

Mick Luber, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

July 6, 2021

Location: Columbus, Ohio at Scott Williams's house

ML=Mick Luber

AA=Anneliese Abbott

ES=Ed Snavely

SW=Scott Williams

AA: All right. This is July 6, 2021, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing Mick Luber! So Mick, do you want to start by telling us a little about your background in organic/sustainable agriculture and your specific connection to the organic movement?

ML: Well, I used to be in an organization in Ohio called the Federation of Ohio River Co-ops. And they distributed food around Ohio, West Virginia, parts of Indiana, parts of Pennsylvania, and parts of Kentucky. And I was part of that group. And we had a farm group in that organization that would meet every two months. They used to have quarterly meetings where all the people got together and ran the organization, and it was a sustainable food distribution system. And in that group at that time a lot of people had moved back to the land, and people were looking for an economic way to be viable. So the farm group was organized to try to get production out of those farms into the warehouse or to the local co-ops or to the local buying clubs. And that's where I got involved. And we found out that the people from down in Cincinnati were organizing a meeting about people producing food. Went to that meeting, and that's where OEFFA came from. (1:49)

AA: And so then you were involved in OEFFA from the beginning?

ML: Yeah, I was at that original meeting, and we planned the first meeting there. A woman named Marie Duivenvoorden was the coordinator. And we decided to have it at a place on the west side of Columbus. And I have actually the documents of the first meeting and the participants.

AA: And so then, from that first meeting, how did OEFFA grow, and how were you involved in that?

ML: Well, at that first meeting, like I said, we came up with a set of standards that had been investigated by the people in FORC, that they used for that food to be considered organic. And so we just start with that percentage of people, had it passed in an hour and a half, and decided to set up a certification system to go with that for the farmers. And we had a two-page publication.

AA: So then, you were also a farmer, correct?

ML: Yeah, I raise vegetables. I've had a farm since 1979 in eastern Ohio. It's a 61-acre farm, and it's hilly there. So I have presently about 6 acres of level on top of the hill, 6 acres of level on the bottom, and then I do a lot of drafting around on the farm.

AA: So then, you were involved in farming the whole time you were involved with OEFFA?

ML: Yeah. I was working for the post office at the time, and I got offered a full-time job, so I came up—[interruption] Where were we?

AA: You were talking about your farming and OEFFA at the same time.

ML: Right. We had a buying club in West Virginia, and we started a store there. And we were looking, there was a group of people looking for a way that we could run the store, produce food, have a bakery, have a kitchen to supply people with food. We had about 50 to 100 people as members in this co-op. And we had this group, we were trying to buy a farm, we never got that, always got outbid for a piece of land. And one day I was driving around on these back roads, and I found a farm, and I went to the auction, and I bought 61 acres for \$23,500. They tried to sell it as two pieces to people who wanted hunting cabins, and I outbid them by \$500, so I got the farm. So I started farming. And I couldn't do full-time posting and farming at the same time, so I became a farmer. And I started, in that little community I lived in before that, I started a farmers' market there probably three or four years before. We'd go down to the post office, sell everything we wanted, it was just what everybody was doing. I was originally a school teacher in the inner city in Chicago, but I was from eastern Ohio. I moved back there and started playing in the dirt. (5:28)

AA: And so at one point you also became an organic inspector. When was that?

ML: Well, I helped draw up the standards and did comparisons in Michigan, California, New York NOFA. I got that information together, and that's when we started. There wasn't a whole bunch of inspections going on when we first started. But over time I was on the committee. I didn't get my farm certified until—because I thought it was a conflict of interest to be on the committee and be deciding about that stuff, I still raised stuff organically.

AA: Great. So do you want to talk a little more about your farming methods and how you developed them, and which people and publications influenced you?

ML: Well, Rodale, the people I met at the first meetings. Going out inspecting farms—I stole a lot of ideas from people that were doing it, large farmers as well as small farmers. I use a bed system. I use a keyline system, which was designed in New Zealand to try to conserve water. Everything in the bottom goes down through the valley, everything on the sides of the hill has a little contour, so the water falls, there's just a series of about five beds, grass strips, five beds. They go down hill a little bit, so all the water that drops into them runs through. Never had an irrigation system on the farm. I've always used that in order to maintain the water supply.

AA: Okay, very cool. Is there anything you want to share about your philosophies of farming, kind of how you developed those, how they've changed over time?

