

**David Rosenberg, Narrator**

**Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer**

**July 9, 2021**

**Location: Cincinnati, Ohio**

**DR**=David Rosenberg

**AA**=Anneliese Abbott

**AA:** All right. This is July 9, 2021, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing—

**DR:** I'm David Rosenberg.

**AA:** Thank you so much, David, for being willing to do an interview and taking the time to do this today. So do you want to start with talking a little about your background in organic and sustainable agriculture and your specific connection to it?

**DR:** Well, I got interested in agriculture when I was at the University of Michigan. I was a freshman when we had the first Earth Day in Ann Arbor in 1970. There's a couple of interesting things. One of the grad students decided we were going to have a community organic garden at Michigan, which was never done before. So they gave us a piece of sandy ground out on the far edges of campus. And we did that. And we were pursuing this whole thing totally from an intellectual level. None of us were organic gardeners or farmers. We didn't know anyone that was an organic gardener or farmer except people that maybe had home gardens, and nobody wanted to spray anything, and they just took what they got.

Meanwhile, the whole scientific community was really alarmed by people saying, "We need organic agriculture." These were the years when Earl Butz, President Nixon's secretary of agriculture, said, "If we switched to organic agriculture in America, 60 million of us will starve." Or was it 40?

**AA:** 50, I think.

**DR:** All right. And so we just kind of did and observed and did some more and observed some more. That was pretty much it. The only seed I had ever planted to that date was a green bean seed in my parents' garden. And the first job I got was to plant radishes. They're these little tiny seeds, and I thought, "Oh, gosh, these are never, they're not all going to sprout." So we had to do a row about as long as this ten-foot table here, and I used the whole seed packet. And by golly, every one of them came up! And when the head of the garden was giving tours, he'd say, "This is a new gardener who's learning." And that's how it was. We were just learning.

From my years of experience there and more reading, I was convinced that it was a good idea. And so when I finished college, I got the opportunity to partner with two of my high school friends and their spouses and live on a farm in rural Kentucky, in central Kentucky. Was there for a couple of years. It was beautiful, but I missed my community and decided to come back to Cincinnati.

And it was just by happenstance when I came back, thinking, “Gosh, I’ll never be able to farm. If I didn’t like that place, what place would I like?” I was directed to a real estate agent who was one of three known organic gardeners in the city of Cincinnati that had any street cred, shall we call it. They were known as organic gardeners. And we spent some time, we had lunch together. He said, “I’ve got to show you this place.” And he took me to my future farm. It’s in the middle of the city of Cincinnati, in the city limits. As close to downtown as this place is here, in Hyde Park. We were on a four-lane primary city road. All of a sudden we made a right turn and then a left turn and another left. And we were on this cul-de-sac that was a ten-foot wide road. And everywhere you looked there were greenhouses, all the way going down to the end. Pulled up at the end. I remember to this day driving up the hill. And I was just flabbergasted. And I met the owner. We hit it off really well and became really close friends. And we worked things out so I could help him for a year and take over the farm. Because he was anxious to go out with his grandchildren. So I got an opportunity. (6:24)

Meanwhile, I was interested in other things, like I became the produce manager of the Cincinnati food co-op. And we did things like, we learned how bananas were destroying the local economies of Central and South America. And we decided to put, I guess you’d call it a tariff, a surcharge on bananas. And everything we earned we would use to educate people about food and agriculture issues. So that was kind of the first thing I did other than agriculture when I left college. And started asking other people my age, “Hey, what’s going on with the food scene?” Everyone said, “You’ve got to see Terry and Jody Grundy.” And eventually I did. And the rest is history. They had started Rural Resources, which was chock full of good ideas and information. They started doing projects.

You can ask me follow-up questions, or are you going to repeat the question just to make sure you’re getting everything you want? (8:24)

**AA:** Yeah, so I’m curious about this farm that was actually in the city limits. Is that still a farm now?

**DR:** Yeah, I still live there. It’ll be 45 years in October.

**AA:** Wow.

**DR:** This area, it’s called Wooden Shoe Hollow. And in the early part of the 20th century it was considered the countryside, even though it was really close to town. And pre-expressway, the only way to get fresh vegetables in a locality that was out of season was to have greenhouses. This area was settled by Dutch and German immigrants who had that skill when they came over to America. And they settled here. And every house on the street had greenhouses. Except mine. They tore mine down about ten years before I arrived. Which is probably lucky, because I probably would have tried to heat it and would have lost a lot of money. Because agriculture, urban agriculture was on the skids. Once the expressways came, there was just no competing with California. Not because of quality or the desire for people to want to support local farmers. It was all about buyers who wanted the best prices and the convenience of having to buy from as few places as possible. And these ag conglomerates, as soon as our lettuce would come in, they would lower their prices, sometimes below cost, just to keep market share. Because they knew they could make it up when our crops were done. And that’s how they forced so many family farmers out of the vegetable business. (10:52)

**AA:** So then, what did you grow? Did you grow vegetables? Do you want to talk a little about your farming methods and your farm, and kind of what influenced you, what you were doing?

