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An Oasis in The City: Visiting the Fenway Victory Gardens

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

Well, we did have a fellow a few years ago try to grow corn, beans and squash here, and he gave up after two weeks if you recollect because of challenges from the local wildlife.

Laura Wulf 00:09

Yes, for the folks that grow vegetables here, they mostly screen them in and build very elaborate contraptions to protect the plants from the squirrels, the chipmunks, the rabbits. Urban gardening isn't as easy as it used to be.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:23

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:32

This is Cassie Cloutier, and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. To conclude our tour of institutions that are connected to the MHS through our collections, we return to the Back Bay Fens for the season finale. We cross the street to the Fenway Victory Gardens, the oldest continuously operated Victory Gardens in its original location in the United States. Not only does the MHS hold the papers of this remarkable site of urban farming, but our staff also tend to a small plot amongst its seven and a half acres of land. We speak with Laura Wulf, Photographic Specialist & Digital Imaging Coordinator at the MHS, and Dennis Fiori, former president of the MHS to learn more about their experience with the gardens. We also sit down with Chief Historian Peter Drummey to hear more about the history of Victory Gardens, as well as Sai Boddupalli, president of the Fenway Garden Society to learn about the garden society today.

Cassie Cloutier 02:01

Collecting, preserving and communicating the building blocks of American history takes a lot of time and effort. Some of the dedicated staff at the Massachusetts Historical Society relax by indulging their inner gardener. Here are Laura Wulf, photographic specialist and digital imaging coordinator at the MHS and former MHS President Dennis Fiori talking about how they got involved with gardening.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:24

So how long have you been gardening?

Laura Wulf 02:27

How long have I been gardening?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:28

Yes!

Laura Wulf 02:29

Well, so I grew up in Manhattan, so I didn't do any gardening until my 20s. I worked on a farm in Vermont, and I learned how to plant a garden and got the bug then and then, when I moved to Boston in the mid '80s, I got a plot in a community garden, and I've pretty much had a plot in a community garden ever since then. So that's 40 years. Yeah, so I've learned from other gardeners, from the gardening community and trial and error.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:07

And is your interest fruits and vegetables or flowers?

Laura Wulf 03:11

Yeah, more, more vegetables. That's mostly what I've been growing in my plot over the years, lettuce and cucumbers and sort of the basics, nothing fancy. Recently, I've been curious about learning more about pruning, pruning fruit bushes and trees and the community gardens here have workshops, annual workshops, where they bring in an expert and they walk you through how to approach pruning, and what time of year to do it, and what tools you need and so I'm always trying to learn new things.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:49

Before we talk about the Fenway Victory Gardens and your experience in there, we talk about gardening in general. At what point did you start having interest in and starting to garden?

Dennis Fiori 03:59

Probably when I learned to crawl. I'm Italian on one side and French-Canadian on the other. And the Italian family descended from a long line of Tuscan farmers vintners in Tuscany around Lucca. And some of my favorite pictures from my grandparents' house in Brunswick, Maine, believe it or not, they immigrated to Brunswick. They came through Scotland first, I guess maybe to get used to the climate. I don't know. But anyway, their house was totally surrounded by gardens and poles with pole beans and vines going up everywhere they gardened. And my father was the same way. We had a big old Victorian house in Brunswick, Maine, where I grew up, right near the Bowdoin campus, and we fortunately had a very large lot for in town, probably a half-acre. But my father gardened a lot of it. From a very early age, I helped him, and then I got very much into it. And there was a local greenhouse when I was growing up that grew little, tiny plants that they would sell for 25 cents each. They're tiny, little perennials. My mother would take me there a couple times a year and let me buy a few dollars' worth of them to start my own garden. So, gardening always been a part of my life and well, other guys were out doing sports, I was gardening. Saturday would not be baseball, would be pruning roses. Just always had an interest in it. So, every house we've owned, I've had a garden. Some of them I've even carried with me. When I left Concord and the Concord Museum, where I was director to run the Maryland Historical Society, I took a U-Haul full garden with me, heeled it in at a rental place we had until we found a house and then renovated it, and then we moved it all there. So, I decided that was end of the road. I didn't bring it with me when we moved back, but a lot of the plants moved there. So, I've always, always, always been into gardening. And when I came back to Boston and we lived on Beacon Hill, I had two gardens. One was pots in the front of the house, whole string of pots in front of the house, where I continually changed what's growing there. And matter of fact, the Beacon Hill Garden Club gave me a prize one year from my garden. I didn't even apply for it. Someone must have put my name in, which did well, unless, unless the sports team won, like the Celtics, then the drunks that came over the hill, I come out the next morning, and unfortunately, it was always a pot knocked over and broken. You can hear them in the bedroom at night. So, I've always been interested in garden. So, we moved here on Beacon Hill. The pots in front were not enough, and I found out about the Victory Garden and applied for a plot. So unfortunately, I didn't have to wait very long. They test you. You have you get a small plot first, and they're fenced off, and you have to get a key and lock. There were never