ML: Well, when I was living in Chicago and thinking about, what would I do if the food system shut down? I thought it would be pretty hard. Although years later they tore down a bunch of projects and put in inner city farming. I thought everybody was moving back to their communities, going to establish farms and start supplying food to the local communities. My father was a coal miner, and my grandfather before him had farmed. And they were union people. And in order to be able to go out on strike, you had to have something in your back porch in order to take you through the year. And so my parents always bought a lamb from somebody, and I would go there so that they could butcher and keep it. They put up 50 cans of beans, 50 cans of tomatoes. It was just the way people survived. So it gave them, and that gave me—my father kept \$50 a day in working the union job so they could actually send me to college to get me a college education. So the philosophy of putting by so you can be politically independent, economically independent, I always carried that with me. (9:10)

AA: Great. Is there anything you want to share about your personal perspectives and views on the connection of organic and sustainable agriculture to the broader historical and cultural context?

ML: Well, I've watched this over 50 years. In the ten years where I saw the gardens at the house, I always tortured my dad. My dad had a farm, and he used to take—I had three brothers and a sister—take us out to the farm and try to do work. And we were always throwing things at each other, and he'd always get pissed off and take us home and then go back and do the work. And his garden at the house, we used to turn it over. It was clay, and with a shovel, and you'd go out there in July, and you might be able to hit it with a shovel and break it up into little clods. And over time I found out about composting and all that stuff, and when I moved back I lived with my parents for almost ten years. And I started doing compost, and my dad thought I was nuts. He said, "You never wanted to work before! What are you doing out there?" And I'd turn the piles every two days and start putting this stuff on his soil there. And that soil turned to where you would go and pull out the weeds and they would just pop out of the ground instead of the clay that was there. So it changed his perspective on me, and it changed that soil.

And then I started, I moved to a farm that had been in corn. There was a local cattleman who had a dairy herd, and he was farming corn there, using atrazine, BladeEx, and so when I moved there, I tried to grow clover and oats. And the clover wouldn't come up. And I thought I should be in the pottery business instead of the farming business. So I didn't move to the farm for six months so the people there could kind of do their transition. And I made compost piles. So every place I went to put plants in, I put a mound of compost. And over three years the land started changing. I still have clay there, but it kept me alive for 40 years. I've been going to markets for 25 years now and supply people in Pittsburgh, three markets in Pittsburgh, and one in Weland [?], West Virginia with good produce. And I had five workers at the farm, paid their salaries, kept the farm alive. So is that enough? (12:11)

AA: Yeah, thank you! Is there anything you want to say about your involvement in OEFFA and any other organizations, anything you want to share about that, any stories you want to tell?

ML: Well, there's lots of stories to tell about OEFFA, the changes that it's been through over the years. It started as a grassroots organization. Hopefully it still is a grassroots organization. It's

gone through lots of changes. We originally set it up so there was five areas of the state, the four corners and the central part of it. And we always kept in mind that we had an environment, that we weren't Ohio's organic farmers' association, we were the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association. So there were environmentalists involved in the group when it started, there were backyard gardeners, there were health fanatics, and then there were farmers, large and small. So we've kept that umbrella organization going for all these years. There's been divergencies. We started out with certification and membership as two pivotal points, but if you're milking cows, a three-pointed stool or one-pointed stool works really good. And I always thought that marketing was an important part of it.

I ran the annual meetings for five years, and then Charlie Frye came up to me one day and said, "You did such a good job with these meetings, maybe you'd better run for president." So I became president. We had the financial underpinnings, we had the membership and newsletter and the farm tours together, and then we hired Betty Canana, who I was talking about earlier, to do marketing. And she was the kind of person that could take farmers and pull them by the ear and make them work together instead of competing with each other. And she did a great job. And then she got hired away by OCIA.

About that same time, OCIA was coming, these guys with these gold chains around their neck who were lobbyists in Washington came and wanted to start an OCIA chapter. And I think they were up to making more gold for themselves. They wanted to have tours around Washington and stuff like that. And when I saw them coming, I knew that they were people that wanted to divide and conquer. So we inculcated OCIA into OEFFA. It ran smoothly for a couple years, and then some people wanted to divide it up. There was a surcharge on growers by acreage, and they were using that as a wedge. If you had a backyard garden you didn't have to pay as much for certification. And we got rid of that charge for those large farmers. But there were still people hammering, these guys were taking, the vegetable growers were taking advantage of the grain growers. And that was never the case. We always tried to take care of everybody's needs. And eventually it worked out.

