

Rich Pirog, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

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Location: Vanhalla Park, Holt, MI

RP=Rich Pirog

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right! This is July 12, 2021, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing—

RP: Rich Pirog.

AA: So Rich, thank you very much for taking the time to interview today. So why don't we start with having you tell a little bit about your background in organic/sustainable agriculture and your specific connection to it.

RP: Sure. So my connection to organic and sustainable agriculture started in 1989 when I went, I did a fellow program. I was at University of Missouri Extension to develop the state's extension water quality plan. That was my introduction to sustainable agriculture. I was already an agronomist with the University of Missouri Extension, so I was familiar with organic agriculture as a production system. This opportunity to be on this water quality fellowship introduced and connected me to a lot of folks that were working in the very nascent sustainable ag movement in the mid-80s. SARE had just—Sustainable Ag Research and Education program—had just recently started their program, it was at that time called LISA, low input sustainable agriculture. And I attended a few conferences and workshops that got me interested in sustainable agriculture. So that's how I got started.

In 1990 I applied and interviewed and was chosen candidate for first education coordinator for the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State. Other than the director and the assistant director, I was the first full-time person hired at the Leopold Center back in, I started in the fall of 1990. (2:10)

AA: So is there anything you want to talk about being involved with the Leopold Center, talk about what you did there and your perspective on that?

RP: So the Leopold Center was created as part of the landmark 1987 Groundwater Protection Act of Iowa. The funds for the Leopold Center came from a tax on nitrogen fertilizer and a fee on the registration of pesticides. Although it wasn't a center for organic agriculture, it certainly promoted organic agriculture as one system, one type of system that farmers would have as an option. One of the primary goals for the Leopold Center was to research and identify practices that had negative environmental and social consequences to Iowa, agriculture in Iowa, communities. And the funds to create the Leopold Center provided enough funding for the hiring of several staff and for a grant program.

For the first five to seven years at the Leopold Center, my main focus was on [sustainable agriculture and] organic education programs. But as the interest in local foods and food system movement grew, we started to both fund work in that area in addition to organic and sustainable agriculture. And over time I became marketing and food systems manager for the Leopold Center. And I was still very involved in organic and sustainable agriculture.

I'll just say a few things about those early days. The center was controversial in its creation in that there was bipartisan support to create it across the aisle, house and senate in the Iowa legislature. However, I think three of the four people who backed the creation of the Leopold Center lost their next run for office. And there clearly was tension between the Iowa Agribusiness Association and the university and the Leopold Center because they [the Agribusiness Association] now had a tax and they didn't have much control, and obviously the Leopold Center was perceived as an entity that would threaten the fertilizer and chemical industry in Iowa. Iowa is one of the leading ag states in the country, has a very high population [of farmers and a] high number of farms, at least it did in 1990, the numbers were starting to go down then.

So there always was a tension in the background about the support that the Leopold Center would have and the kind of stance it would take, particularly on issues around surface and groundwater pollution. There were a number of issues already in Iowa, like nitrates were found in groundwater, there were clearly issues, a lot of the surface water bodies in Iowa had levels of water pollution. So there always was this underlying tension, and the Leopold Center had to focus on the research but proceed carefully. (6:27)

AA: So then, when did you leave the Leopold Center? And if you want to talk a little bit about how you came here to Michigan.

RP: I remained at the Leopold Center until 2011. The last five years, four years that I was there I was also associate director at the Leopold Center. Just going back a little bit before 2011, probably by 2000 my focus was split between education programs and specifically leading the efforts around local and regional food systems. The center, Leopold Center, was something that we discovered in our grant program, particularly around food systems, is that there was value certainly in awarding grants in food systems and sustainable agriculture, but it was the convening of the grantees, bringing them together to learn from each other, and for them to build additional partnerships, that was a key turning point I think in how I viewed my work at the Leopold Center. It wasn't just about giving grants, it was about creating learning communities and networks of people across organizations that really could benefit from not only their own project that they were funding, but also from what others were learning that had grants either at the Leopold Center or SARE or some other funding body.