a lot of vegetables grown there. It was mainly decorative. So well, I take that back. The people I knew were decorative. I'm sure someone was growing vegetables someplace. I didn't. Strangely, even though my father grew vegetables, I've never been a big vegetable grower. So, most of my garden has been ornamental. It's a lot of work, and I'm into beauty, not into such, into eating. Now we live in Concord. We're surrounded by truck gardens and gardeners, and it's one down the end of the street, so it makes it even easier. I grow some tomatoes because Peggy wants them, my wife wants them, and I grow lettuces and I grow herbs, and that's about it, not much else other than that.

Cassie Cloutier 07:16

Luckily for these staff members, there is a green space just across the street from the MHS building.

Dennis Fiori 07:21

So, the Victory Garden was just a great outlet. It's an interesting community. It's an interesting mix of people. On one side of me was a nurse, very nice. You didn't see her all that often. I swear she must have gardened at midnight because she would garden around the shifts at the hospital. So, you know, you'd see her and not see her, and she would show up. And then across the street was this, this guy who was, who was an Egyptian, absolute character. And you just never knew what mood he be in and what he would be up to. He would do things that come in your garden if you'd like to plant. He'd say, 'You don't mind if you take a piece of that, do you?' And he would walk off with it. And sometimes he wouldn't even ask. I think he had no means to create a garden, so he created it by taking little bits of everybody else's and putting put it into his space, which he sort of took care of, and didn't create a huge mound in the middle of it, which I thought was interesting. Anyway, he was, he was character, but there were, you know, they're just a lot of interesting people that that had gardens there and maintained them. Some were just amazing. Some were English landscapes because if you were successful with their small plot and they and there was a board.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:35

And what's a small plot like, what's roughly, what's the size?

Dennis Fiori 08:39

Boy, it was fairly small, I would say the first one I had, well, it was probably mine was long and narrow. It was probably 20 or 30 by 40, maybe something like that, 50 some places in there. But if you were successful and the plot next door came up, you could apply for it. And I did so I doubled mine, and mine had a little

lawn. Then I had a terrace that I put in since we didn't have a backyard, you weren't really allowed to have cookouts there or that sort of thing. But I had an inflatable pool that I would blow up for the grandkids when they would bring it out from behind. I had a box where I stored all the tools and things, and behind that I would have toys and a wading pool because each plot had water had a water source. And so, watch the kids in the pool, and get a kick out of watching these people go to Fenway Park come by. And then when there were afternoon games that we got there, there were often some very interesting people that had a lot of beer coming through the area. It also attracted tourists, which I thought was interesting. You know, they came through to just look at the oldest continually operating Victory Gardens in America. And they were always fun to come by and talk about gardening. They wanted to know the history and why you were gardening, what you were doing and what certain plants were, which was fun. So, it was a overall great experience. It was a great thing when I worked here, because that's what I do at lunch. I have a sandwich and I just go walk to my plot, and I'd sit out, maybe I'd pick a few weeds and I just see how it's going and then after work, I would go over and work in it for an hour or two. So, it was a great sort of break thing, a great release. I'm sure it is for the people here who go over and take care of it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:16

Well, I just saw a Baltimore oriole too. You've probably seen lots of birds just sitting here.