**DR:** Well, at first I thought, “Oh my gosh, here I am, my childhood city. I know hundreds of people. If I just put a shingle out, everything will be fine. They’ll all want to come and buy stuff from me.” So I started by growing a big variety in addition to the mainstay of older growers, which was lettuce, basically. That was *the* crop for Cincinnati growers. Early and late tomatoes were also good. By that time most of them had stopped growing food and switched to growing flowers. I wanted to grow food. So I grew lettuce and a big variety of stuff. And the farmer who I bought the place from helped me for several years. He loved to leave Lima, Ohio and come down for a weekend of a week and just be back on the farm. He introduced me to all the customers that I could go to for selling lettuce. And I found that that was a whole lot easier than selling onesies and twosies to the public.

In fact, one of the first projects we did at Rural Resources, I’m certain with my urging, was to start farmers’ markets. Because there weren’t any in Cincinnati, except for one that had so many years of hard times that they wouldn’t let any new people in. So a young farmer couldn’t sell at a farmers’ market. But anyway, we started. And I came and I brought my lettuce. And all people wanted was tomatoes, peaches, and sweet corn. So I did terrible at the farmers’ markets. Pretty much stuck to wholesaling after that.

We had stockyards in Cincinnati. And if you had a dump truck, you could drive down to the stockyards and they would load you up with manure. You could make compost, have free fertilizer. I did that. And lettuce doesn’t usually get a lot of insect problems. So it worked pretty well for lettuce. From there I tried a few other things, and it worked. But this was about the time when, for some reason, prices took a real dive. This was 1977, ’78. So what seemed to be decent at first got worse and worse and worse every year. And I realized, “This isn’t going to work. If I don’t figure out something else, that’s the end of my farming career.”

So just on a whim, I went to a natural foods expo in Washington, DC. And was just amazed at the sophistication of products there. When I started my business, obviously there was no organic produce anywhere. You maybe could buy organic wheat flour, and maybe a friend of mine got Kroger’s to put rice cakes at Kroger’s. That was pretty much it. Pretty much it. So those crops, that product was not available at all.

I started selling to health food stores. And they were happy to try a product now. But I realized they didn’t have produce in their stores except when I brought it. And I realized after a couple years that the pattern was, I’d bring the product, and it’d take maybe a month for the customers to notice it and start buying it in any kind of quantity. And then maybe a month or so later, I’d be done, and they’d get out of the habit again, and we’d be back to square one. So I started realizing, “Well, that’s not going to work either, because I can’t sell enough. And I can’t predict how much to grow and all that sort of thing.”

So at this natural foods expo, there was a company that was trucking in organic produce from California, distributing it in the Washington area. And I looked at that, and I realized, “That’s the answer to my problem.” You have to create a year-round supply of organic foods. And then the farmers would have markets to sell in. They’d just fill in when they could, and when they didn’t have product, there was always California. Or Washington, or Mexico. There was several places to buy from.

So I started an organic produce distribution business. With the idea that, “Okay, I’ll get this business going, I’ll create markets, and then I’ll be able to sell my crops.” Well, you might have realized by now, my career’s been full of surprises. And that plan didn’t work out either. Because the distribution company grew so quickly that I didn’t have time to farm. And so I pretty much stuck with the distribution company except that we started growing some simple things like alfalfa sprouts, clover sprouts, things that you could control pretty easily. Year-round production. Which was another anathema to seasonal growing, is you can’t keep help from year to year. Because they work from four to six months, and then you have to lay them off for six months. And you just can’t expect people to keep doing that year after year. So I realized with the sprouts, well, I can grow year-round, and I can have somebody help with it. It will be a year-round job. Plus, the distribution business was year-round.

