

Harriet Behar, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

November 6, 2023

HB = Harriet Behar

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is November 6, 2023, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing

HB: Harriet Behar.

AA: So Harriet, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview today!

HB: You're welcome.

AA: So why don't we start with you telling me a little about when and where you were born, and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

HB: I was born in New York City in November of 1954. Actually, tomorrow is my birthday. And no connection with agriculture, but as a child we went up into the Catskills every summer and lived in what was called a "bungalow colony." We left the day after school ended, and we came back the day before school started. And I got to run in the woods, in the fields, and play with the monarch butterflies, hunt for salamanders, and all kinds of stuff like that. So when I had a choice to decide where I was going to go to college, I came to Madison, and what I liked was that I could get on my three-speed bike and get on the edge of town. Madison was much smaller in the '70s than it is now. So no connection with agriculture, but very connected, I was very involved in high school. I was the editor-in-chief of my high school paper, I was on the student council. And the first Earth Day, I organized a whole environmental teach-in and all of that. So I'd say much more environmental than agriculture. (1:59)

AA: So was it Earth Day that got you interested in the environment, or was it a little before that?

HB: Oh, it was before that.

AA: Was there anything specific that got you interested in that?

HB: Well, the world was a mess. I remember Lake Erie caught on fire. Air pollution was a big deal. So it was kind of like, as a young person, if something wasn't done about the environment, there wasn't going to be an earth. And of course we're still in that situation. The Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act really made a huge difference.

AA: So you went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison then?

HB: I did.

AA: And what were you studying?

HB: Journalism.

AA: Okay, so you didn't really have any connection with agriculture at that time when you were in college?

HB: Not really, no.

AA: Did you do anything with, I know in Madison they were starting up the food co-ops during that time. Did you go to any of those while you were a student?

HB: Oh, yes, definitely. That was where I did all my shopping, was at Mifflin Street Co-op, which was right nearby. And then we were members of this thing called Common Market, which was a large buying club. And then I had some friends that were living out on a farm, and I eventually moved out on that farm, too, and started growing vegetables. I ended up selling vegetables to all the co-ops and natural food restaurants in Madison for a couple years. And also was at the very first Madison farmers' market.

AA: What was that like, the first farmers' market?

HB: Well, it was kind of small compared to what it is now. I don't think we even took up the whole square. But there was definitely a need. Although, I remember getting a lot of questions like, "Did you go to the grocery store and buy this and then bring it here?" I was like, "No, I grew it!" Some people didn't understand that you could grow vegetables.

AA: So was that while you were still a student, that you started growing vegetables. (4:35)

HB: Yeah, during the summer, yeah. Then I also got a job while I was in college. I was the very first woman to work for the Madison Parks Department. And my job interview was, "Okay, push that wheelbarrow!" And I got a job at Olbrich Botanical Gardens. It really seemed kind of crazy to me that women didn't work at the botanical gardens. But I was the very first one. And I will say that there was kind of harassment. Not sexually, but the various men who didn't like it, they'd come up to me and say, "You took our job. You shouldn't be working here. This is what men should do." Gave me a hard time.

So then actually after working there about three weeks, they hired another woman. And they made us a crew. So we ended up not working with the other men. Because it was kind of uncomfortable for us. They gave us things to do, and they did their thing. Then I worked there a second year, and by then things had kind of calmed down. The first year they wouldn't even let me drive the lawnmower. It didn't really make any sense. But that was when things were changing. It was like, can women drive a lawnmower? I think women rode lawnmowers in the '70s. I don't know.

So I did actually learn quite a bit there. I only worked during the summer, so I didn't do a lot of seed starting and potting. But I did a lot of planting and weeding. One of my favorite jobs, which the men hated to do, was pruning the rose garden. Which they don't have anymore. But

they had this very large rose garden, and every week we had to trim back the dying flowers. So you had to look at every flower and decide if it would make it to the next week or if it should be clipped. And then of course I would get all of these flower heads, and I'd make potpourri for all my friends. So that was kind of fun. It was interesting. I worked two years for the Parks Department at Olbrich Gardens. And we did other stuff, too. We planted the flowerbeds at the City Hall on Martin Luther King Boulevard, and lots of different things like that. We worked around the city, too, not only at Olbrich. (7:57)

AA: So then, what did you do after you graduated?