Laura Wulf 10:21

Yep, haven't seen as many hawks this year, but there's always hawks, great blue herons. I saw a bobolink once. I heard it first, and it was down on the ground near the river. This was a few years ago, and it must have been maybe it was migrating from one place to another. It's the only time I saw I've ever seen that bird anywhere.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:43

I've never seen a bobolink. I'd love to see a bobolink. I've seen American Woodcocks just in here.

Laura Wulf 10:49

Yeah, those are hard to those are hard to find.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:51

Yes, they are.

Laura Wulf 10:52

Yep, it's been interesting to watch over the last bunch of years, there's been a lot of work dredging the river and re-landscaping the edges of the river and pulling out all the phragmites, and it's looking so different now. Remember when the reeds used to catch on fire on a regular basis? It's always changing, you know? It is always changing. And I like visiting certain plots and seeing what they do from year to year and what they're growing.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:21

And it's only 2020, when we got a plot. Was there interest in getting one earlier? Was the wait list that long?

Laura Wulf 11:30

No, it wasn't. I think it came out of a conversation Sabina and Sarah Georgini and I were at a, one of the an MHS gathering. I can't remember. It was one, you know, one of the like Strawberry Festival or Harvest Fest or something, or some event. And we somehow, the it came up, and we brainstormed, and we thought, let's see if we can put our name in the hat and get a plot. And originally, we were thinking, you know, we could do something very historically oriented, and we could grow Abigail Adams roses. There's a, you know, a certain kind of rose. And we thought we could plant like corn, beans at this the three, the three sisters, the three sisters, corn, beans and squash, but I tried to grow corn once, and I think there was a big windstorm, and it blew, blew it all down so, or somebody jumped into the plot and broke the stalks. So, we got them about four feet high, and then we lost them.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:32

Well, we did have a fellow a few years ago try to grow corn, beans and squash here, and he gave up after two weeks, if you recollect because of challenges from the local wildlife.

Laura Wulf 12:42

Yes, for the folks that grow vegetables here, they mostly screen them in and build very elaborate contraptions to protect the plants from the squirrels, the chipmunks, the rabbits. Urban gardening isn't as easy as it used to be.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:57

I've seen raccoons in here. Never seen a turkey or anything like that.

Laura Wulf 13:03

Turtles. I've seen a lot of turtles. I ran across a turtle actually building a nest and laying eggs. A bunch of us had walked by it, and we just stood and watched while it, you know, with its back legs, built, dug out a nest and then we watched a couple dozen eggs, sort of leathery, soft eggs get deposited in the nest. So, and then some occasionally, I found the little babies walking around when they come out, and I try and steer them away from the road and back towards the water, where they will be safer. So, there's a lot of wildlife going on.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:40

Yeah, I saw a turtle laying eggs and a raccoon just watching it and just waiting.

Laura Wulf 13:45

Waiting for a snack.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:47

Pretending like it wasn't watching.

Cassie Cloutier 13:54

We then sat down with Chief Historian Peter Drummey to discuss the history of Victory Gardens in the United States and their importance during the First and Second World Wars.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:07

So, season four of this podcast started with 1154 Boylston Street here in the Back Bay the MHS headquarters, and we thought it would be fitting to end back in the Back Bay with our neighbors across the street at the Fenway Victory Gardens. So maybe we should start with the basics. But what is a victory garden?