So that seemed to be a good direction. And that went well for several years. Its success was its final undoing. Because once we got the Kroger account, every produce company in the city wanted to do organics. And I had to make a decision about whether I was going to compete with these places that had just yards full of refrigerated tractor-trailers and really sophisticated operations, or whether I was just going to stay small and compete with them, which I didn’t think would work. What I ended up doing was helping one of my wholesale customers to get into organics. And I can’t claim a whole lot of the work here, but I taught him enough about it that when Wild Oats came to Cincinnati, they thought they had some possibilities. Because Wild Oats didn’t have any kind of distribution system in this part of the country. And they got the Wild Oats account. Wild Oats had juice bars that served wheatgrass juice. And they let me grow the wheatgrass for the whole Midwest for Wild Oats. That was good. That was good. We were selling quite a bit every week. I think I filled a small truck up two or three times a week.

And then Whole Foods bought Wild Oats and closed every juice bar except the one in Cincinnati. I had to kind of figure out what to do. Just kind of stuck with the distributor. And we had good times and not so good, and it was just kind of cyclical. Not predictable, but it would go up and down. It was okay. It worked really well. But by then I’m getting close to 70 years old, and the pandemic arrived, and two chains went bankrupt. My distributor got bought out. And then shut down. And so this whole network that I had, that I was hoping would carry me into my retiring years where I could just raise a little wheatgrass and get enough to get by on, that all disappeared. So right now I’m trying to decide what to do. But that’s a pretty short—or not—history of how my career has gone. (24:45)

You asked about the farming methods. I think the closer we could use economies of scale or shrink down equipment and techniques to my scale that still had the technology that really helped the most. Good equipment was the main thing. Good equipment. Learning to start plants really efficiently. Getting a technique where we could get them in the ground really fast. It was pretty much just conventional agriculture with free fertilizer and a few occasional supplements for feeding the crop and minor pest control things. But that wasn’t really hard to figure out. Something happened, we’d do a little research and find out what to do. It went pretty smooth.

I guess, in retrospect, I think that production’s the easiest part of the whole business. It was all about how to navigate in the marketplace where you had fairness and security and accountability. Having all that was the hardest, building those relationships in a system that was just really not set up for someone like me. It was set up for agribusiness. Now, we have a couple of new distribution businesses that are specializing in local produce in Cincinnati. So it will be interesting to see how they do. (27:44)

**AA:** Yeah, thank you. That's all really interesting. Is there anything you want to share about your philosophies of farming and organic or sustainable agriculture as a whole, like the whole system, and if those philosophies have changed over time?

**DR:** Well, surprisingly they've changed very little. I've kind of through observation seen some things and added to them, but the philosophies still are the same, which is basically that we need to design agriculture like nature designs an ecosystem. And so this whole notion of having a population center with different levels of agriculture in concentric circles away from the center of the city, so that the interplay between the two complement each other. For example, stockyards and manure. Rotten produce, take it home and make compost out of it. The possibility of maybe recycling cartons instead of having to pay a dollar a box just to put your product in and never see it again. That always hurt, especially when the price was \$5 a box for everything. Packaging was very expensive.

I think agriculture probably has a more profound effect on nature than anything, not only in the past fifty years or the last 500 years, but probably the last 10,000 years. Half the greenhouse gases that are manmade in the atmosphere now happened from 10,000 BC to 1500 AD. Or maybe even 1800. And the other half we've added in the last 150 years.

So organic agriculture complements a natural system instead of sabotaging it. Because basically with conventional agriculture, you're using fossil fuels to make fertilizer. You're breeding seeds to be compatible with petrochemical inputs. You've got a centralized distribution network that reaches out all over the world so the transportation costs are high. Your chemicals in your soil respire the organic matter. So every year you have to use more chemicals and more pesticides to get the same yields. You've probably heard all of this, this is all old information now. But for a long time it wasn't. For a long time it was not old information. People didn't understand it. Now they're starting to understand it. So it's really encouraging. Now what we do with that information remains to be seen, if we'll make the right choices. But the knowledge is there; no one can claim ignorance anymore. (32:20)

**AA:** Yeah, thank you. That's really helpful. Do you want to talk about, before we move on, is there anything you want to say about your personal perspective on the connection between organic or sustainable agriculture to the broader historical and cultural context, including other movements? I know you said a little bit about starting during Earth Day when you were in college, and all that. Is there anything else you want to say about those connections?

**DR:** Well, the most important connection to me is when you have a sustainable, regional food system, you change the relationship between urban and rural. At least you have the potential to. The advent of conventional agriculture with centralized systems and mass distribution needed mass production to make the system work well. It was a system of extraction. Fossil fuels extracted from the ground. Refining chemicals from the ground. Not just food, but shelter. Packaging from forest products. Basically, rural America became—rural America had a neocolonial relationship with urban America. The cities gathered in resources from the rural areas, consumed it, and spit it into the air, spit it into the water, spit it into the landfills. And all that extraction ended up turning the cities into garbage disposals for our extraction. Organic agriculture can complete the circle. In bringing in things on a sustainable basis, you can recycle it back to the countryside. So the farmers like me get free fertilizer, and you get to recycle their

packaging. The cities get cheaper landfill bills. Think about the water. Five hundred years ago, you could drink out of the Ohio River. That's different.