HB: Well, then I moved to that farm and started—what did I do? I actually became a weaver. I went to art fairs. Between art fairs and growing vegetables, that was how I made my living. I did a whole variety of different things. Sometimes I would go to farmers' markets and have a wide variety of vegetables. Some years I just made agreements with the stores and said, "I'll supply you all your spinach in the spring and fall, or I'll supply you onions, or I'll supply you sweet corn." And then I concentrated on two or three crops instead of growing lots of different crops. (9:00)

AA: So were you farming organically at that time?

HB: Oh, yes. Although there were no organic rules at that time.

AA: Right. So what got you interested in organic farming? Were there any people or books?

HB: Well, the environmental side of it. I read Rodale's *Organic Gardening* magazine and all of that. And to me it was kind of also really this partnership. It was very exciting to me to try to understand the natural cycles, the natural systems. What are the predators for these insects? And then trying to grow beneficial plants that attracted those predators. Why were we getting these diseases? What can we do about that? If we mulched, if we didn't mulch, whatever it was, it was trying to understand the systems and the cycles within nature and using those tools, instead of going out and buying chemicals that warned, "Wear rubber gloves, wear face masks," all of that. So it was very exciting, and especially of course when you had some successes. Wow, that really worked! And you just felt kind of part of nature instead of always fighting against it. (10:46)

AA: So then what farming methods did you use?

HB: Well, whatever we could find. I read a lot of books at the library, took out a lot of organic gardening books. Of course I had a subscription to *Organic Gardening*. There was a group of other farmers at one point, for two or three years. The co-ops and the natural foods restaurants in Madison talked to all the farmers that were selling them vegetables, and we set up a system so that we the farmers were not necessarily competing with each other, and the stores then knew they could get the full array of food they wanted locally. So there was this group of about 15 farmers that would meet with the co-ops every January or February. And it would be like, "Yeah, I'll be first in cucumbers, and then somebody else will be second to make sure we have enough." It was somewhat complicated, but it kind of worked out. On Sunday nights you would call in, and the stores had already called in your orders. You would say who you were, and they had the

list, “Okay, this is how many cucumbers Mifflin Street wanted, this many cases. And Willy Street wanted this many cases.”

Anyway, there were those other farmers. And we worked together. So I visited a lot of their farms and talked to them. We on our own worked out which varieties we were going to grow, so that if I didn’t have enough cucumbers, the other person’s cucumbers would still kind of look like mine. If I only had three cases and the store wanted five cases, they wouldn’t have two different kinds of cucumbers that week. So I would say I learned from other growers.

And then in 1988 Organic Valley started. And I was actually in South America at the time. And they actually had all these classes for their vegetable growers all through the winter, but I didn’t get home until May. And I saw the information about it, and I really wanted to get involved. But they said, “We’re kind of overwhelmed, it’s our first year.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll join up with you next year.” So I did my own thing that summer. And then that fall I went to a meeting, and they had a list going around saying, “We have this need for volunteers.” So I signed up for one of the volunteer jobs, which was going around to the farms and estimating for the seller, the person who’s marketing the vegetables, how many cases of various things would be available the following week, so that he would know what to say to the buyers, what he had to sell. As well as, I drove around with books, insect identification, disease identification, and if they needed some organically approved material, I had kelp and fish emulsion with me that the co-op sold to them to make it easier, because it wasn’t as readily available as it is now, the organically approved things.

So I signed up for that, and then somebody called me and said, “Oh, that was a mistake. First of all you’re the only person who signed up to do that.” I couldn’t believe that, because I thought it was so interesting. And they said, “It’s actually a job. We want to hire you to do this.” Now of course, I had not had a job for like 15 years. The last job I had was at the botanical gardens. Or ten years, or something. And so I had to think about it. So I only did like one or two art fairs that next summer, because I did take the job. And so that’s how my time at Organic Valley started. (16:03)

That summer, I went around to all these farms. It was really a lot of fun. And talked, helped the farmers, and estimated. Because I had that experience all those years, selling cases of produce to the stores in Madison, and a whole variety of different things. So I had a pretty good eye, if I looked at a field of cucumbers I could tell how many cases that was going to make.

In August of that first year, the person who was selling the produce said, “I am going to go to my friend’s wedding in Colorado.” I said, “Oh, okay.” He said, “You’re going to have to sell the produce.” I said, “When?” He said that to me on Friday. He said, “I’m leaving tomorrow, and I won’t be back for two weeks.” I said, “What?” And he said, “Well, you can do this. Here’s the telephone, here’s the Rolodex, go at it.” And I kind of knew, I knew where all the invoices were, I knew who he was selling to, and how much they were buying. And the Rolodex gave me the name of the person I should ask for. Do you know what a Rolodex is?