One of the high points at the Leopold Center before leaving in 2011 was that we had established a number of working groups around the state in content areas like niche pork, grass-based grazing systems, fruits and vegetables—which in Iowa were a very niche area compared to, say, a state like Michigan. And we had a number of, in one group that we had called the Regional Food System Working Group, we were convening local groups and networks across the state. At its height we had 16 different local groups. They in some ways resembled local food councils. Some were organized to work on various local food incentives, others had sort of a policy or healthy food focus. Some were interested in land access issues for farmers. But we would convene them [these groups] four times a year.

And what would happen is that over time they would invite other folks including mayors, county supervisors, people from the chamber of commerce would come. Occasionally an Iowa representative or an Iowa senator would attend. And in 2010 there was a bipartisan group of four legislators that put an amendment into a bill that said the Leopold Center would lead the creation of Iowa's food and farm plan to promote local agriculture in the state of Iowa. And that bill passed with the amendment, and so the Leopold Center was charged with the food and farm plan. It took us about six months. We used all the local groups [from the Regional Food System Working Group] to do all of our grassroots organizing and putting together recommendations. And we submitted our recommendations to the Iowa legislature in January of 2011. Those recommendations, a number of those recommendations, which didn't cost any funds, things like changes within committees, or policies within the state agencies, a number of those recommendations [not all of the recommendations] were adopted. And the Iowa legislature did provide funding, about \$75,000 a year starting in 2011 to follow recommendations of the food and farm plan. To my knowledge, up through 2020 the state was still appropriating money for that.

I left in 2011 to accept a position of senior associate director at Michigan State University to help create the Center for Regional Food Systems, which did not exist. It took us about a year to create that entity. In my time at Michigan State University focusing on regional food systems, Michigan has something called the Michigan Good Food Charter, which is a set of goals and agenda items to create healthy, fair, green, affordable food for all Michiganders. Certainly organic and sustainable ag are a big part of that. This was not state law, but it was funded by a number of funders, primarily the Kellogg Foundation. And since 2011, since I came to the center, that has been a core part of the center's work, is to help advocate for some of those party action items in the Michigan Good Food Charter.

I kept tabs with what was happening at the Leopold Center in Iowa. Apparently after the 2016 election there was some pressure from legislators to say that the Leopold Center had done its job, there really wasn't a need to keep funding the center. And sometime in 2017 the legislature did pass a bill that didn't close the Leopold Center, but closed its funding. While I was still at the Leopold Center, I think it was 2009 or 2010, the center received a \$4 million endowment from a donor. And [the interest on] those [\$4 million] dollars, to my understanding, those are the only dollars that are left that fund the Leopold Center [since its funding was terminated in 2017]. There is no staff except for the director. Their impact has been greatly curtailed because of their lack of funding. And clearly the center still had a lot of important work to do. The decision was primarily political. It had a great run, it lasted for 30 years and I think made a significant impact in the Iowa food and farming communities.

And I know Iowa continues to have some very strong organizations like Practical Farmers of Iowa. Incidentally, I was, for one year, I was part-time associate director at Practical Farmers of Iowa while the director was trying to complete his master's degree. The Leopold Center always had a great working relationship with Practical Farmers of Iowa. And I learned firsthand some of the work that they were doing. It is an amazing organization that has always remained focused on how it can benefit and aid farmers that are interested in exploring profitable and environmentally sound farming practices. They've always stayed true to that mission and haven't really had what I would call "mission creep," which I think has really aided and helped them to grow over time. I believe they have something like 25 staff now. And I think you're going to be interviewing people from Practical Farmers of Iowa later, but I have just very positive things. That model is, there aren't many other organizations that have lasted, and the

vision that its original founders had and the number of allies, both within the public and private sector and the university system, have really made it a lasting organization that I think will last long into the future. The fact that many of their members, right now their membership is reaching far beyond Iowa. They have hundreds of members outside of Iowa. Their membership keeps growing at very high rates. And they're just well-positioned to be a force throughout this century. (16:38)

AA: Thank you. That's all really interesting. My next question is about farming methods. Have you actually done much farming, or mostly just been an organization leader?