Peter Drummey 14:28

Well, a victory garden is a term that predates the Victory Garden we're going to talk about that is during the First World War, when there was much concern about the amount of food that it would be necessary to send to the American army of potentially 4 million men being assembled for service in Europe, that the manpower in this I think of farm laborers, mostly men recruited into the army the amount of food that it would be necessary to prepare and send overseas, and the shipping, both movement by railroads within the United States and then by ships to Europe. All those things meant that if it was possible to lower the amount of traditionally produced on farms, agricultural materials, to lower that amount, that would take some of this pressure off of the war effort. It also was the fact that if this was done in the fashion of an increase in home gardening. It probably also would mean that home gardens would be producing vegetables and fruits to some extent. And this would be the diet of Americans on the home front, so to speak, whereas meat and the food that made soldiers strong would be being sent overseas. In Boston, 1000s of acres were plowed up, much of it in city parks here in Boston, Franklin Park, the largest open land within the Emerald Necklace. The Olmstead designed park that goes through and connects different parks in Boston, the golf course in Franklin Park plowed up along the Fenway itself. The Olmstead designed sort of drainage system for the Back Bay, the open flat places within it plowed up and a lot of this land given over to small plots that were divided up and plowed up to be where individual families and often school children would be growing food in these places. Now this was a very large effort. At the time of the First World War perhaps things were called more directly what they were. So, these weren't Victory Gardens. These were war gardens. 'Food is ammunition,' one of their posters said. You were raising food to help in the war effort. Another famous poster from the time said, 'Let's can the Kaiser.' So, I'm very broad but very direct, but the idea that you were doing a patriotic test by doing this. So, when the war ended, and this effort was very successful, very dramatically successful. When the war ended, there was an effort to continue the growing of food, mostly to alleviate the famine crisis in Europe caused by the war that continued after the war was over, and it's then that the idea was to harness the war gardens victorious in this effort to relieve suffering. And that did not last a long time, but this term Victory Garden is largely associated with the end of the First World War. It's sort of things, sort of retrospectively understood to be Victory Gardens and the Second World War I think there was a feeling this could be made more practically useful, so that instead of letting school boys out of school before the school year was over to work in planting and let them come back to school in the fall, later than the rest the girls in their classes, so they could work in early harvest. That there was this idea that let's get large pieces of land, organize them in a rational way, make use of much more agricultural expertise, and do this so that we're making the most effective use of land. These are Victory Gardens right from the

start. Starting in 1942 in a tentative way, but by 1943 and 1944 and '45 becoming very dramatically effective. There was some resistance to having the urban gardens associated with the First World War thinking there weren't large pieces of open land in a dense urban place. There wouldn't be good sunlight, good soil. It was expensive in terms of the tools and equipment and seeds and fertilizer would be used, in terms of what the real point of it was producing food. So perhaps more focus on a larger scale of agriculture. Not that it didn't happen here in Boston, but it's happened to in a lesser degree, in the sense of here in the Fenway, very near to where we are. We're at the sort of northeast corner of the Fenway, and at the northwest corner, there was land set aside for a demonstration garden that the Boston Globe newspaper sponsored sort of show you how to do this. But the idea was this might be something someone could do in their backyard in a suburban or rural setting that is a large enough garden to essentially feed your family for a year, which is a large, very large, need a big backyard to do that. But that was what they were thinking of, a scale of food production that would be more effective. A small group of people who had pots and were working this ground came together and had an organizational meeting in October of 1944. Their idea was to organize themselves, essentially as a garden club, that is, they would continue to plant and grow things on this property that they had worked hard to develop, continue it after the war. And to do that, they would form, they called it the Fenway Garden Society when they named it. I think that might have to do with one of the things that went with the Boston Globe demonstration garden, is they had recruited people to be the Fenway Garden Club. So, to prevent confusion between these two organizations, they were the Fenway Garden Society, and at first there seemed to be a real question whether they could organize do what they wish, but whether or not this would remain active as a place to grow, essentially food as part of the war effort. At the end of the Second World War, the Fenway Garden Society came into being, and it, in some respects, stepped forward, and it didn't appropriate the land. No one was claiming it was their property but petitioned and demonstrated that it could still be used for this gardening purpose. Never intended for that purpose, but that came from the interest and energy of the people who organized the garden society. So, we've had a long informal, neighborly connection with them, and going back more than 10 years ago, they decided to deposit here the Massachusetts Historical Society, the records they had gathered.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:59

Would you like to say anything else about the collection itself, lots of newsletters, newspaper clippings, too.

Peter Drummey 23:07

I actually think they should be applauded for how much they did keep and how much time and effort members of the garden society since put into assembling things that they had. I think what one of the problems probably is that, I suspect that many people, individuals who have been active in the garden society, the Fenway Garden Society, have kept things in their own papers related to it, but not necessarily thought that those things, with some interesting exceptions to certainly people who have given personal papers to us, they're not part of additions to the garden society records, but they're the documents and records of individuals, but they add to it, and I suspect that's where there might be I would hope people hearing this would think, oh, I know someone who worked in that organization, or I know another organization, other community garden, or another organization, that would be interesting also to think about because while this collection is important in its own right, it's in some respects, not typical of a lot of community gardening efforts, especially in an urban setting. It has an interesting different backstory to it, and that doesn't mean there are not important records for community gardening, but they don't originate necessarily in a neighborhood and reflect that neighborhood in the sense that this is where gardening space was available during the Second World War and then used by people active in gardening there thereafter, whether or not they were living in this immediate neighborhood.