So you know, all this can happen with organic agriculture. Since agriculture has such a profound influence on the whole world, when you change agriculture, you change the world. And so it's really exciting when you look at just about any environmental issue, you can connect it to agriculture. Just about all of them. Except maybe nuclear power. But I haven't thought about that. Maybe we can do that, too. (36:49)

**AA:** Yeah, all those connections are so important. So I'd like to hear more about your involvement in different organic/sustainable organizations. I know you mentioned Rural Resources. I think you've been involved with OEFFA also. And anything else you've been involved in, too, if you'd like to share whatever you'd like to about that.

**DR:** Okay. Keep that thought. I want to say one other thing. I never understood why our organization was called Rural Resources. And the more I've learned about what we've been doing all these years, it's obvious. We need to pay attention to rural resources to make cities work and to make rural areas work. It's all about rural resources. So I'm really curious how Terry and Jody came up with that name. But I look back on it, and wow, that's brilliant.

**AA:** I don't remember if she said how they came up with it or not; I'll have to check on that.

**DR:** Yeah, that will be something to talk about this evening. So your question again was?

**AA:** When did you first get involved with Rural Resources? And then if you want to talk about what that was like. And then other organizations, too, like OEFFA and anything else you were involved in.

**DR:** Well, Rural Resources quickly was the only organization I was involved with. There were times when I thought I'd like to do other things, but I couldn't run my business and do any more than that. And probably couldn't do as much in Rural Resources as I wanted to do, either, because of the farming and the distribution business. All that was a lot of work. But look at what we did. We had the first Earth Day in Cincinnati in 1977 or '78. We created farmers' markets in Cincinnati. We created community gardens in Cincinnati. We created the statewide organic farmers' association. We had the first Women in Agriculture conference in the Midwest. What else do you need, if you're someone like me? It was just everything I wanted to see happen, we worked on.

So I was involved in some of the projects that we started. I clearly was involved a lot in OEFFA. I served on the board for years. I helped start the certification system. Which back then was, you told someone at OEFFA you wanted to get certified, and they called one of your neighbors and said, "Go over to Dave's, certify his farm. Stick your nose in there and look around and see if it's kosher. If it is, certify him." I don't think there was any cost involved. Maybe \$5 or \$25 or something like that. Now it costs \$1000 to certify a small farm. So I think the government getting involved in organics made that happen.

And that helped me realize something else about how the world works, is that when the government decides to regulate something, it's not for people like you and I. It's for the oligarchy so they have rules that they can follow and operate the way they want to operate

without risk of any unforeseen legal problems, other liability issues. And paves the way for them to get major market share in the newly regulated product. Which was organics. And it took about five years after the law was passed for agribusiness to have more than half. Now they have probably more than 90 percent market share. Not only in farming, but in value-added product, too. In fact, it's higher in value-added.

Getting back to your question, which was—(43:05)

**AA:** Well, if there's anything you want to share about what it was like being in Rural Resources back in the early days.

**JR:** Oh, the people I met were just great. I couldn't wait for the next time we would get together. There was so much to do, and we knew how to do it. Or if we didn't figure it out, it was just great to see all that happen.

It would be interesting to hear what other people have to say about this. I felt like after five or so years that to do what I wanted to do, we needed to have staff, which meant we needed to raise money. And other people felt like we didn't need that. And they were right. The best thing about Rural Resources was that we didn't create projects so we could raise money to pay our staff. We created them because they needed to be created. We created them for the people that were the stakeholders in that particular project. So when we created OEFFA, we helped for a couple years. But as soon as they were ready, we backed off. The organization took off on its own. The same thing happened with the tailgate markets. The community gardens would have been the same way, but another nonprofit decided it was going to make them a lot of money. So they took it over. So we got out of that.