RP: When I was in Extension years ago, I would help do some small plot work, but other than gardening I've never done any farming from the standpoint of trying to make a living at it.

AA: Well if there's anything you're interested in commenting on about farming methods, organic versus sustainable, you can do that. If not, we can move on to the next question.

RP: I would just, I think my comment, I think there's still some, the general public still conflates the two, as I think do a lot of folks that aren't that involved in agriculture. To me, I think what has been good, the good part of it is that the sustainable ag movement has always been a larger tent that has included organic agriculture but isn't limited to organic agriculture. One of the previous directors of the Leopold Center, Fred Kirschenmann, was a nationally and internationally known organic farmer. And I think Fred is an example, he really understood the importance of lifting both organic and sustainable agriculture as both worthy comments.

The idea of sustainable agriculture, though, I think has always been a bit hard to define. One of the questions has always been, "Sustainable for whom?" Is it sustainable for the farmers, the communities? As we continue to have in agriculture and farming issues where it's difficult for farmers to be profitable because they often don't have enough influence to have enough countervailing economic power in the food supply chain. Organic and certain types of sustainable production practices have given them certain price point benefits that I believe have been very helpful in keeping farmers on the land and being able to make a profit. I'll just stop there, maybe we can look at some other questions that are more specific than organics versus sustainable ag. (19:37)

AA: So I'm curious to hear about your philosophies about sustainable agriculture, and also curious to hear about how you moved from sustainable agriculture in general to local food in particular.

RP: When I started at the Leopold Center as an educational coordinator, I was very focused on, the primary task I had was to be able to introduce the concept of sustainable agriculture to not only the farming community but to other researchers and educators at the university, at Iowa State in this case, and nonprofit organizations and other food and farm businesses. And as we did that work, I would say in the early days at the Leopold Center our focus was primarily—as it should be, because the center was part of the Groundwater Protection Act—there was a significant focus on agricultural practices that would protect and preserve water quality. That continued until the Leopold Center's end in 2017 as I described it earlier.

What I found interesting was, this was very small but growing movement in the early 90s, movement around community supported agriculture and the idea of local food as a way for farmers to have more economic power in the supply chain. Because it was something that would bring farmers and consumers closer together, provide more opportunities for partnership and shared values and ideas. What seemed ironic was, here we were at big sustainable ag farming conferences in the very early '90s, and we would have these conference, and there'd be either lunches or dinner, and the food could be coming from anywhere. If there was a lunch, it was almost certain that the apples were from Washington, even though Iowa still had a small apple industry, and actually at one time had a very big apple industry. We had no idea, if there was meat served at the lunch or dinner, where it was coming from. The vegetables that were served, again, there was no idea.

By the early '90s as the CSA movement started to get hold, I was involved with—actually one of my students, even though I was not faculty, I had summer students and interns all the time in my years there—I helped support one of my students and some partners of hers and one or two other faculty to help create—I played a very minor role—but to help create first a CSA in Iowa. And just seeing firsthand what some of the benefits were was a tipping point for me, in seeing that local food could play an important part in the work of the Leopold Center and in sustainable agriculture because of the economic and social potential benefits of communities purchasing more of their food supply that was grown and/or processed and distributed locally or regionally.

And so by the late '90s the center began funding, I'd say by '96 or '97. Actually '95. By '95 we started to fund our first grants around local and regional food systems. Doing simple things like introducing local foods, doing pilots at a local, independently-owned restaurant, or having the food service at a conference center or an institution or a hospital serve more local food to its staff. Maybe not necessarily the patients, but the staff, the cafeteria in the hospital. And those early pilots were quite successful in identifying a lot of challenges in being able to make a local food enterprise work, including the fact that most of the food service buyers and restaurant buyers were used to just ordering from a company and the truck coming, and they didn't give any thought to where it came from, but they could do everything with one company, usually a food service management company like Sysco or U.S. Foods. And the idea of local foods posed new challenges because there were very few farmers that could handle all their needs, so they had to work with multiple farmers. So we quickly ran into some major challenges. It was far easier for, say, a high-end restaurant to be able to procure local foods because they had more flexibility in their price and menus to be able to pass those costs on to their restaurant patrons. But a college or a university didn't have that luxury, they were on more fixed budgets. They wanted to have more simple systems of ordering and procuring local and regional foods.