AA: No, what is that?

HB: Oh, it’s one of those round things that had little cards on it that you spun around, and you could then read all the different things and phone numbers.

AA: Ah.

HB: So that next Monday, I went in. And of course you've got to understand that I had been working with these growers since February, helping them choose varieties. I knew all their kids' names, I knew their dogs, I knew everything about this family. Because I had visited most of the farms at least four or five times. So I was motivated. I really wanted to sell the stuff. And the first day—and if you think about it, most sales jobs are all about relationships. So here I am calling, and they don't know me from anywhere. And I say, "I'm filling in for Greg," and they didn't care. "Oh, never mind." So I came home. I hadn't sold a thing. And I was devastated, and I cried myself to sleep. But then the next morning I woke up, and I said, "I am not going to take no from anybody. I'm going to ask them questions." So I get on the phone, I start calling.

And I'm looking at the prices, and I'm like, "This is not right." I knew that there were quite a few stores, and I thought, "Why aren't we selling directly to the stores? We're so close to Madison, and we have a truck. We have a refrigerated truck, we have a truck driver. Maybe we should do that." And so I completely changed everything. The previous guy was selling everything wholesale and shipping most of it out to the East Coast. I decided that we should just sell locally. Because that's what I do. So I called all the stores in Madison, and I knew a lot of the people there. They were very interested, so that first week, I think on Thursday, by then I had sold everything out of the cooler going to stores in Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago. Everything was gone at much higher prices, because they gave us the price that the distributor would have charged them, versus us just getting that and the wholesaler making their money.

So when the guy came back from his vacation, the general manager said, "We're going to give you a different job, because she's doing a much better job than you. Because we're not throwing away any produce." And that was my thing, I wasn't going to throw away any produce. I even sold some of the organic produce, if we had a lot I sold it at conventional prices. But the way Organic Valley worked is when you sold a case of something, you didn't get the exact prices that that specific case sold at. You got a pooled price. So if I got three different prices for cucumbers, there was an average price for those. And that was what everybody got, was the average. So that's how my time at Organic Valley started. (21:44)

AA: So you mentioned that—now it wasn't called Organic Valley when you first started. It was the CROPP Cooperative, right?

HB: Yeah. "Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool" is the way we answered the phone.

AA: And you said you were instrumental in choosing that name "Organic Valley." So how did that come about?

HB: So the previous year they started making cheese. There were seven dairy farmers, and it went to eight. There was about eight dairy farmers for the first two or three years, and then they added a few more. So that first year they started making organic cheese. And there was a big distributor in Madison called North Farm that sold to all the natural foods outlets around the upper Midwest. There was another one in Minnesota/Iowa called Blooming Prairie. There was a network of them. There were probably around 14 of them around the country. And North Farm had their own brand name on cheese. Because we're in Wisconsin, they sold all this natural cheese to all the other co-ops around the country. So then CROPP went to them and said, "Do you want to carry a line of organic cheese?" And they were very interested. So they made their own label, "North Farm Organic Cheese." And they started selling that all around the country.

That year that I took over the selling of the produce—remember I said that was in August—it was in the months of November and December, North Farm didn't buy any cheese. Zero. And we were like, "What?! What is going on?" And we couldn't get a straight answer out of them. So in late December the dairy farmers were having a meeting. I was at the meeting, and they were saying, "We have got to find out what is going on." And at that time the premier organic market for organic foods was California. So they said, "We have to send somebody out there to go figure this out, what is going on." So all the farmers, eight dairy farmers, they each put a hundred dollars in the middle of the table. And we took two hundred dollars out of the money that CROPP had—we were running on a shoestring—and they said, "Harriet, go to California and find out what is going on."

I knew some of the people who were going, there was this thing called the EcoFarm conference, which is still happening. So I of course went to that. I rented a car, and I stayed at youth hostels, because a thousand dollars wasn't going to get me very far. I was out in California. This included the car, the airfare, and everything. For a thousand dollars I stayed out in California for a month.

And I drove from southern California all the way up through California. I have to say, the youth hostels are always in very beautiful places! And I visited over 50 natural food stores. But pretty soon after I first got there, I found out what the problem was. And the problem was that North Farm, for some of their organic stuff—I don't know why it didn't go with the regular cheese. But somehow, the organic cheese ended up on a different truck. And it ended up with all their grocery items that North Farm was distributing. They gave it to these distributors who didn't have refrigerated trucks. So this is California. And it doesn't freeze out there. It's not that cold.