But right after that there was a burnout in the organization because it was all volunteer. There was no staff. So these people that had been coming to those meetings were burned out. I mean, people can have bad meetings. It depends on who you elect to run the meetings. A lot of those people were, they wanted to talk, and farmers like to talk. So you'd start on Ed Snavely's pigs over here, and so when I was running the thing, I made people come up with a—what is that thing called? How you run a meeting?

AA: Robert's rules?

SW: Agenda?

ML: Agenda. If you wanted something on the agenda, you had to come to the meeting an hour before and hash out that something so that you're presenting something to people that has some teeth. It's not just you want to talk about having some marketing or farm tour, something like that. You actually are presenting something. And that worked out really good until, I don't remember who was responsible for it, but the woman who was doing the marketing got hired away. And then they hired a guy from Eden Foods. Nice guy, except he couldn't look you in the eye. So I went to the Farm Science Review, and people were telling me what a bad guy he is, and he's selling corn to the guys up in the northeast, or oats, that weren't certified. There were like

three or four stories. So I went home and I investigated all the stories and found out that he was doing right by the people that he was selling those products for. And then after that they decided that they wanted to bust up the regions.

And they didn't want to do marketing anymore because it was a conflict of interest. So the general body decided that. And they went from regions to chapters. So they had a grain growers' chapter, people in a locality would get together and have meetings. And I just felt that that was one of the breaking up places of OEFFA. And they've been running the organization with chapters ever since, and they've given up the marketing thing. And I would like to see them—and running the organization with grants that they get from various sources. And they're not making any money themselves.

And there's other stories about certification and stuff like that that I could go on for hours about. And we had a great—Sylvia Up was a great, she ran the certification program. She was outstanding. And then her mother got sick, and her husband who worked in a hospital took over the organization. And he worked for a hospital, he had somebody that filed papers for him. And grain growers weren't getting their DCs, weren't getting their bills of lading, weren't getting their papers on time. And it was because there wasn't a secretary hiring the papers. Janie Mar, who's an inspector, got hired to take over the program. She went and in three months got all those files reorganized and did a great job. Got OEFFA through its first or its second USDA inspection. And then she hired a staff and a couple other people on the staff thought she was too—something. They said she was yelling at a producer on the phone when she was actually yelling at her husband on the phone. And they had two other things they said she had done wrong. And I didn't find out that she got fired until Alexie, who was her subordinate, didn't know anything about the program, was just a staff person under her, was running the program. So I went to bat and yelled, went to the board meeting, tried to get them to rescind their thing. Janie Mar signed a non-disclosure agreement so that she could keep her health benefits for a year after she was fired from the job.

And that's when the bureaucracy in my opinion started. There were a lot of people hired to review records who had never, no experience on farms. It was just sad to see in my book. They actually went through my inspection and my seed thing and they found a place where I had bought celery seed that had a non-NOP compliant covering on it and made me take a 4 x 8 and a 12 x 4 area out of my beds for three years. And then they weren't calling on me to do any inspections, stuff like that.

So there's lots of things that have changed enough over the time except for that interaction. When you go to one of OEFFA's meetings and you see the interaction between farmers, vegetable growers, environmentalists, people in the health thing, chefs, it's just beautiful to see. And so I think that organization has lasted, it's just like a good farm. The diversity on a good farm, if you have a bad year in one thing, there's something else that's going to pick you up. And the other thing is, on any farm, when you think you know the perfect way of doing anything, it just slaps you on the side of the head and tells you, you'd better have something else in your quiver, otherwise you're not going to survive.

So is that enough? (22:56)

AA: Sure, yeah. And feel free to add more anytime throughout this interview if you want to. So yeah, I'd like to hear more about your perspective on certification, especially being an inspector and then involved with OEFFA. And how things have changed since USDA certification. So I'd really like to hear your perspective on all that.

ML: Okay. I'll tell you the story that I told before. There was a body of people. I went to a conference that we had out in Kansas City where all the organizations in the United States who were into organics—I went to Washington for three or four years, where the USDA things was planned too, later. But there was a group of people, people from OCIA, who went there to try to come up with a way to make this all private. Necessary Trading Company was out of Virginia, who sold product, was willing to take all those standards and see where there was commonality. And that proved, we had two meetings, and they found an agreement, they had CCOF in California to go up to three years without fertilizers. And along with three years for pesticides, which most groups, Michigan, Ohio, the people in New England all were using. And they actually started evaluating products that people were using. And then Cascadian Farms and a lot of large grain buyers and sellers wanted to get into the international market. And they pressed the USDA to come up with certification. And I went to those meetings. And there were interest groups in livestock processing, grain farming, vegetable production, all there working on coming up with those standards. And it took the USDA ten years. The first thing they came up with was that you could use sewage sludge on your thing. And you could use irradiated food. There was a third one, do you remember the third one?