And so that began the work around what's now been called farm-to-institution work, where we—I was in Iowa, this was happening around the country, other states also were looking at what would be the most ideal ways to procure more local and regional food by either having the farmers form some kind of network, having somebody actually do some of the brokering, usually this came from grants, nonprofits helping to be that middle person between the farmer and the institutions, to make it work. And this was certainly happening in Iowa, Practical Farmers of Iowa were a leader in doing some of that work.

But it all started with my own growing awareness and seeing some of the students and others at Iowa State embracing local food and seeing how it worked. And that program became a major program at the Leopold Center and was a passion of my own work throughout the '90s

and into the early 2000s. When I was at Leopold we started to produce some papers in addition to the grants, we started to produce some applied research papers on things like food miles, which is how far food is traveling, where foods that we were purchasing in the stores were coming from, are local foods more costly? And so this work would augment what we were already funding in our grant program, and also increase the public awareness of the center in a lot of sectors because local food at that time, probably in the late '90s or early 2000s, was very popular and was getting a lot of press as it was being seen as one answer to some of the dilemmas in the farming business. (28:30)

AA: Thanks for sharing that. That's really intriguing, because I've been interested in local food, and just kind of hearing about how that started is really interesting. Is there anything you want to share about personal perspectives or views on the connection of organic or sustainable agriculture to the broader historical, cultural context, maybe how other movements or things have influenced it?

RP: Yes. I think in a broad sense the organic and sustainable ag movements in this country, when you look at them through what is happening, especially in the last few years, and certainly even more hyped since the national growing awareness after George Floyd was murdered, that the movements were very, the leaders of the movements, the thought leaders were primarily white farmers. Probably more than anything white Christian farmers. And in my own journey—and this was true both in sustainable and organic agriculture—my own learning journey of this process, it's become clear that it was just part of a continued sort of what I would call universalistic thinking that the dominant culture, in this case the white culture in this country, that narrative is the narrative that a lot of what has been written in the history of the local movement, of the sustainable ag movement, to some extent the organic movement. It takes on, the heroes tend, most of the heroes are white, a large number of them are white males.

There were many people whose stories I think, especially during the farm crisis of the '80s, one example is Booker T. Whatley. Not Booker T. Washington, Booker T. Whatley is an example of someone who really was writing about how farmers could survive, small-scale farmers could survive using more direct marketing activities and by using environmentally sound activities. Some of these figures like Booker T. Whatley, you can't find them easily in information about local foods and sustainable agriculture, yet they were there. I personally had a chance to hear Booker T. Whatley at what was called a Farm Adapt conference that was put on by *Successful Farming* magazine in 1986 or 1987, I think it was 1987. And he had a very big following. But it was clear that, Booker T. Whatley was an African American, the narrative of other cultures and races around sustainable ag, about more indigenous foods, that was not part of the early story.

And it is becoming more a part of that story now as more and more people that get involved in sustainable ag, organic agriculture, and local foods look at the history and the epistemology of how these movements evolved and developed and realize that there are many stories to tell. The Native American community, and their use of more indigenous foods, and then as they became indoctrinated and Americanized, their kids were sent to boarding and training schools, they lost a lot of their—they didn't completely lose—but they lost a lot of their cultures and their foodways and they're now working to regain those. With African Americans, it was the issue of the stigma of slavery, that I think for a number of generations the idea of going

back to farming for many was difficult. And I still see that today. But I see changes, because we see more African American leaders in issues around food sovereignty and food justice.