In those days—this was 1989—organic produce was known to be kind of ugly and have blemishes. Not like now. People wanted organic, and the farmers were just learning how to grow it, so that was the reputation. So the stores just thought, "This cheese is kind of slimy, and it's just because it's organic." But it was because it came on a non-refrigerated truck.

So I found all this out within the first three or four days. And that all changed what I was doing out there for a month. So then I started talking to stores, "Who delivers your cheese? Who are your distributors?" Then I got the names of all these different distributors that North Farm was using. Some of them were the same; some were different. So then I started visiting the distributors. I went to southern California, and then I started going to the distributors. I had information, I had a little photo album to show them what the farmers looked like. I went all over; I think I visited like twelve distributors by the time it was all done.

I came home, and I said, "All right! I have orders from these distributors." So we had to go to North Farm and asked them, and they just said, "Don't get into our business." They were very confrontational. They didn't like it that we had even found out what they were doing. And we were like, "Our cheese is arriving in the stores in really bad condition. It could even hurt somebody to give them slimy cheese."

At that time there was some tobacco money that went into the Department of Agriculture. And they had this grant program called Agricultural Diversification and Development. The ADD program. So we wrote a grant to develop a label for our products, for the cheese, mostly, and a brand name. We got a \$20,000 grant. And with that money we hired a graphic artist and were able to print the first set of labels. We shipped out the first organic cheese under the Organic Valley label on Earth Day. So I just want you to think about that. My trip to California was in the month of January. I think the grant was due February 10. We got the money, I think the end of

the month. So in literally 6, 7 weeks, we had a label and were shipping the cheese. This was like lighting speed. But of course, we were terribly motivated, because we had all this cheese and nobody was buying it from North Farm.

And so that's how Organic Valley started. I insisted that the name of the company have the word "organic" in it, because I wanted it to be branded in it. Because there were companies called "Health Valley," and they sold organic stuff and they sold non-organic stuff. But our mission statement was that we only sold organic products. So we've got to have the word "organic" in it. And we can't have this long name like Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool, because by the time I get to the word "Pool," people are saying, "Huh? What? Huh?" They don't understand what we are and what we do. I just said, "What about Organic Valley?" We had no time. It was like, "Okay, that kind of falls off your tongue. And it has to be something easy that people can remember." So that's how that happened. (31:46)

And there was somebody else who worked there. He was our truck driver, Jim Pierce. And he gave the moniker, "Family of Farms." Now they've kind of dropped that now. But that's what our label said: "Organic Valley Family of Farms." Because we really believed in the co-op aspect of the business. And at that time the farmers were very, very involved in decision-making. So that was the first label—and this company doesn't exist anymore—it was a company called Mixed Media. And I went into Madison and sat with the guy at his computer. We kind of picked out the fonts, and I gave him a photograph and said, "This is kind of like what our region looks like." And then he had an artist, somebody made this original beautiful painting, and that's what our original label was. And then it's like, as they say, the rest is history.

So I became kind of the head marketer there after that. And then the next year we got a grant, started adding farmers because the cheese was selling well, and started making butter. Butter and nonfat dry milk. And then it just kept going from there, with all the different products that could be made. It was mostly the farmers who really wanted butter. And of course we had to promote butter. Because that was in the days when everybody ate margarine. And we wrote all this stuff up about trans fats. This was before anybody really knew about this stuff. And then of course we were at the right place at the right time. We came out with fluid milk. We had already been planning to do fluid milk, and then rBGH came out. That was that hormone that they were giving cows to make them produce more milk. And of course, that's not allowed in organic. So this was like this incredible boon for us, because there were all these people wanting organic milk because they didn't want the hormones.

But there was this whole major thing with every state had the right to decide how the milk was going to be labeled. It ended up that we had to hire somebody just to oversee the labeling in all the different states, because we were shipping milk nationwide, and try to come up with a statement that all of them would accept. And we finally did, except Hawaii didn't take it. And we said, "We don't care if we can't ship to Hawaii." And Nevada. We couldn't go into Nevada because they wanted us to change one word, and nobody else would let us change it. So we just said, "Okay, we won't ship to Nevada and Hawaii."

That took up a lot of my time. And then, of course, I had different distributors that I had to work with to ship the milk. Because that wasn't like cheese that could sit in a warehouse. That had to get going. So there was a very big growth spurt in Organic Valley at that time. One, because there was a big demand, everybody wanted organic milk—the consumers. And the second was this kind of ramping up and dealing with the regulatory aspect of labeling, that our cows did not use rBGH, or whatever. So that was another huge growth spurt. And most of the work that I did.