But that sort of relates to my observation about how things are going. And boy, I have real mixed feelings about nonprofits being involved in virtually any part of the food, farming, policy arena. Nonprofits need staff. So they need to raise money. There's never enough. So they're always looking around to where they can get grants to keep them going. And they end up doing things that the grant issuers want done, but not what needs to be done. So the whole regional food movement in Cincinnati is, I'm going to say, well over 90 percent urban-oriented, maybe higher. Our food banks, which are so important, also support the industrial food system. All the waste and no-sells from the industrial system go to a food bank. They get their tax breaks. The food banks get food, not always the best, but they're getting better and better at it. But the system stays the same. You still have agribusiness in charge. You have nonprofits, supposedly fixing things so everyone can eat. But in essence, they're keeping things the same in a lot of cases. A lot of cases.

We even have nonprofits that would get grant money and volunteers and they would raise crops and go to the farmers' markets with really low prices and compete against farmers which actually had to pay their way to get their earnings. They couldn't get free help. They couldn't get someone to give them a salary, say, "Here, go out and grow something, sell it, we'll make up the rest." That doesn't happen.

And then I saw the whole local food movement trying to turn everybody from suburban homes to poor people into food producers. Because somehow that was going to help feed people. And it doesn't. Especially if you're a poor person. The worst thing you can do is be stuck in a garden all day trying to grow your own food when what you need is a decent-paying job. That's changing. People are starting to understand that. But looking back, I'm just so appreciative that

people other than me at Rural Resources had the foresight to see what to do and why to do it and how to do it, which is really different than what we're seeing now.

We have a second wave of farmers' markets that started happening in Cincinnati about 10, 15 years ago. Not a single one is farmer-controlled. Owners own the business, own the farmers, write the grants to get free help, everything like that. And the "successful ones" have less than 25 percent of the vendors in agriculture. Most of them closer to 10 percent. We've got bread people, and we have bakeries, we've got kombucha makers (which I love). I don't even know what all. But that's the new model. So is that going to revive regional agriculture? No. Because you can't earn a living at a farmers' market. Or if you can, then a market with a population around it of 10,000 or 20,000 people, it supports four vegetable growers. That isn't going to help. If you want to feed 20,000 people, you probably need about 1,000 farms. We don't have that. Maybe in the whole greater Cincinnati area there might be 300 people growing for farmers' markets. Something like that.

So you know, I'm really happy about all the things we did. And we always talked about the importance of systemic change. And here we are again where we need some more systemic change. So there's lots of work to do. And I'm so looking forward to talking to everybody tonight, getting their perspectives on what's been going on. (53:10)

**AA:** Do you have any thoughts like what that systemic change would look like? Or if nonprofits are not really the answer, what you think the answer is?

**DR:** Personally, I think market-based projects are what's going to make the difference. Because the general public, it's sort of like universal health insurance and—what's the other one?—oh, gun control. And supporting family farmers. People want sensible gun control, they want a decent insurance system, and they want to support organic farmers. And the politicians, the government can't figure out how to do that for us. So we've got to create it ourselves.

Yeah, I've written some things about how we can do that. And it's starting to happen, in a really small way. But we have to basically, we need to take these 500 and 1000-acre farms and on each one put one to four 20-acre specialty farms that work in partnership with the big farm. So if they're feeding layers or broilers or vegetables, the farm can grow grain and hay. They could have pastured animals, and the vegetable farmer could get enough compost for free fertilizer. And the 500 to 1000-acre farm could change some of their production and get out of the international commodity system and create regional markets for a wider variety of crops where the prices don't have to be created by speculation but by the common sense of, "Well, what's it take to grow it? My neighbor can grow it for a dollar less, why can't you?" "Oh, because he sprays, or oh, I didn't know he could do that. I'll ask him, and I'll grow it for a dollar less, too." Just good old-fashioned supply and demand. Where there's more personal interactions.

Agribusiness and the distribution companies mainly, grocery chain stores, control the whole food system now. So there's no such thing as a marketplace for regional produce anymore. Especially around here. Because the whole system was gutted starting about 60 years ago, or 80 maybe by now. It was pretty much a fait accompli by the '80s. There's just no room for a strong regional agriculture here. Now people want it, and we'll see what we can do. I think we need a regional marketplace where anybody who grows product in the area can take their product, and it's sold the day they bring it. So you've got to get buyers to cooperate with that instead of the way they're used to getting things done.



And I think we can eventually get into bigger grocery stores, but we need to create a label that every piece of food that's grown in this area, we'll have to put that label on their packaging or sticker on the apple or whatever so that it's recognized in the marketplace. People start to ask for it, and the supply builds up enough, then I think we can make some headway. (58:38)

**AA:** Yeah, thank you for sharing all that. So is there anything else—and you said a little about certification earlier, and about OEFFA—is there anything else you want to talk about OEFFA and your involvement in that over the years, your perspective on it?