And so these new elements of the sustainable ag movement, I think we're starting to see a better telling of the narrative, a more comprehensive narrative, a narrative that lifts up some of the disparities that existed, both within the land grant system between the 1862 land grants [the term "1862" refers to the year the Morrill Act was passed, which established land grant universities], which are like Michigan State, usually white-led, white-founded, the 1890 historically black colleges and universities, and the 1994 tribal colleges. There's fascinating stories of how they evolved. Up until more recently, in the past few decades, very little attention was paid to the economic disparity that continued to put the 1890 institutions and the newer 1994 institutions in a more difficult position. They did not have the capacity to go after grants, to build the kind of levels of capacity in teaching, research, and extension that the 1862s had because of the way funding mechanisms were set up. Of course the 1890s—I don't know if this will be part of the overall story, but a brief bit of the story is that the 1890s were created in part because it was required that land grants offer equal access to teaching and research. And they were able to change the language so that "separate but equal" was included. And that's what really started the 1890 institutions. But they from the get-go were poorly funded. And they did not have the capacity and the financial support that the 1862s have had.

I think I've gone off on a bit of a tangent there, we can maybe come back to the original question. So I'll just stop now and see if we can get back to the question. (36:41)

AA: There's one thing that I'm curious about. So, with the exception of Booker T. Whatley, what year or general timeframe would you say that more of the African American and indigenous people kind of came into the sustainable agriculture movement, kind of got move involved in that?

RP: There were people, and I'm having a hard time remembering her name, there was a Native American woman [Winona LaDuke] who was involved in the sustainable ag movement from the early '90s. She ran for president as an independent years ago. There were individuals, but I would say it's really, it's been in part because of the shift—several things. There's been a shift in funding of foundations that were supporting sustainable ag and food systems to recognize the disparity that they were funding primarily white-led organizations and white-led institutions. And they started to make a conscious shift about 10-15 years ago. I would say that this idea around food sovereignty, which I think is still not as well understood, the Slow Food movement in Europe, founded in Italy, certainly had some influence. But essentially we're talking about the right of people to determine the aspects of their food system as opposed to what was the case in this country, when we would use food as a policy tool. I remember grad students when I was in [graduate] school from Latin America, they would get food surplus, the equivalent of Velveeta cheese and beans and other things that were surplus items, wheat and other grains that came from the US. Had never had white bread, just white wheat flour and other things like that.

Also another real important thing that's changed, in addition to the focus on racial equity that has influenced the sustainable ag and organic movements, is a much closer relationship and understanding of the intersection between food and health. As we saw in the '90s and the 2000s, through the last decade as well, the growing trend in the increase in obesity in the United States, and the link between that increase and areas that, the term that has been used is "food deserts" or "food swamps," areas that either don't have a lot of access to healthy food, like full-line grocery

stores, or the term “food swamps,” they have plenty of food, it’s just that most of the food is junky, unhealthy food, potato chips, high-sugar snacks, high-salt snacks, fried, high-fat, shelf-stable products. These intersection areas of food and health, food and racial equity, food and placemaking or the importance of having stable housing, not having to worry about a roof over one’s head—they all I think were coming together more and more. And food systems and sustainable ag and in organics, in that you rarely hear anybody talking about just purely the sustainable ag and organics just from the standpoint of the environment. The social issues have become very, very pronounced in sustainable and organic food. In the early ’90s that was not the case. That has evolved, as I said, very rapidly over the last 10-15 years.

And I think it certainly has created a wider umbrella of practitioners to be able to solve the problems, because it’s never been, the problems have never been one-dimensional, they’ve always been multi-dimensional. And I see that happening in the future as a lot of the work in the food system movement where the funding is federal government and foundations has been around healthy food access, seeing more how do we get people in low-income communities having more access to healthy, fresh food? And they’ve married that with, much of that food should be as local as possible, and free of pesticides, so there’s that connection to sustainability and organics.

But what has become clear I think more recently, in the past five years, is that just addressing healthy food access may not be enough to address some of the issues of racialized poverty and the upstream issues like redlining, which have created kind of living conditions and neighborhoods that continue to sort of foster poverty in many places across the country and many cities. I feel very optimistic that even though the challenges we face now seem immense because they’re so complicated, but we’re more on the road to I think addressing some of the root causes because the sustainable and organic movements have included local foods, included all these other issues around healthy food access, food sovereignty, food justice, that I think are critical to really changing the food system.