AA: The GMOs.

ML: GMOs, right. That all three of those things were viable. And poor Grace Gershuny, who had worked with all these farmers for years—Joe Smiley and Grace Gershuny. Joe Smiley ran QAI for years. A book called *Soul of the Soil*, which was just great—she was the scapegoat. She had to come out and tell people in all these groups that that's what they were going to do. And she got trashed by everybody. And I also, when I was there, these guys who proposed legislation, I kept on raising my hand and saying, what's this going to cost? We had an inspection fee of \$125 or \$250, which was, even small farmers could use. And they could never come up with a figure. And the figure now in Ohio is \$1000. And it's paying for that staff, 23-30 members staff that's operating I think.

And I think the standards are good. I think they should have a livestock thing where these guys that have porches on the side of their chicken houses can't say that those have access to the outside. And this whole controversy about hydroponics being considered organic. It started with the soil. And it's always been the soil. It's always been people that were working with the soil. Without those people, you can put up a building, and you can put in lights, but it's not working with the soil. And that's what the organic movement started as. Robert Rodale and all those people seemed to be, Rex Spray, Glen Graber, all those people. They came with soil in mind. And all the farmers I've met over time, it's the soil in mind. (27:49)

AA: How do you feel about all this controversy about the Real Organic and regenerative organic and all that? And you don't have to comment if you don't want, but—

ML: There's nothing wrong with any of those things. The people that originally wanted to do this, those same regenerative things were there. It's not like it's something new that they're reinventing. Those people wanted it, people taking care of the land, producing good food to put into people's bodies. All those things were there when this all started. And there's nothing wrong with being better than the USDA because there's a lot of things in the USDA—look, they came

up with those rules, but where is the policing of the grocery stores and the people that are out there? Where is the support? They give it a little smidgen of the agricultural thing to organic research. Where is all that? If you look at the numbers of what's being sold and what's being sold in organics over the past ten years, we've gone up by percentages that the national has never gone up, but those figures for what's going to the organic and transferring regular farmers, the guys the extension agents. I mean, we should have more acreage in organics now than we ever had. But the USDA has never done that for the farmer. They have done the policing and the record keeping and the 20-page applications. They're all for that stuff, and inspecting the inspectors. But where all that food is today on the shelves, more of it needs to be going towards the farmers and the people that are producing that stuff. And getting more people into actually—there should be community kitchens in all these areas producing food for the institutions. Where are they working on that kind of stuff? It's in the marketing department of USDA, why aren't they doing that? Why aren't they getting this stuff into the schools? They're doing all the policing, but none of that stuff. Amen. [Laughter] (30:33)

AA: Thank you very much for sharing your perspective on that. Is there anything you want to say about the relationship between the agricultural universities and organic/sustainable agriculture, and how that's changed over time?

ML: Sure. There was—when I started doing this stuff, North Carolina, University of Nebraska, I think some people in California, whatever that conglomerate, UC-LA, Southern Cal, all these kind of things—were doing research. And one of the first things that I got asked by somebody was, “How do you get farmers to go into organics?” Well, I had a guy who was married to my cousin who was in a bank, so I went to ask him. I said, “If I wanted to go and add 20 acres to my production, what would I have to have for you to get to loan me the money?” And he said, “Well, you've got to have research. You've got to have a 5-year plan.” There was a third thing; I can't remember what that was. But anyway, Ohio State was doing none of this stuff. It took almost 15 years before they actually caved. There was a guy named Ben Stinner who was working at—Here's a story that happened before that. Did you ever hear of the Alar scare?

AA: Oh, a little bit, yeah.

ML: Well, the Alar scare happened because all these people were buying apple juice to give to their kids, and they thought that was healthy. And there was Alar in it, and it was causing people to be afraid of poisoning their kids. And at Ohio State in Columbus, they get their water out of the Olentangy and the Scioto River. And actually on the news they were putting nitrate tests in the weather forecast at night. And this controversy about Alar. So they had a guy named Fred Miller, who was head of the agronomy department. So over in Europe, they had 15 years of research on organics, low-input, and conventional agriculture. So they hired a guy, Clive Edwards, from England, who was working in that research, to come to Ohio State to balance that whole thing. And that's when they started that sustainable agriculture thing. And it was a trough. Everybody in every department wanted to come to the sustainable ag meetings and get a little bit of that trough for their sort of things. And it was lucky at that time that Clive Edwards was there.