Cassie Cloutier 25:16

We now return to our tour of the gardens with Laura Wulf, where she guided us to the plots attended by MHS staff.

Laura Wulf 25:28

Here we are.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:28

Okay, here we are.

Laura Wulf 25:29

So, the first plot that we had, we got in the in June of 2020, we'd been on the wait list for a year or two I think.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:39

It's a fine pandemic project.

Laura Wulf 25:41

It was a perfect pandemic project. The plot was completely overgrown, and I spent that summer pulling up and digging up weeds and covered in mud. And it was a really great way to be outside and to spend lockdown. But it was in a very low-lying area of the gardens, and it was waterlogged. The soil was very soggy a lot, so we had a hard time growing things. And then two springs ago, it was very, very wet, and the plots around us had been building their plots up so that they weren't as affected by the wetness. And we hadn't done that yet, and we became surrounded by these higher plots, and our plot just got completely flooded, and really became a duck pond. There were ducks swimming in the plot, and we surrendered, and we said, we asked the committee if we could have a new plot. So, we worked good and hard on that for three or four years. It was better than when we left it we left it, but somebody else is going to inherit it and help out.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:47

And then we have this second plot here where we are now.

Laura Wulf 26:50

Yep, and the second plot is in really great shape. It's on higher ground, and somebody had built a really nice flower beds and a tool shed, and there's a small maple tree, and we're in the shade of I learned recently this is a dawn redwood tree right next to us. This towering tree is only 20 or 25 years old, and because they grow so fast, it's one of the tallest trees in the garden already, and there's one more dawn redwood over on the other side by the water. So, I guess in 500 years, this thing will be so big that we won't have this plot anymore.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:33

That's all right, the tree will have earned it.

Laura Wulf 27:35

Yep, yep. So, we've got a nice grassy area, and we've got five or six chairs and a small table, and it's a lot of shade. So, it's a nice place to come out for lunch, which I do most every day.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:49

Do other staff members join you?

Laura Wulf 27:52

Not too often, Sam's [Couture] out here sometimes. We've been meaning to do a tour for new staff and just anybody who's interested and let them know about it. We were hoping to get things patched up a little bit more before we did that and cleaned up. We haven't gotten around to doing that, but this summer, we will do a tour and invite people to come and use it whenever they want to.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:13

There are some of you who also help to prune and clean and plant.

Laura Wulf 28:17

Yes, yep, it does need a little bit of you know, clean up after the winter, raking up leaves and dropped twigs and branches and things and some pruning. And we did plant a few flowers in that bed last summer. This spring, we found a rabbit's nest in that box right there. So, oh, look, there's a rabbit, yep. So, they've stayed close to home. So, there was about four or five little bunnies in there, not really sure they pack them in tightly, and they all kind of dispersed, and then came back a little bit. So, we haven't actually planted anything yet. And there's some catnip. There's just some bushes. The irises have come and gone. There's a bit of a raspberry bush over there.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:01

And in past years, you've also brought the items that have come out of the garden to share with the staff. Mint, I think.

Laura Wulf 29:06

Yes, we had a lot of mint in the last plot. There isn't too much in this plot, but we have more than enough to share. I like to pick some and leave it in the in the kitchen, downstairs, for people to use. Make some mojitos or watermelon salad. We don't have anything to offer right now.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:24

And who decides what to plant.

Laura Wulf 29:25

Sam [Couture] and Elena [Rippel] and I have had a few meetings together, and...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:30

Sam is our conservator.

Laura Wulf 29:31

Yes, yep, yep, and she has a very green thumb. People can sort of do whatever they want if somebody has some extra Sam and her husband grow a lot of stuff at home, and they've brought some flowers in the past to our other plot, but we haven't had much time to for the garden, and we want to try and repair this. That's first on our agenda.