Some of the problems, the political and economic problems still remain the same, in that too few parties, usually larger food businesses, control too much of the information. They reduce their risk by putting the risk onto other parts of the food supply chain, usually the farmers or farm workers. And so those that have the least political and economic power are usually the ones that have to take the most risk. And so we have issues today that connect. It’s that issue around farm workers is obviously a politically very thorny one from the standpoint of how people about immigrants coming into this country. (44:56)

AA: So I’m curious. One of my questions here is about your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural, especially the land grant universities, and organic/sustainable agriculture and how that’s changed over the years. And I’m especially interested in hearing your comparison between Iowa State and Michigan State, since you’ve been at both.

RP: Yeah. I think, as I said, the relationship—At Iowa State, I started in 1990 at the Leopold Center, it was clear that there was support within the university, which I think was essential. There was a person who may be on your list, Jerry DeWitt, who was the director of ag extension. And he had developed a very close relationship with the leaders of Practical Farmers of Iowa. And I think part of what gave legitimacy to the organic and sustainable ag movement in Iowa was the fact that there was a very organized effort on the part of the farmers. And the farmers believed in, the founders were very adamant about doing on-farm research. And both Jerry

DeWitte championed this, as did other researchers that were coming into the university at Iowa State. And I really think the legitimization of on-farm research and the acceptance of it by the research community really made it easier at Iowa State to at least do the work. And created a space at the Leopold Center to provide funding to do more on-farm research. We would fund Practical Farmers of Iowa to conduct some of their trials.

The flip side of that was there was still suspicions and concern by the ag industry in Iowa that the sustainable ag movement was out to rid the industry of chemicals and fertilizers and that would mean putting a lot of people out of business. I think Practical Farmers of Iowa played an important role, although organic was part, there were some organic farmers. Most of the farmers were just reducing their inputs of fertilizers and chemicals. And over time I think the ag industry saw that a way to move forward, constructive way to move forward was to increase the offering of services to farmers and management rather than trying to rely just on the sales of chemicals and fertilizers. Matter of fact, there were several programs at the Leopold Center, Practical Farmers of Iowa worked on with cooperative extension, to help increase farmers' acceptance of the idea that things like scouting for pests and taking the late spring nitrogen soil test were tools that could reduce the use of inputs, however would require some services that an agribusiness could supply. So it was substituting services for fertilizers and chemicals. That was at least the approach we took in Iowa that was I think constructive and had some success.

I was not here in Michigan in the early days of sustainable ag movement. But there's a big difference in the states in that Iowa is very much a commodity state of corn and beans, a little bit of wheat, a little bit of alfalfa, and then hogs and cattle and eggs. To some extent hay. While Michigan usually ranks as the second or third most agriculturally diverse state in the country, having lots of horticultural crops, both for food and non-food. And so coming to Michigan, the idea of fruits and vegetables as a niche crop was not a reality here. Fruits and vegetables were a major crop. Their commodity systems for fruits and vegetables were well-organized, certainly relative to Iowa, and played a major role in the state, as did dairy and eggs and beef and to a lesser extent pork and corn and soybeans.

So the ag industries in the two states were a bit different. And so we had more, there was more room to work here. There also was much stronger in Michigan the foundation support of foundations like the Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, that were focusing on issues of health and had made major, major contributions to Michigan State, politically made it more acceptable for us to work in local and regional food systems. What I hear, and I think some of your other interviewees like George Bird and John Biernbaum will be able to tell you the earlier stories of the challenges around organics that Michigan faced, but for me coming here it was, there was just a lot more acceptance around local and regional food, there was a lot more acceptance that it was a significant part of the state's economy. In Iowa I would hear at times, it was true, that fruits and vegetables were such a tiny part of the economy that it really wasn't going to make that much of a difference. Although a lot of the small farmers in Iowa, like many states, to get started they would work in places where they had a full-time job and they were able to sell at farmers' markets where they were part of a CSA or something like that.