So they started doing the research at OSU in organics. And because of Ben Stinner, who didn't go out on any limbs but knew what was going on with the soil—it as just a shame when he died, because he was doing the research with all these farmers to show that if you use organic

methods, you can produce. Rex Spray was the shining example that you could make money using an offset disk, doing a rotation, growing clovers, and it worked. And then OSU, here's what they did with that. They used Rex as an example of doing that. And then Fred Miller and Ed Hatcher—I forget what his name was—but anyway, they did two inches of paper on whether this would work or not. And the conclusion of it at the end was, this hatchet guy said that it wouldn't work for anybody. They had used Rex as the example, and it was just terrible what they did. But it kept people from going through the transition to organics.

But good soil management—look now, all these guys on all levels are talking about soil management through all the colleges. Even though the people that have come to OEFFA and presented workshops, there aren't as many now as there were 15 years ago. And I think it's because of—this is just my opinion—because the people that come are used to doing these slide show presentations with a piece of paper, and they don't talk practical stuff to the farmers. So the farmers go to those meetings, and they write these evaluations of the presentations. There's—what's the guy that worked with Deb? I can't remember his name. Anyways, he does great presentations. And there's a difference between using farmers in presentations and just academics in presentations. And they're doing good work as far as I know. They were testing wheat with higher protein in it so they could use it for baking and stuff like that. I don't know exactly what they're doing now. I'm not acquainted with it.

But all over the United States schools, the University of Kentucky is doing, they have ten, there's a problem with plastic, all the Amish that are raising stuff are all raising it on plastic. The University of Kentucky has 20 years of bare ground and plastic research. So if a farmer wants to go non-plastic, there's the possibility of using that research. The trouble that I find, I'm not a computer genius, but when I go to their research thing, it's the papers that are produced by somebody that's in the department, not the practical work that's in those files. The guy that came and talked about the research, that stuff looks like it's viable.

And I've learned so much from the large farmers. Like I have, these guys have rotary hoes so they can go flush the weeds in their fields before they plant. And they can go over those fields after they plant to take care of those weeds that are on the top of it. So the first experience I had, I went to see Larry Ringer, and he had a soybean field on some guy who was at the first meeting who's been organic forever. And I looked out on that field, and there's a big cloud of dust, and he's flying across there, and I asked, "Where's Larry Ringer?" And he said, "That's him on the thing." He comes in, and I said, "Didn't you just destroy all those soybeans you were going through?" He said, "No. They tell you to get on and go, don't look back."

So I was at a farmer's place, and I saw a busted-up one of those things. So I got a gang out of it, my beds are 40 inches, I went and got it, put it on a 3-point hitch, put it on my tractor. I had a farm tour, and I had a kid that was working for me, I said, "Get on that tractor, go over those beans there." He went over those beans, all the beans are still there. It worked. And now I can use it over top of my garlic, I don't have to go through with a hoe all the time. It works. And that's what OEFFA has been. Farmers sharing, looking, stealing, and it's made it so a lot of people have survived and are still farmers today. (39:35)

AA: Now I'm curious. How many Amish farmers proportionately are there certified organic in Ohio? Do you have any idea?

ML: Lots of them. A big part of the vegetable production in Ohio. Greenfield Farms, which is a co-op—I don't know if I should talk about this. The problem I see with it is that these people get

into it, and a lot of them don't, they worked in a cabinet shop, and somebody says, "You can do vegetables." So they come in, and Greenfield Farms tells them all these products that they should buy in order to do what they're doing. And the people that they're selling their things are all number ones. I think Tiny's or something like that in northern Ohio, they're selling this. So zucchinis have to be this long, have to be this wide. And they get rejected for everything else. Oversize, all that kind of stuff. So their only option is the auctions. Now I've been to an auction, and I went in there one time, and this guy bought a whole pallet of zucchini right in the middle of zucchini season. And I said, "What are you going to do with all that zucchini?" He says, "I'm not buying it for the zucchini. I'm buying it for the box. I have to pay a dollar apiece for those boxes, and I'm buying those boxes for 75 cents. I'm just getting wax boxes. I'm throwing it to my livestock."

