two, a three, three or four benches.

And these boys are always thinking of doing something different, always something different. One of the boys has gone beyond that and now helps weed the library's gardens here around the library every first Saturday of every month. He actually goes out and takes his trowel, pulls

weeds and so forth and takes care of the, the topiaries and so forth around the library now, on his own.

[00:15:18] **Tessa Desmond:** What sort of impact do you think they've had on the garden?

[00:15:21] **Robert Allard:** Without them, the garden wouldn't be what it is. They've, they've helped tremendously. When we, when we went to get, to ask for an extension, we were there with, for a Citizenship and Community Merit Badge. They wanted to see the town at, working at that level and they were asked, the garden was asked, you know, are you associated with the, with these Boy Scouts, with this troop? And they said, yes, they're the ones that come in and help us do this. And basically the mayor said, well, if you're associated with them, you can get anything you want because this town is very big on troop 25.

In 2029, it'll be a hundred years for this troop. And they've only missed one charter, and that was 1940 during the war.

But this, this was not re chartered. So this is a very big troop. We usually get between 20 and 30 boys. And we're doing a little bit of everything.

[00:16:18] **Tessa Desmond:** And what's the impact that you think working in the Farmville Community Garden has on the boys?

[00:16:24] **Robert Allard:** It shows maturity. It shows leadership. How to govern other boys. I see the boys help one another. Camaraderie. Honor. Helping others. Helping the neighborhood. Helping the community. And that's what it's all about. I mean, because to get a lead, to be a leader, you have to be a follower first. And that is taught, what we teach, through, through what we do. Between the growing, and my job, when I'm at Scouts, is to teach them how to cook as well.

To challenge them, not bring the, no, don't bring the C game, bring the A game. Do something you've never done before. Challenge yourself to go to the next level. And so many boys have done this. And, we get back on, I get a lot of feedback from some of the older scouts. You know, I'm glad you did this for us, because if we did it, I'm doing this now.

And, I actually had, I came back from a campery one, one, one summer. And I was the only one at the house. Relaxing a little bit, have a cup of coffee, and doorbell rang. And one of my, one of my former scouts. And I said, what do you want? He says, I want to introduce you to my girlfriend. Okay, so I sat down on my stoop and I, he had to take, make a phone call. He walked away and I said, okay, how's he doing? He's doing good. Well, now they're married. And I said, shouldn't you have gone to your, Dad, he said, nah, you were him. That's the way it was.

[00:18:08] **Tessa Desmond:** What role did you play in making, um, in establishing the Farmville Community garden?

[00:18:14] **Robert Allard:** I started out, one of our former members, he no longer works with us, we were the ones that plowed the garden to begin with, and we found all kinds of things.

We found marbles and silverware and bottles, which we gave to the main museum. And that was where I started. And I found that I was out there maybe three days a week, sometimes four. And if somebody needed help, I was there. I bought tools that were battery powered, so if I needed to work on a bed that started breaking down, I could go ahead and fix it.

So I was more of a steward of the garden. And I enjoy it. I mean, I still do. I go out and try at least two or three times a week and do whatever needs to be done. We've got new groups coming in, and we have a church group that helps out. We now have, sometimes we get students from ECU that come over, and I try to be there for that.

But, I just enjoy gardening. To me, if my hands ain't dirty, there's something wrong because to me, I mean, I get frustrated at work sometimes, and to me, if I could take negative energy and turn it into positive, and gardening is a big thing about that, I just go out and dig a bigger hole, that's all, put something in it, you know, but to watch something grow from a seed or a plant, and to me, that's, you're doing something positive.

And if I can do that for the community, that's even better. Because if you're helping others, you're helping yourself. Simple.

[00:19:49] **Tessa Desmond:** And are there things that you've learned from other gardeners in the community, or?

[00:19:53] **Robert Allard:** Oh, it's, it's, it's a learning process. It's, it's a, a two way street. You know, I learned about collards from Eulalia.

I learned different seeds from Ms. Eulalia. Um, Ms. Cathy, she's taught me a number of different things, but different ways of doing things. There's different ways of planting and, you know, there's, we're incorporating more bamboo to make structures and this and that, which before we had nothing. And I found if I use a trellis to plant butternut squash, it doesn't go crazy and go over three different beds.

I'm trying different things, trying different foods that I've never had before. And if I can, if I can grow it and raise it and eat it, that makes my, my palate a lot more prepared for other things. And if I can take it, what I take back to the boys, and I can teach them, that, that passes on to them.

And to me, the garden is, it's a quiet place. It's a place where I can relax, no stress, and I can see things grow, how other people do their thing. And it's a two way street. We have a number of different cultures in the garden. You know, because everybody's not from the same place. And if I can learn how to grow Mexican herbs, or I can grow Haitian herbs, or I can grow whatever from a different country, I'm just making myself better. And if I can make myself better, I can make my community better.

[00:21:31] **Tessa Desmond:** Thank you. Is there anything else you want to share?

[00:21:34] **Robert Allard:** No, I enjoy it, and I'm glad I've taken the time off to do this. And I think it's worthwhile. If we could do more of it, be even better.