So things were more mature in the local and regional food industry, there was more capacity here in Michigan. And because of the foundation support, there's more general acceptance. However, at both universities, at Iowa State and Michigan State, and I think it's true around the country, the programs still are not mainstream enough. It's still mostly grant-funded. The Center for Regional Food Systems is still mostly grant funded. There are very few positions at Michigan State, and that would be true at Iowa State, that are hard-money positions that have

organic and sustainable ag. There are a few. Iowa State was the first program to offer, I believe in the country to offer a graduate program in sustainable agriculture. That happened during my time there, while I was at the Leopold Center. And it attracted a number of faculty who wanted to be part of a sustainable ag program. But both states are still dominated by positions that are still serving mostly commodity-based agriculture. In this case here, it's just, in Michigan, that commodity agriculture is far more diverse. So I'll stop there. (53:59)

AA: Thank you. Yeah, that's really interesting, especially the differences in the crops between Iowa and Michigan. So is there anything you want to say about any involvement you had in organic organizations? I know you've said a little about the Practical Farmers of Iowa. Are there any others you were involved in, or anything you want to share about that?

RP: While at Iowa, and Jerry DeWitt played a key role in this, in creating an organic research faculty position at Iowa State. And that person, who I believe is still there, Kathleen Delate, helped further legitimize organic research at Iowa State, was continuing to do long-term trials around organics. Another researcher, Matt Liebman at Iowa State, who I believe is still there [Matt retired at the end of 2021], who was or still is the Henry A. Wallace Chair for Sustainable Ag, has done a lot of long-term studies, cropping systems, comparing different rotations and compared to the corn-soybean rotation and found different rotations to be more profitable in the long run. And the organic research has I think disproven some of the assumptions about organic, that it's always going to be low-yield, that it's always going to be unprofitable.

So I have not been involved actively in the Organic Trade Association or organic organization, but the work in Iowa, through the work of the nationally-funded Organic Research Foundation, which was originally based in California, its founder was Bob Scowcroft, they really heavily legitimized the work around organic research. And certain markets continue to command higher prices, which provide avenues for farmers. Certainly Organic Valley as an organization has been able to, in your own state of Wisconsin, and other states around the country, including Michigan, have been able to provide a livelihood for dairy farmers to remain in farming, for other farmers, providing other types of products to remain in farming.

I still think there's confusion in the marketplace for the average consumer between organic and sustainable. There are a number of eco-brands that have come out. A lot of food products do have certain types of labeling on them other than organic that differentiate them. For example, antibiotic-free for meat and egg products, humanely-raised products would be another category. And those products usually command higher market value and higher prices. And they continue to create some niches. That said, the organic industry is certainly much bigger, it's more owned now than it ever has been by large multi-national companies. And often is the case—not always—but often is the case as with all industries, food industries, where the supply chain is controlled by larger players, there's pressures, risk is put on the players that have less economic power, which usually is farmers and farm workers, food service workers, people who play an important role in the food system.

At our Center for Regional Food Systems, we have one specialist—I have 13 content area staff—only one focuses on organics, and she splits her time between that and beginning farmers. We certainly have a small organic industry in this state. I do think, you can see this if you go from state to state, where there's a strong program at the land grant institution, or land grants in the case of those states that have an 1862 and an 1890, if there's a strong program in organics, there's more likelihood that you'll see more organic farmers. Because over years they've helped

not only conduct research but create market opportunities for those producers. It's no coincidence that organics, there's been faculty at the University of Wisconsin that have embraced organics, and that certainly has been a benefit to Wisconsin organic farmers, has been a benefit to Organic Valley. Organic Valley also has been a benefit back to the university in providing the kind of resources, and having them do on-farm work, whether it's in the dairy industry, in meats, or in fruits and vegetables to be able to support the industry.

What's needed, like it is in any food industry, is there's a combination of, there needs to be a strong research base, education base, support from the state department of agriculture and staff that are supportive of that industry. And a willing farmer base. If one or more farm-based organizations or nonprofits like Practical Farmers of Iowa that are willing to put the focus on providing more comprehensive support for all the different areas that farmers face challenges in. (1:00:36)

AA: So you said a little about organics versus sustainable. Is there anything else you want to share about your perspective on organic certification, and whether that's been positive or negative? I know there's a lot of views out there, I'm curious.