At that time I was getting a little burned out, because it was way too much. So I said, "Let's let somebody else do the marketing, and I'll just do new product development." Because I had done, we were selling cultured butter, and there was a lot in working with the facilities and figuring out the recipes and all that. And then the packaging side, that was a lot of work. So I became the new products coordinator and handled all of that. I handled marketing literature, but I didn't go anymore to the distributors and stores and all that. Somebody else took over that job. And then we came out with cream cheese, cottage cheese, sour cream.

And then I kind of decided it was too big. In fact, I don't even remember what it was. But it was like a \$100-million-a-year company. And then they were like, "Harriet, we want you to go to the trade shows." And then somebody said to me, "Well, can't you wear like a little bit of makeup, and maybe wear like a dress and wear pantyhose and heels?" And I said, "No. I can't do that." And I used to go to the trade shows in what I called my "milkmaid outfit." I'd wear my hair in braids, and I'd wear a jumper and flat shoes and knee socks. But Organic Valley was going into all these big chains, conventional chains. And I was the odd person out. And that was partially why I said, "Let me just be in the background. I don't really want to." So that's why I say, when people say, "Why did you leave Organic Valley?" I'll say, "Because they wanted me to wear pantyhose, and I couldn't handle it."

So I gave them six months' notice, and when I left I trained 8 people to take my place. Because there were so many different things that I was involved in. During the time when I was working there, I also learned how to be an organic inspector. Because I still kept going out to farms. I was kind of like the certification specialist there. So if farmers were just getting certified, we were out there beating the bushes trying to find people to go organic because we had all these sales and not enough milk, organic milk. It's not like you just look it up somewhere. It has to be organic. So I learned how to be an organic inspector. So after that, I just became an organic inspector fulltime. Because nobody wanted me to wear pantyhose, and I really enjoyed being out on the farm. I knew how to be helpful. I knew the rules really well, because I had to be helping other people go through the transition and successfully become organic. (40:31; end of Part 1)

So then I became an organic inspector. I went all over the upper Midwest mostly, although there were times I went to Japan, I went to Europe. I was in Mexico. But mostly I did my inspections here. I was an organic inspector for many years as my fulltime job. And at the same time, I also trained organic inspectors. So I saw a lot. I would do over 200 inspections a year, which included going to processing facilities in the winter. So I saw a lot of the organic food from seed to fork, basically. At that time retail stores were getting certified, and restaurants were getting certified. So I saw all of that.

And then MOSES, which is now Marbleseed, was looking for somebody to do some educational programming for them. So I took a job as an independent contractor and for I think three years gave trainings to government officials and university people. Because they had a grant for training extension agents and technical college people and natural resources conservation service and park service agency and risk management agency. Of course there were more and more organic farmers, bankers were coming to them, and they didn't understand what that meant. It was a three year grant. So I gave trainings to those people. And then they ended up doing more grants, and so I ended up working for them fulltime and became an employee. And I think it was about sixteen years that I worked for MOSES.

I got very involved in working on the national organic farming conference, and I started doing more advocacy, because MOSES was very involved in promoting organic at the national

and federal level, at the state level. So I was doing a lot of that. And that's pretty much what I'm still doing: advocacy and education. I'm not sure if I'll do any inspections. I don't think so; it's almost the end of December. This will be the first year since 1992 that I have not done an inspection. I'm still an approved inspector, but I'm just too busy doing other stuff. So I don't think I'll do any inspections. Anyway, I still consider myself somewhat of an organic inspector, and there's a training that I do for the Independent Organic Inspectors Association on their training for grassfed certification. (4:08)

Anyway, how's that?

AA: Yeah! All really interesting.

HB: So I've been very involved. I've been involved with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the National Organic Coalition. And I currently work for the Organic Farmers Association. I'm a member of the Organic Trade Association, and sometimes they ask me to give talks. I was on the National Organic Standards Board, and I was the chair for a year. Kind of all aspects.

AA: So when you were working as an organic inspector, what were some of the things you saw inspecting the farms? What were some of the highlights of that experience?