**DR:** I've been involved less and less over the years. Not because I didn't want to be involved more, but life gets in the way. OEFFA's got a big staff now, 40 people maybe, 50. It's a big staff. They've got a payroll. They've got to raise money. Certification really helps with that. Because we set up the certification to be farmer-friendly and OEFFA-friendly. In other words, it wasn't set up so the owners could make as much money as they could, it was to serve the farmers and serve the organization. So we can do it cheaper than these other companies. And we get a lot of volunteer help. There's a lot of goodwill in an organization like OEFFA. It's amazing.

I remember when we started it and I was on the board, it was like this dream. How can we figure out how to get just one staff person so that we can coordinate all these projects we want to do? It just seemed like it was impossible. Now there's 50. So it's truly amazing.

OEFFA was also set up so that half the board plus one had to be farmers. So it's always going to be farmer-controlled. And that makes a big difference, especially now in the era of nonprofits having to hunt for money. Well, they can hunt for money all they want, but they have to do what their board tells them to do and hunt for money that will do that, not the low-hanging non-fruit, the other projects that the government and certain foundations want to do.

So there's some really nice foundations, and I can't wait to see how it keeps changing. I'm sure it will be for the better. (1:01:56)

**AA:** I'm just curious, I don't know if you've had much experience with this or not, but is there anything you want to share about your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities, especially the land grants and organic and sustainable agriculture and how that relationship has changed over time?

**DR:** Well, the way it's changed is the way according to Charlie Walters, who was the founder and editor of *Acres U.S.A.* He said, "Listen up, guys, this is how it works when you come up with a new earth-shaking idea. The first thing that happens is the powers that be—in the case of land grant universities, the intellectual powers that be—will tell you it's impossible. When you show them it's possible, they'll say it's too expensive. When you show them that it's not too expensive, then they'll get real quiet. And a year or two later, they'll tell the public, 'Look what we figured out.'"

So we've got conventional farmers seriously considering using cover crops for the first time in 60 or 80 years as a regular practice in agriculture. That was the organic system that—obviously, we didn't invent that. That was the way people used to farm until they tried the other way and liked it better, and we said, no, this way's better. "No, you can't do it. No, it's too expensive. Oh, look what we made. Look what we invented. Use cover crops. We'll get government programs to help you."

So I don't say that to be demeaning to the land grant universities. They're just slower to move. And I think the pioneers very often end up on the short end of the stick. Because once their ideas get incorporated into the big system, they're already thinking about what we've got to do next, not, "How do I get a job in the system?" So pioneers are doing their pioneer thing. This developer who wanted to turn Wooden Shoe Hollow into housing units said to me, "You don't want to be a pioneer. Pioneers drive wagons and get arrows shot at them. You just don't want to do that." So that's one way to look at a pioneer. Now I would not change what I did for anything. It's been interesting. Every year I learn something new. Every year there's something on the horizon that's exciting. So that kind of suits me. But I think you take a certain amount of a financial hit when you're too much of a pioneer and not a well-oiled machine that's got all the things that a good factory full of machines have. It's worth it, though. No regrets. (1:06:47)

**AA:** That's really good to hear that. Is there anything you want to—and if you don't want to, that's fine, too—I know there's some things about organics, especially in regards to certification, that are kind of controversial now. Like there's talk about Real Organics and regenerative, and there's debate over whether or not hydroponics should be certified organic. Is there anything you want to comment on those controversies, or not?

**DR:** Well, it's all about money. The organic farmers go through a lot of effort to have neutral third-party certification so that they can have unbiased people say to the public, "This is the real thing." People that go to farmers' markets, the customers want cheap prices, the farmers want to make as much as they can, so they want to say they're organic without going through certification. Meanwhile, big agribusiness sees opportunities in organics. So as soon as the rules come out, they figure out how to follow the letter of the law as they interpret it without paying any attention to the intention of the law. So hydroponics isn't organic agriculture. It's growing food on Mars agriculture. How do you grow something in a sterile environment? Well, with lots of chemicals. Lots of controls. Capital-intensive. So it's not organic. Organic has to do with the ecological cycle of communities.

So agribusiness figures out how to put a little patio outside the chicken barn saying, "Yeah, our chickens get to go in the pasture." And they rotate livestock in and out of production. Just whatever they can to maximize their profits. And the government listens to the agribusiness folks a lot more than they listen to us. Our organic standards boards have always given correct advice to the government, but the government doesn't listen. Sometimes they do. But a lot of these big things, they haven't. I think it's tarnished the organic label. But everyone's taking shortcuts. You can't just point the finger at the organics.