So if there was this marketing and processing thing established for all these things, instead of those guys losing money, paying more for the box than for the product, and people were processing that stuff, freezing it. That guy we talked about earlier, Hertzels, that's the guy that was in OEFFA that changed people. We started having guys who grew cantaloupes, put in a six-acre field of cantaloupes and do a workshop at our conferences so people could see that there's this alternative. And all these institutions that we have out here that should be carrying organic products, clean products for their things, if that was happening, if these—what are those guys? Hedge funds?—were supporting those kind of things, you could see changes. And less pollution, the lakes not dying, the rivers not polluted. It would be a way to go. (42:14)

AA: Pretty much everybody I've talked to in Ohio has mentioned Rex and Glen Spray really favorably. Do you want to give any more background on them, kind of what they did?

ML: Well, you should have been lucky enough to go to a farm and see a humble person. But he could get excited every once in a while. And he would pump his arms a couple times like that. And you could just see the pride in what he's doing. But he would never, he wasn't boisterous, he wasn't a braggart or any of that kind of stuff. So he did it by example. He was one of the best Christian people that I've ever met. He wasn't proselytizing, but he took his religion into his soil and made it work. And he and his brother started out dairying. And they quit dairying, and they started doing beef. And they started doing rotations. And he was selling clover seed. So he was raising clover to sell. So it was part of his whole stick, so they could survive. They were doing 700 acres. And to do 700 acres well takes real skill. And they started selling beef and were selling to Organic Valley. They always used an offset disk. You walked through the fields, they always had a good rotation. They came to the first meeting, and they came all the time. They served on the board. They did workshops for people. They invited people to their farm every year to show them what to do. They weren't, "Nope, this is my secret." They were that kind of people. I didn't know his brother. Did you know his brother very well?

ES: Yep. Glen was kind of the person back behind Rex.

ML: Did the field work?

ES: Rex did the field work. But Rex was the spokesman. And very humble about it.

ML: Yeah, when I went to the sustainable meetings the first time at OSU, sat next to him. And all these people are chomping at the bit that they want that money that's going to come out of that thing. And you could just see him saying, "What have we created? Is it really going to go to the organic people that deserve to have that money, or is it going to be these grants that somebody writes and not really share it, or it's my story or my PhD or whatever?" And the thing that's never happened is the economic thing to get more farmers there. If they're going to send out all this money to various things, they should be doing that for these people that are actually—the cost. They never figured in the cost of those pesticides and herbicides washing down through those streams, and the cancer.

What were those two, that couple from Wisconsin that we had at the conference? They wrote a book. But they had moved to a farm, and that's when spraying first started. And his wife would wash his clothes with the kids' clothes, and she had a baby that couldn't eat anything. And there was a Catholic priest in the community that said, "You're poisoning that baby with washing the clothes with the whole family." And got him to start using an oats gruel for that kid and changed, quit washing the clothes, quit spraying the chemicals. And it changed their lives. He was sick, she was sick, the kids were all sick, and it just changed them. Engleberg.

But those kind of stories, you go to a meeting and you hear that kind of story. It makes you think, you know. And it's those kind of people that got organics going that direction. Now everybody's got a phone and they can think they're participating by pushing a thing that says "regenerative agriculture," that it's something different than organics. It's the consistency over time that makes things like this work. My grandfather, I was at—my brother married a dairy gal over in western Ohio. So I went to Thanksgiving dinner there, I'm sitting at the table, and his son-in-law was working at OSU in agronomy on how to make cows produce more milk and all this kind of stuff. And I'm sitting there and I'm talking about organics, and he's telling me I'm full of shit, and the old guy's sitting at the top of the table, and he's giggling. And after dinner he's sitting in his armchair, and I'm sitting there on the couch, and I say, "Were you laughing at me or what in there?" And he says, "Oh, Bill, he goes to Ohio State. They only know one way." He says, "We used tobacco as an insecticide. We did all these different things. It was only after World War II, when they had all these slick tricks. We used manure, we used all our manure, there was nothing that you didn't try." And he said, "It wasn't until that time that we started using chemicals." He says, "I know it can work both ways."

So examples like that. If you could get Rex and put him on a phone so that these people in the cities could see that. Or just like a farmer like that, saying, "Everybody thinks that those chemicals—well, we've had them for fifty or sixty years—that that's the only way that you can farm, that's the only way that you can make money." And look at the farms out there. People used to have 150 acres, 200 acres. Or even 700 acres. Now people are doing thousands of acres. And it's all on a tractor that's got GPS and it's all monocrop. And that just can't be good for the food, it can't be good for the land. (49:32)