HB: Well, I always said to the farmer, "I want to eat this food!" That's the highest compliment I could give to anybody. Although I did tell one woman once, "When I die, I want to come back as one of your cows." I would just see the various ways that the farmers worked within their ecosystem and solved their challenges. Because everybody's ecosystem is different. And also everybody's aptitudes are different. So if somebody was really good with equipment and machinery, they'd always find some mechanical solution. And if somebody was a good manager, they would figure out a management solution. And it was just so interesting. And of course organic farmers love to share. I've had this happen many times. When the head of the NRCS, the state conservationist came to our conference one year, and he didn't know anything about organic. And he was like, "This is so vibrant! I just can't believe everybody talking and sharing. They're all smiling, and oh my God, at lunch there's so many discussions at the tables." He just couldn't believe it. He said, "Compared to conventional farm shows, this is so optimistic, and everybody's just having a great time, and it's like old home week, they're just so happy to see each other." He said, "At the regular farm shows, people are kind of depressed." And of course, we at MOSES planned that. And we worked at having all our tables at lunch be round, so there could be a lot of discussions.

What was your question again?

AA: Just the farms that you inspected, some of the highlights of that experience.

HB: Just that. Just that so many different ways of dealing with issues. The other thing is, doing organic inspection is kind of an intimate experience. You end up looking at all of their finances. You know if they're having marital problems. Sometimes things kind of come out. "Oh, I'm fighting with my in-laws, they won't let me use the bin for storage anymore." I mean, things like that just come out. So it was kind of an interesting thing. And many times you would go to the same farm for two or three years. They would then rotate you out of that. But you kind of got to

know people and be friends with them. So I really enjoyed that. I mean, there were a couple of times when I caught some fraud, but in the thousands of farms I went to, that only happened like twice.

You're not really allowed to be helpful, but you can make suggestions, like, "Have you thought about doing this?" Instead of saying, "You know, if you did this, it would be much better." So it was a little of a mixture of education and oversight. But kind of light on the education. So that's why I really liked working at MOSES. But I still kept doing some inspections, mostly processors, because the certification agencies are short on organic inspectors. Hopefully, we're trying to work with universities and get some more organic classes in there, and try to get some more people who make organic inspection a career. (9:41)

AA: So how did you see MOSES (which is now Marbleseed), how did you see that change over the years?

HB: How did I see it change? You mean after I left?

AA: Or while you were there. You said you were there—was it 16 years, you said?

HB: Yeah, I would say it just grew. It didn't really change.

AA: Okay.

HB: We really wanted to have good customer service. My main job at MOSES was, I answered the technical assistance line. So I was always answering farmer questions. Everything from, "What varieties should I grow?" to "Where can I market this?" And everything in between. So it was really interesting. And my real push on that was to talk through the issues so they could problem-solve on their own. Kind of go through, "Is there a mechanical solution to this? Is there a management solution to this? Is there a cultural solution to this? Is there a biological solution to this?" So kind of the way I would approach if I had a challenge on my own farm, how I would look at it.

So I really feel like I taught a lot of new producers how to do organic problem-solving. Which is different. On conventional you just call up the chemical guy and say, "I've got this insect, how do I kill it?" But you don't do that in organic. It's kind of like, "I've got this insect." Well, how much is it hurting? Where is it hurting? What's its lifecycle? If you grew what you're growing earlier, or later? Or if you did companion planting? Or is it causing a disease, or is it just feeding? Is there a trap crop that you could grow that they would go to that trap crop, that you would just then till in when you were done, and they would leave your main crop alone? There are so many different options. Can you cover it? And then, are there organic products you can use? But that's always your last resort. How well are you rotating? Is it because you didn't rotate, so the larvae overwintered and then, boom, your crop is right there, and they're ready to start eating? Maybe you can get a better crop rotation.

I mean, there's so many different ways of dealing with challenges. Including weed challenges. The profile of soil nutrients, that was one thing I learned a lot as an organic inspector. I can walk into a field and almost know what the soil test was going to tell me by looking at the weeds that were growing. Because certain weeds like certain things and thrive in certain situations. So if you change the soil nutrient profile, usually increase the calcium, or lessening

compaction. Always increasing organic matter, that always helps. Getting more boron. There were so many different things. And all of a sudden those weeds, they would still be there, but they wouldn't be as numerous or vigorous, and they would no longer be a problem. And that was something also to teach the farmers, that a little bit of a problem, in a way you want to have some bad insects around so your beneficials have something to eat. You don't want to kill everything.

And actually, the American Chemical Society came out with a study—it's about twenty years old now—that said that there were higher antioxidants in organic food. And they surmised that it was because the plants had to have a stronger immune system, because they had to compete with weeds, because they had a little bit of insect feeding. Therefore the plant was challenged and produced more antioxidants for their own immune system. Which of course is better for our immune system, too. So that was very interesting.