Cassie Cloutier 29:53

We invited Sai Boddupalli, president of the Fenway Garden Society, to visit us at the MHS and asked him about how he was introduced to the gardens.

Sai Boddupalli 30:03

I got my first plot at the Victory Gardens four years ago. This is our fourth season, but I've been a neighborhood resident for the past while in Boston, for 15 years, in my current place, in the Fenway/Back Bay neighborhood in Fenmore, really, for the past 13 years. Wow, which is fascinating to think. So yeah, I've had a lot of interaction with the gardens in the neighborhood. And, yeah, it's been really a rewarding experience, and that's been my involvement with the gardens. For my day job I work at the Boston Society for Architecture. I'm a program manager there, and small team, but historic organization working with architects to on the kind of professional side of things, with licensure and all that, but then also working with the community on making better design decisions for Boston, both in buildings and in communities as well. So yeah, kind of in the non-profit world in general.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 30:54

Does one have to be a plot owner to be on the board?

Sai Boddupalli 30:58

Yes. So that is, that is a requirement. So, to give a little bit of context, the Fenway Victory Gardens is about seven and a half acres as a part of the Emerald Necklace conservancies. As of right now, I believe either 499 or 501 plots. And this kind of fluctuates on a day-to-day basis, which is also funny, but as we're kind of redrawing boundaries, and, you know, trying to figure out certain elements of our organization, plots will come online and offline. But we have 399, primary gardeners, so a lot of gardeners have more than one plot through signing up for the wait list. So, it's pretty big operation. The requirement to have a plot is that you must be a city of Boston resident. Dues are \$40 a year if you're under the age of 65 and \$25 a year if you're over 65 so we have senior gardeners, and that hasn't changed in a very long time. So, there is a element of rent control, I suppose that we have. And we ask that non senior gardeners, anyone under the age of 65 performs nine hours at minimum of community service each year. And we help organize community participation days that bring folks together to do wood chipping our rows or doing, you know, weeding of public spaces and things like that. So, we ask folks really try to embrace the community element of the community gardening as well.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:16

When did you first hear about the organization?

Sai Boddupalli 32:19

Yeah, so I went to school right around the corner from here, well, right next door, actually, at Berkeley College of Music. And so, living in the neighborhood, you know, right across the bridge on Charles Gate East, just on the other side of the pike, and coming to school here a lot, I would walk through the gardens my friends and I would go out there with our guitars and, you know. And so, I remember, actually, very specifically I came to when I was still in high school at the time, in 2008 I came to Berkeley for a summer program, the five-week summer program. That was the first time I actually went to the gardens at night with a bunch of our friends, and we just went down and sat by the muddy river. And I was just, I was amazed that it existed. Growing up in the Bay Area, there's a lot of green space, but it's very different, I would say, than this kind of orientation. Then I was also just kind of, like flabbergasted by the scale of the operation, because you don't often see community gardens of this size, seven and a half acres and that many plots. So that was, I think, my first interaction, or like, conscious interaction, with it. But more recently, you know, after moving to the neighborhood and being here full time right around the pandemic, this was summer of 2020, this must have been September, I was working at a private members club, the Boston College Club,

and doing membership and I was organizing a volunteer day. And we were looking at organizations where we could get our membership to go volunteer, and we ended up doing our volunteer day at the Fenway Victory Garden. So that was my first touch point with them, with the organization. And I remember, funnily enough, at the time the president Pam Jorgensen, I emailed her, and I was like, God, I didn't get a response for, I think, like, a week or a week and a half, and I was like, God, why aren't these people getting back to me, like, I would love to go, you know, take people there. And I remember, Pam ended up calling me, and she's like, we're a volunteer run organization. And I was pestering her about it, and I was like, oh, this makes so much more sense. So, understanding that there were limitations to their capacity at the time, and then now being on the other side of the coin and being the person who is the limitation of capacity. It's been quite a full circle journey. So yeah, we volunteered there. We turned compost for three hours on a very hot August day, I remember, but yeah, that was my first interaction with the organization, officially.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:32

And when did you get a plot?