When Rex had a farm tour and the Michael Fields Institute from Minnesota came down. And they had that big earth separator that went down into the soil so that you could pull it apart and see the soil structure. That was during the drought when Ohio State all of a sudden told every farmer out there, they were all into no-till. Every farmer out there, "Get your cultivators out. That's the only way you're going to save your crop, is because you're going to break up that hardpan that is on the surface." So Rex had a field he did that on. They went across to a neighbor's field. If you looked at Rex's corn, he had three sets of roots growing on that corn. And you could see the structure from the alfalfa and the stuff he had in his field, those roots had

gone down in the soil. And right around those plants, there was a little respiration of the water out of that plant on the top of the soil. You go over to that field next door, same thing—nothing down there. Hardpan. Hardpan where the plow went through. If you used a disc, hardpan four inches up on it. No respiration around that plant. Green crops over here, brown crops over here.

That's the kind of things that people have to see so they can understand that kind of stuff. And there's just not enough of that. There's a few, the little use I make of YouTube, you see a few farmers, not very much in-depth stuff. There's a lot of stuff now about regenerative, like that is the thing. And most people have never really seen that stuff. Except in the stores, they've seen the organic section in the stores. It's good that they are there, I'm not disparaging them. There just should be, by this time, 40 years, I think there should be more. (51:49)

AA: Yeah, thank you so much. Is there anybody else that you would consider really important people in OEFFA, in the Ohio organic movement? Like I know you mentioned Clive Edwards.

ML: I don't know if Clive's still there, do you know?

AA: I mean just telling about their influence, like other people that were really important at the time.

ML: You'd need to spend a year talking to the people that were the founding members of OEFFA and their kin. All these Amish people that are now selling organics. When they first started, they were selling produce. And then they started the organic perspective. And now they've given up their just growing produce to grow on the organic. You want names? Steve Miller is—what about the guy you were talking about who kept OCIA from going away?

ES: Jim Krogen. Stan Greg.

ML: Well, Randy Greg, his son is still farming right? Dean Makelvane. Vegetable growers, Ken Rondy in Athens, Ohio. He did a USDA SARE grant where he had 10 high tunnels and documented the inputs. He raised mushrooms in his barn. He had a sprouting house. Doug Siebert. Great vegetable grower, Peach Mountain Organics. Leslie Garcia, his wife, the best flower woman. She was at the first meeting. There's just—Mike Laughlin. Throw some names out there, buddy. David Val.

AA: So basically there was a lot of people all working together that made it happen. It wasn't just like one or two people that ran the whole thing. It was everyone working together.

ML: Right! It was a volunteer organization for 15, almost 20 years.

ES: And that's what's still keeping the grain growers going, that cohesion, that continuity. I mean, when we go to a grain growers meeting, there isn't anybody that ain't willing to share something. I mean, it's not that little secret that you've got behind your back.

ML: Sharing markets. Sharing, you can go on to the farmers' markets. You can find people that are willing to share even though you're right across the table from them. But it's farmers in general. It's not just organic farmers, you know. I know conventional vegetable producers that

are just as interested in keeping farms alive as the organic people. You should never disparage anybody that's growing stuff, no matter how they're doing it. And if you can show them something better and change them, that's the thing that most people do. They say, "My way is the way, I'm not willing to share that thing." And then you don't interact with them. That's the thing that's missing today. You can't share with people unless you look people in the eye. That guy I was talking about from Eden Foods. He just couldn't look farmers in the eye. He just wasn't that kind of person. And you just don't get along in this world not looking people in the eye and doing this kind of stuff.

AA: Now about Charlie Frye, I think you mentioned once that he was a pastor. Is there anything you want to say about him?

ML: Charlie was a great person. He was the president when they gave up the areas of the state. He was the kind of person that could bring—Malabar Farms, he was the one that kept that alive, kept people going there. And wanted to replicate that. That's a state park. If you have that vegetable system in a state park where people are going to go over to the mansion and then go through the garden, great advertisement for organics. It just happened that the woman that they got there didn't pan out. But there's all those things that are, you've got to keep them alive and keep them in front of people.

I was a long-haired hippie when I came into this organization, and nobody trusted me. They would stand 10 feet away from me. But because I kept on coming to meetings and kept on talking, it worked out. I got short hair now. I had long hair for 20 years. I was trying to get next to a woman in my community who had a daughter. So I cut off my hair and I came to an OEFFA meeting. And people that used to stand 10 feet away from me all of a sudden were standing next to me, and I got uncomfortable. But it's the substance of the person that counts, no matter what. And honesty, and looking people in the eyes. I'm having trouble now with these co-ops that are selling organic products that cut corners.