So I would say, at MOSES the main thing that I saw was a lot of growth and a lot of interest in organic. And of course, you didn't have to be only interested in becoming certified. We went to the conventional farm shows and answered people's questions even if they weren't organic, because a lot of the conventional farmers wanted to get away from—one, they didn't want, especially if they had small children on the farm, they didn't want to use so many chemicals. And they didn't want to spend all that money. So we talked a lot with conventional farmers, too. But we interacted a lot, like I said, with the extension, with the university, with the government, all that. (15:45)

AA: So with the universities, did you run into many anti-organic attitudes there, or not?

HB: Oh, yeah. All the time. All the time. "Oh, it's just a bunch of bunk," or "Why do you make it so hard on yourselves, there's all this great stuff." Yeah. And, of course, at the farm shows we would be set up right across the aisle from somebody selling GMO corn. But we just said, "No, this is a choice, and we offer just a different system." In my mind, I was like, "I wish these people would just all go organic," because to me, it makes the most sense. It makes the most sense economically, it makes the most sense environmentally. And a lot of the farms that I went to, after they had been organic for about five years—so they had basically been using organic methods for eight years, because they had to go through the three-year transition doing organic, and they were certified then five years later. Those farms were getting as good or better yields than their conventional neighbors. There was one farm down in Iowa that was the top yield-getter in corn in the entire county. And not just in organic—everything. So it just showed that organic can feed the world. And we could feed the world while, at the same time, we're improving our natural resources instead of degrading them. Clean water, clean air, healthy soil. All that great stuff. And of course, the organic farmers every year leave their soil in better condition than they started with. (17:57)

AA: So when some of these people who were opposed to organic, when they saw things like that, did it ever make them change their mind, or not?

HB: Oh yeah. There's people that I would go to the first time, and they'd say, "You know, I've been watching my neighbor. And I know they're organic, and so I went over, and he talked to me, told me how he did it. So I thought, why not me?" I got an email, "I never thought I would go organic, but I would really like it." A lot of people would say the conventional farmers "farmed by phone." They'd just call somebody up to till, and call somebody up to spray, and call

somebody up to plant. They'd buy whatever the seed dealer tells them to. They hire somebody to harvest. And they don't farm anymore. These are people who want to farm. And there's an old adage for organic farmers, "The best fertilizer on an organic farm is the farmer's footsteps." Because they're out there looking things over. So they see, "Am I having an insect problem? Is this part of my field not as vigorous as this other part? I've got to pay attention over here. I need to do some soil testing and find out if I need to do some amending. Or maybe I need to put a double load of manure here." They're just paying attention. (19:33)

AA: So you mentioned you were involved with the Organic Trade Association. Is there anything more you want to say about that?

HB: Well, just as a member. When I was with Organic Valley, they were very involved. So I was on a whole variety of different committees and things like that. But I'm still a farmer member. I would say I don't always agree with their position, but at least I have a chance to get my inputs. I feel like, if you agree to be silent, then they'll just ignore you, so I'm not going to agree to be silent. I mean, they can still ignore me, but at least I've said my piece. It's just to me, like if you're not going to vote, then you can't complain.

AA: And then you said you actually have attended most of the NOSB meetings over the years. Can you tell me more about that?

HB: Yeah. So when I worked at Organic Valley, I attended, because I needed to know what was happening so that I could warn people, "In two years you're going to have to change this, because the rules are changing." And of course, being able to represent what Organic Valley felt when there was something being discussed that would affect our farmers. I look at it as kind of like a soap opera, what's going to happen next time? There's always a cliffhanger at the end. And so it was very interesting to see. (21:23; end of Part 2)

And I still, the next NOSB meeting will be in Milwaukee. So I will go to that. And when I was with MOSES, they paid me to go. But then the pandemic happened, and now they're all on Zoom, so I don't necessarily have to go, and I don't have anybody paying my way. But I can drive to Milwaukee. And I have a friend who lives near downtown, so I can stay with her. Because that can be expensive going to those meetings. They have them at nice hotels, and you go out to eat every night.

So I probably have attended fifty meetings. And it's interesting, the other part of it, too, especially with MOSES, was when the new rule did get finalized, or new material was put on, I knew how it happened. So if somebody said to me, "How did that happen?" I said, "I know! Well, this was discussed, and they did talk about having it this way, but then there was this other issue, so that's why it ended up the way it was." It helped people actually follow the rules more willingly when they knew that there was a process behind it. It wasn't just this arbitrary thing. There was a lot of input from all stakeholders. And a lot of it is a compromise. Because what works for us in the upper Midwest may not work for the people in Florida, or Arizona, or Missouri, or whatever. And so, in the national and international laws, we had to think of ways to have whatever the language was work for everyone. (2:07)

AA: So what is your perspective on why it took so long to finally get the USDA standards? From 1990 all the way to 2002, I think it was.