Regenerative agriculture. Rodale was trying to sell that 50 years ago. They said, "We don't believe in organic agriculture. We want regenerative agriculture. We don't want you guys to call it organic. We want you to call it regenerative. And we're going to write that in all the books we sell." And here they are again. I don't know. We'll see what they do. They seem like they're doing good things this time. But the only reason we need a regenerative agriculture organization is because the government and agribusiness owns organic now, and we can't do what we want in a democratic, transparent, sensible sort of way.

And so personally, I wish Rodale would have put all their energy into reforming the problems in the organic system. Because I don't think you're going to get anything better than that. You have a system not only with neutral third-party certification, you're required to improve your soil every year. Where are you going to get anything better than that? It remains to

be seen. Maybe we'll come up with something. Right now, I think everybody that's selling food in the new regional food distribution system says—well, a few of them are certified, but not many. The rest of them say, “Well, we farm that way, but we're just not certifying.” You can't have that kind of attitude in a marketplace and hope that it will grow into anything that has any integrity at all. So I'm a little concerned. (1:13:22)

**AA:** Yeah, thank you for sharing all that. So is there anything, what do you think are the most important aspects of the history of organic and sustainable agriculture to preserve, and the most important lessons to teach to the younger generations?

**DR:** That's a tough one. Well, the most amazing thing that organic agriculture did in my opinion is to create a new category of food that not only is appealing to the eaters, but it has clout in international trade agreements. See, the way these trade agreements are written, if you want to sell an apple and the standards of apples are, it has to have so much color, so much size, so much sugar content, and you're in a trade relationship, you have a trade treaty with another country, then they have to buy that apple. It doesn't matter how much you sprayed it. It doesn't matter what the carbon footprint is of producing that apple. But when we created organic, we did it. You know, here's how crazy it got. Do you remember when Mad Cow disease happened? How old were you then?

**AA:** I was a kid, but I remember it.

**DR:** So Europe didn't want to buy any meat from the US. President Reagan said, “We're going to go to the global court, because you have to buy our meat. We meet all the standards. You can't not buy our meat.” That's how the trade agreement works. I don't know how it turned out. Well, I guess pretty quickly the USDA found hot spots. And farmers don't feed manure and dead animal parts in their feeding rations anymore. I'm sure that helped. Especially the brains, feeding the brains to animals.

So the opportunity we have and have to take care of is to think about more things in our trade agreements than what we thought of before. I'm not saying some people didn't know when we wrote these trade agreements what they were doing, they negative things that would happen. But nobody listened. “Oh, all the jobs are going to go to Mexico.” “No, the US is going to have a service economy. We don't need all those factories.” So there they went, they all went to Mexico. Our manufacturing base just went to hell in a handbasket. Wages went down for everybody in the US because of that.

So these trade agreements weren't written for people like you and I. They were written for the companies that wanted to enter the global marketplace and have a set of rules for them to operate in. And they didn't care how much wages were or other things that are eluding me at the moment. They just wanted a playing field to operate on, even though it wasn't a level playing field for everybody. It was their playing field. They wanted their playing field. And we can't write trade agreements that way anymore. Got to have strong environmental stewardship verbiage in the agreements. We have to respect human rights. We can't have people working their lives away not being able to earn enough to live on, and think that that doesn't have repercussions globally and locally. We're seeing it now in spades.

So organic did an amazing thing by kind of making a little crack in the big conglomeration. We have something that says, “Our people like organic foods. We're going to

have international standards. You can't use the word 'organic' unless you follow these standards." And so an apple and an organic apple are not the same thing. That's huge. Even though Chinese ball bearings and American ball bearings are the same, even though they're not, because the Chinese don't have to follow the labor things that we need and don't have the environmental protection that we have. (1:20:41)

**AA:** Yeah, thank you for sharing all that. So before we wrap up, is there anything else you want to share about your perspective or your experiences, any other stories you want to tell or anything?

**DR:** I don't have stories coming to my mind now. But if there's anything you're curious about, I'm happy to talk to you more.

**AA:** I think you covered things pretty well. Unless you just want to talk about what it was like in the early days of Rural Resources. And you did cover that a little bit, too.

**DR:** Great potlucks. Great potluck meals. Excitement. These things that we just didn't think were going to happen started happening. I'll give you an example. This is a story, too. So the way OEFFA got started, we were sitting in a Rural Resources meeting. And this was an annual meeting, we had our out-of-town trustees, which was a big deal. Plain Fare was involved. They had other jobs; they came just for this meeting. One of them asked us, "What's the agricultural scene around here?" And we talked for a while. And I was kind of in a mood. And I said, "You know, we don't even have an organic farmers' association in Ohio." The out-of-town trustee, Roger Blobaum, said, "You need to start one." And then we went on to the next agenda item.