Sai Boddupalli 34:34

I signed up for the wait list that night after, after going there.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:38

And had you always been interested in gardening?

Sai Boddupalli 34:41

Yeah, I so I grew up like I said, in Northern California. My mom is a very active and avid gardener, and to be honest, I didn't really like gardening because being the young person, she made me weed all the time. That was basically my interaction with gardening was to pull out the weeds and help her out. But my dad is in food science, so we always had seeds growing up, and she would always plant them, and we would always be eating fresh produce, and always have access to that. And California is kind of unfair. It's a cheat code. It's very easy to grow so many different things. So, it's like, it's, yeah, it's a, it's a very hardy zone where you can get a lot of produce in a lot of good quality produce at home. So, we grew up, my sister and I grew up gardening with my mom and yeah, and then when I moved out here, I thought signing up for the wait list. What I really admired about the gardens, I remember thinking this also is the variety of ways in which people are using their plots, right? Some folks are using it to kind of be urban backyard or, you know,

something, a green space where they're not necessarily planting. There's a bunch of gardens that are primarily for flowers and growing. Yeah, there's also incredible tree canopy and a lot of people taking care of trees. So, I loved the idea that you could make it what you wanted it to be, and, you know, what you had the capacity for. So, when we first initially got our plot. We signed up for the waitlist. My wife and I, this was yes, 2021 and we ended up getting our first plot in 2022 in May of 2022. So, it was just about just under a year of being on the waitlist. And, yeah, we weren't sure what we were gonna what we were gonna do, and it was kind of a blank slate that we had. And now we are growing a lot of produce, but we have a lot of flowers. Just made a salad with the lettuce and radishes that we grew. We pulled some daikon radish out of the ground that we'll pickle for daikon kimchi. There's just a lot that, yeah, you can do, but my favorite is the flowers that we have. And right now it's lily season in July right now in Boston. So, we have a madonna lily plant that blossoms with white, very fragrant white flowers. And it's almost as tall as I am now, and it's going to bloom, I think, probably in the next couple of days. It's like getting very ready, but that's my favorite, to just be able to sit and see that and watch it for a little while.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 36:59

Well, you mentioned the records. The records, of course, are here at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Would you like to comment on why is it important for the records to be at an institution like this?

Sai Boddupalli 37:11

I think the historic legacy of a place like this being first and foremost a city park as a part of Olmsted's vision of the Emerald Necklace, I think is the context is monumental, right? It may seem trite, but I truly consider it as sacred land. I think it is incredible the vision and the care in which all this was laid out. And in Olmsted's original vision, the Emerald Necklace ended right about here, right? The Comm Ave Mall didn't exist yet, and he did the Common but this is one iteration of it. So I think even historically, thinking about the land use and the records and the way that we, not just us as an organization, but we as Bostonians, as people were stewards of this land, has been incredible framing and context setting just right off the bat to kind of lay the foundation and outside of our organizational records, you all are a resource for that truly, right? I think that's a very important part of all this as well. Organizationally, the original stewardship of this land as a victory garden was created to be a food production source during World War Two. And the organizing of people to pull in one direction, to grow food even is, to me, just such a beautiful, like herculean task that was taken on. So for you all to have records of the way that people were, getting folks to volunteer, getting folks to show up, to do the stuff through you'd mentioned the newsletters that you all

have telling people about best practices, to the financial records, to the meeting minutes, I think is really critical to have that context as an organization and informs us now as a current version of this, what has worked and what hasn't. And I think that is the biggest gift that we could have, that you all hold for us, is you have successes and failures along the way, and having it with you all, and having you all be partners in the garden, so you are obviously physically close in proximity, but having Laura Wulf in the gardens itself and to be, you know, so intertwined with the actual current happenings, and being able to be a resource for us in that exact way, I think, is such a fruitful relationship for us truly.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 39:22

It is a great partnership, and we certainly appreciate it. Thank you very much. I know that the plot, I think, was a really great place for staff to go, especially as we were coming out of the pandemic, and they wanted to socialize outside. And it was, and it still is, a place where staff go to just relax and get out into nature a little bit. What's the future of the Victory Gardens? What is the organization thinking? What's your vision?