On inspections, the questionnaire is like 23 pages, something like that. And the way the questionnaire works, you have a field history sheet, you have field records, stuff like that. But within it, there's two ways to check on almost every subject inside what they're doing. And that's where you usually find people that stumble. People can look you in the eye, and then you get to one of those things where they said this thing, and there's something else where they start backpeddling about what's there. And it's about products that they have, too. You go into a building, and they have their products that they are using for organics stored. And there's a Roundup container over someplace in the corner. And you say, "Well, what are you using that for?" And I've been at farms where they have an answer for that. When I was first starting to do that, there was somebody that had, their fence was actually 25 feet away from any of the organic crops, so it was actually according to the rules okay. Because in the OEFFA rules at that time it was 25 feet, although now there's no set rule. It's just what you can use. (1:00:24)

ES: Adequate. It says adequate.

ML: I've been in farms where somebody came on their farm and their neighbor's a corn grower or a soybean grower, and they spray. And they don't give a shit about the wind. And these people had an asparagus patch that they had organic. And they actually reported that somebody had come on a windy day and sprayed it, and they were afraid that they were going to lose their

certification for that. So OEFFA sent me out there to take samples in that area to see if there was any contamination. The only thing we had at that time was a chlorine halite test, which can give you a basic sort of test that if chlorine was used, that you could take it on the surface. Nobody presently I know could afford a \$2000 worth of tests to make sure that their crop is clean. And I don't know what it costs you for GMO tests. But at that time that's how that system works. And that's good that that system is there so that people who are impinged upon by some one of their neighbors can at least get something for their loss.

So certification is good, and the documents are good. It's just how they're used. The trouble for me is that all this is on the grower. Is the USDA going to come down on that big soybean grower that's getting all that government money for contaminating some organic farm? No, they're not going to do that. But they should. And again, that whole thing I did about marketing. There should be, if certification is in marketing, then the USDA should be doing more to market organic products into schools, into hospitals, all that stuff. That soapbox.

Anything else you need, dear? (1:02:39)

AA: Thank you for all that. That's really great. What do you think are the most important aspects of the history of organic/sustainable agriculture to preserve and to teach to the younger generations?

ML: All of it. If more academic people were out there recording the stories of these farmers. Not just organic farmers, but of farmers who've gone—look at all the people who went bust in 2008. Look at all the people who are going bust now. Those people's stories need to be out there. Everybody that goes to a grocery store, there should be little medallions of those people that are raising that stuff that's going on those shelves. All those big fancy boxes they put things on, with clowns and tigers on them and stuff like that, they should have little blurbs down on the corners of them with the farmers that are producing that stuff. And then you'd see maybe a little bit of change in the general public. People just take that stuff for granted that it's gonna be there.

The thing that got me moving back this direction, like I said, being in Chicago in the belly of the beast, and the restaurant was the only alternative for you. And it all breaks down, where are you going to go? At least here in Columbus if you've got a backyard, this is probably the best farmland in the country. In fact, I lived on 11th Avenue here when I moved back here and worked with the Federation of Ohio River Co-ops. And we could get, you could dig down six feet and you were still in topsoil.

SW: You're exaggerating.

ML: No, no. Go down there. I mean, it was black. You could just keep on digging. I was just lucky that the place where I lived, there were two guys who were working in corn research at OSU who were into ponds and flowers. So they made this backyard, they had three ponds, three cascading into one, and then they had two separate ponds. And all these flowers. Then we had the special garden. It wasn't bigger than your house. But you could just go out there, and the whole world could fade away. We did a spiderweb for the pea trellis, it was beautiful.

AA: Anything you want to say to wrap up, or any other thing you want to make sure you get recorded?

ML: People should be supporting these kind of groups all over the country. They're in every state that I know of. And more people should be supporting this. I consider it a transition to, the whole carbon footprint, the whole keeping soil where it belongs, it's all in organic production. Those guys know there's not another field down the road. That's why they've had research for a lot longer than we have. They know there's no other place to go. We keep on thinking, that guy goes out of business, we can buy that. Tear down the buildings. That's what they did out in my area with coal. All these little farms that supported all these European—well, at first the Germans came over and made all these farms. Then the middle Europeans came over to work in the coal mines and the steel mills and the stuff like that, and they can all thumb their nose at the bosses because they had a cow. They had milk, they had a garden. They could live good. Pay me what I need. Where you're from, Wisconsin, same thing. Minnesota, same thing. It's just, we need more respect for the farmer. And what they produce. Amen.

AA: All right, thank you so much, Mick! (1:07:29)