The next week we had, or two weeks, we had one of our local meetings. And Terry Grundy probably brought it up. He said, "What about this organic farmers' association?" And I said, "Oh my god, that's so hard. We can't possibly do that." And he said, "But our out-of-town trustee said we need to do it. So I think we should do it." And so we all agreed, we started doing it. Started a conference that reached probably statewide the very first year. It was amazing.

And here's another story, now. So one of the big hurdles to starting this organization was, "How are we going to get ahold of farmers?" And the ODA didn't want to help us. We didn't want to pay to get publicity, stuff like that. So what ended up happening was this guy from Ohio State, a graduate student, said, "Hey, we're trying to figure out how many organic farmers there are in Ohio. Can you help us do that?" And I said, "Well, we'd kind of like to know, too, because we want to put on this conference." And I had just been written up in the Rodale *New Farm* magazine, which was actually new back then. That was 40 years ago. And they didn't want to pay me for helping them do a story. But I said, "Hey, look, if I help you do a really good story, will you give me your mailing list for Ohio?" And they said yes. And they sent a manila envelope about that thick full of address labels. And back then, technology wasn't what it was today. If we wanted to reach someone more than once, we'd have to type up all those labels again and again and again. I think they eventually had ways you could mimeograph—do you remember mimeographs?

**AA:** I've seen them in the archives. That was before my time.

**DR:** Yeah, you can copy things that way. But basically, I gave this guy all my labels. I said, “You get ahold of these people, send them your survey, and we’ll find out.” So he did. And I called him back and said, “So, how’d it go?” He said, “It went great, we got all these responses. We got a big long list.” I said, “All right, well, we need to mail out information about our conference to these people.” He said, “Oh, they won’t let me give out that information. It’s protected. There’s privacy rules we have to follow.” And I just couldn’t believe my ears. I said, “Look at what I just did for you, blah, blah, blah. Here you are telling me this? You can’t possibly believe that’s right.” He said, “I’m really sorry.” So we said good-bye on the telephone. And about two weeks later, in my mailbox was another big manila envelope with no postmark that had a zip code on it. No return address on it. Just my name. I opened it up. It was heavy, there’s got to be a cover letter in here. No cover letter. Opened it up. What is it? It’s all the names of all the people from that survey. He apparently was so ashamed of what happened he just stole them and sent them to us. And that’s how we got the names to reach the organic farmers of Ohio for our first conference. (1:29:21)

**AA:** That’s really cool. Yeah, research is like that, you’re not supposed to give out anything once you collect information. So that was good. The unmarked envelope, then nobody would know he sent it, so he could help you without getting himself in trouble.

**DR:** Yeah.

**AA:** Yeah, that’s cool.

**DR:** I had the same thing happen to me with the Ford Company. They read about me in one of the ag magazines, alternative ag magazines. And they said, “We would like to bring a Ford tractor out to your farm, and you drive it around. We want to take some pictures of you using this Ford tractor.” They were promoting a whole new line of small tractors for smaller farmers. And I said, “Sure. I can do that.” So I did. Really nice photographer came out, took these great pictures. He got on roofs and up trees, and they were amazing pictures. And he took them back to the editor. And the next day the editor calls me and says, “We’d like to change things a little bit. We’d like to put you on the cover of this magazine.” And I said, “Well, I don’t know. It’s one thing just to have me in there, but to put me on the cover, I don’t even own a Ford tractor.” I said, “How about you get me a tractor?” They said, “No, we can’t do that.” I said, “I don’t mean a new one, you can get me a used one, that’s fine.” “Well, we’ve only got \$500 in our budget to pay you.” I said, “No, that doesn’t seem right. Thanks, but no thanks.” And that was the end of it.

Meanwhile, when the photographer took all the pictures, we could tell they were going to be good. And I said, “Send us copies. When you get done, I’d like to have these.” Of course, all the communications broke down after I told them I didn’t want to be on the cover of their magazine. But two weeks later, in a blank manila envelope, we got all these amazing pictures. The photographer sent them to us.

**AA:** Well, that’s great! I think we’re pretty much out of time. So unless there’s something else—

**DR:** I’m sure if you sat here long enough you could get me to think of something else. But it’s been a good long conversation. I think you got some things that you can use.

**AA:** Yeah, thank you so much.

**DR:** You're welcome. (1:33:08)