Sai Boddupalli 39:47

This great timing. We were coming out of a board meeting last night, actually, so we had just gotten together. There's so much opportunity, and there's also very real challenges that have I don't want to say unique, because, again, I think there's historic context for a lot of this, but the pandemic and the isolationism that has taken place has been maybe the biggest detriment to our organization, even though we are an outdoor space, and we were, as you just mentioned, a convening ground for individuals, families, coworkers during the pandemic, because it was, you know, a place where you could congregate outside safely. The permeation of this insularity within our society at large has is in direct opposition of the idea of a community, right? And I think that's where we are seeing the biggest opportunity to try to bring folks back together. More than one in four gardeners in the plots right now is a senior is over the age of 65 so we have a massive, you know, senior population that has very specific needs and challenges and might not be able to do certain elements of gardening. So that's an opportunity to provide support and also need community in and of themselves, right? I think that's another part of it. One every eight gardeners doesn't speak English as their first language. So, the diversity of our population is is vast. That's an opportunity in and of itself. So, this year, we've really been focusing on translations and getting better accessibility multiple modes of communication to folks trying to figure out preferences. So again, that is also coming out of a place of record keeping as well. To even have those numbers on hand right now is something we couldn't have done in the past. So, I'm excited that we're moving in that direction to make more informed decisions based on

our current populations. And yeah, just trying to get that convening and community back together in an organic way that isn't there's a term 'voluntold' and I've been, I've been I've heard that these community participation days, the nine hour volunteer requirements, is being voluntold, that you have to do something, and trying to stray away from that and more towards having people want to engage because they feel like their contribution is going to be what's best for this community and their the community here is outside of just the four gates that make up an individual's plot, is the idea. So, there's a lot of work to be done there, and I'm very excited. I can't believe the past six months have been, have been so it's felt like it's been six years, and it's also it feels like no time has passed at all. So, it's one of those things where we're just trying to build the road as we walk along the way.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 42:29

If people want to get involved or learn more about the park, what should they do?

Sai Boddupalli 42:33

We have a brand-new website that we put out this year, Fenway Victory Gardens with an 's' fenwayvictorygardens.org There is a lot of resources on there for getting involved with our organization, including how to volunteer as an individual or we also do as I mentioned and how I got involved corporate volunteer opportunities. You can join our wait list. You can get in touch with us, but we also have resources for gardeners, for urban gardeners, you know, anywhere, no matter where you are, to get involved, including how to identify invasive species and guides, and for that, composting, recycling, trash management and then planting guides as well. So, we try to try to get the information out, and you don't have to be a member to get involved.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 43:25

Why do you come out here?

Laura Wulf 43:26

You know, I'm staring at my computer all day long, so I really like to get off the screen to be surrounded by plants, greenery, birdsong, rabbits. And I also really like meeting the other gardeners. You know, haven't met too many people on this row yet, but I met some really great people in our other row, and you pick up tips from them, and, you know, learn from them. And they're from all over the city. So, it's an interesting group of people to get to know. Before we had the plot, I used to come out here and just sit under a tree

somewhere. And so, I had already gotten to know people just from being here regularly. And there's a community out here, really. And I also really love a lot of tourists come walking through. And sometimes when they see me sitting in a plot, they'll sort of ask me, like, 'What is this place?' And you know, 'how do you get a plot?' And I really love telling them about the history of the gardens, and that it's the longest continually running victory gardens in the country. It was started in '42 I think. And they're really interested in learning a little bit about the history about the place too.

Laura Wulf 43:49

It is a remarkable secret garden type place. I mean, you've got Fenway on one side, then Fenway Park on one side. You can see the buildings of the Back Bay on the other side. And here's this just patch of green.

Laura Wulf 44:47

Yeah and you could walk past it and not really know that it's here.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 44:51

So, it's sort of like an oasis?

Laura Wulf 44:54

That's a good word for it. Yep, yep, an oasis in the city.

Cassie Cloutier 44:58

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Laura Wulf, Photographic Specialist & Digital Imaging Coordinator at the MHS, Dennis Fiori, former president of the MHS, Sai Boddupalli, president of the Fenway Garden Society, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.