RP: Again, this was not an area, organic certification is not an area I'm an expert in. I know from my staff person that works in this area that the paperwork is challenging for producers. Getting help from nonprofit organizations and from extension is certainly, in those states where there is more of that kind of help, I think again that help supports the farmers. There are some farmers who have left organics because they don't see the price premium being large enough for them for all the transaction costs and time they put in. Food safety concerns have further complicated the issue around that. What is needed for farmers, I think as far as their paperwork, to be able to sell to larger volume buyers. I think it does make a difference if those transaction costs are usually the major challenge, and being able to have the support systems in place and organizations is a big, makes a difference. Those states that have more of that support system are going to have more organic farmers. (1:02:20)

AA: Thank you so much. Is there anything you want to share your perspective on past and current trends? And you're already talked a lot about this earlier, anything you might want to share about why some things are controversial, or maybe what the most important aspects of this history are to preserve and to teach to the younger generations?

RP: Yeah. I am repeating myself a bit from what I said earlier. But I do think teaching the younger generations a more racially and culturally diverse narrative of the evolution of sustainable and organic and local food movements I think is really important, because there were players, and there's more of that history. As somebody who's been involved in this work for over 30 years, it's really only within the last 10 years as a white male that I've come to understand and appreciate the richness of that history and that, I think it could have influenced my work more earlier on if more of us had received that education. Also, that same education around, not only the movements, but how the land grant system operates, and how USDA works and functions, I think is really critical for young people to understand who want to go into this work, to understand the importance of the system but also some of the economic and social disparities that the system caused that kept the capacity of historically black colleges and more recently tribal colleges to be able to be able to do, have more expanded program offerings. Most of these,

certainly the tribal colleges are still just focused on teaching and just a very small amount of research. That's starting to change, and we're starting to see the federal programs change. So I think that's real important.

And also this issue of intersectionality I think is really critical, being able to understand that in and of itself having sustainable farming practices won't necessarily create vibrant communities, that it's a combination of a number of factors and social influences that include placemaking, good local and state policies, good local leadership, that will create incentives around the food system to create economic opportunities in other industries and also create economic opportunities and more opportunities for ownership of land. I think that's going to be a critical issue moving forward for sustainable and organic ag, one that I still don't see significant answers to, about how do we create more opportunities for ownership of community assets, whether it be land, businesses, buildings, whether you're a farmer or a food entrepreneur. The ownership of assets is a way to begin to break the poverty cycle. Whether you're farming or a food entrepreneur or you're influenced by farmers or food entrepreneurs, I think creating wealth through the ownership of assets is part of the answer in the future. And we need to be able to see more research in organic and sustainable ag that moves in that direction.

We already know a lot of really good practices. I know we need to continue to build our research on those practices, but it's some of these really tough nuts around policy and the way businesses and land is owned that make it very difficult for future farmers and for future food entrepreneurs, particularly those farmers and food entrepreneurs of color and women farmers and food entrepreneurs to really thrive. Luckily we're seeing more changes in those programs. I just drafted some comments to the USDA on behalf of the center. Their call for comments around food justice and racial equity, how their programs could move more in that direction.

So we're seeing I think more positive developments. But I think all those pieces need to be more front and center. How do we operationalize equity in food businesses? How do we operationalize equity in food and organic and sustainable ag education? Or I think important parts, we owe it to our future generations and what has already been laid before us to accept these challenges and move ahead in a way that we don't turn back and, as difficult as it is, we try to create a sustainable future that we can also say equity is part of that future. And that we won't be able to in the future find these disparities in the data where black farmers own less land, they're poorer per capita, that Black food entrepreneurs get fewer loans, the list goes on and on. We need to see those differences disappear, and that's part of how we'll know if those changes have occurred.

AA: Thank you. Is there anything else you want to say before we wrap up?

RP: I think we've covered, I'm repeating myself, so I'm not sure. I don't think I have anything, unless there's some other question you have.

AA: I think I've asked all my questions. So thank you very much for sharing all of that; that was really interesting. (1:09:23)