HB: Well, you know there was an earlier standard that had allowed GMOs and sewage sludge. So that all had to go back to the drawing board. So that kind of set it back. Also, I don't even know who was in the White House, but that kind of set it back, too. It was kind of political. It was the will of the USDA to work on that.

AA: And so what was it like, you said you were chair?

HB: Yeah, the first year I was just on, and then I was chair of the materials committee, and then I was chair of the livestock committee, and then I became the chair of the whole board. But I was the vice-chair for two years.

AA: So what was it like being the chair, what was that like?

HB: Well, it was during the Trump Administration, and it was extremely frustrating. Because they were not very friendly toward organic. As a matter of fact, the AMS administrator over the National Organic Program said in the congressional hearing that he was trying to get GMOs to be approved in organic. And so on the board, we had to listen to a lot of, they kind of mandated that we listen to people within the USDA to try to convince us that we should put on our work agenda allowing GMOs! I can't tell you how many of these things I had to listen to. And then argue back. (4:31)

AA: And then you also mentioned that you were involved in starting the transition to organic program.

HB: Right. And that was part of my advocacy. So within the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and within the National Organic Coalition, we talked about how we need more organic farmers, we're having issues with fraudulent grain coming in. Why are we buying organic corn from overseas? I mean, we can't grow everything in the United States. I understand not being able to grow organic coffee, but we can grow organic corn for livestock feed here. And so we talked a lot about transitioning. And we came up, it was me and this woman, Amalie Lipstrung, who was with the Organic Ecological Food and Farming Association at the time. She's not there anymore.

But we really worked hard, and I knew, I had started a mentoring program at MOSES, which now I think is in its eighteenth or twentieth year or something. But I started it. And I saw how beneficial that one-on-one help was. And we paid the mentors, so they were willing to go out to the mentee's farm and walk around and give them those site-specific [suggestions]. And they knew the farmer. So they knew to say, "Let's work on mechanical solutions, let's work on the cultural solution." So they knew. And, of course, I paired up farmers that were in the same region, that were doing the same type of farming. And it really worked well. One of the things that almost was said universally in my exit interviews with the mentees, they just said, "I feel like I moved ahead like five years in this one year. Because I so much improved my systems, having this person walk my land and talk to me about my markets, talk to me about my goals. It was so helpful."

So anyway, we started talking actually with [Ohio Senator] Sherrod Brown, who tried to get it in the previous Farm Bill. He had a marker bill that had this transition to organic program

in it. And it had mentoring, and it had technical assistance. At first, the government said, “You want to transition more farmers? How much money do we have to give them?” And I said, “They don’t want money. They want technical assistance. They want to know how to do it. I mean, yeah, if you want to give them \$25 an acre or whatever, but that’s not the most important thing. The most important thing is giving them technical assistance.” So they have a mentor who helps them one-on-one, they have other places to go if they’re interested in a new enterprise, somebody who knows something.

And so when there was pandemic money, somehow this came up. It didn’t end up in the last Farm Bill, but there was this whole program laid out. And so Vilsack jumped on it. And the media, when I looked at it, I said, “Oh my God! That’s the bill! That’s the marker bill that Sherrod Brown tried to get into the Farm Bill, and it didn’t work.” So that’s how I got involved. But I kind of see my fingerprints all over that. And so that’s what I’m doing now, is technical assistance for the Organic Farmers Association. And that’s under a transition to organic grant. (9:02)

AA: You mentioned that you’ve also done work as a conservation planner. Can you tell me more about that?

HB: Well, I left MOSES because the original founder and executive director got a brain tumor, Faye Jones. She got sick, so she had to leave. But she’s doing fine, and as a matter of fact she’s going to visit me next weekend! And they hired somebody who I really just did not get along with. And he said, “We hold people’s hands too much. If somebody calls you with a question, tell them to go on the internet and look up videos.” And I was like, “No, I’m not going to do that! They call me because they need help.” And he wanted to move MOSES more regenerative and drop the whole organic thing. I don’t know why the board hired him. But he was there, so I had to leave, because I couldn’t take it. So I left. And I went and worked for Erin Silva at the university. And then I was doing all the outreach. I did the conference, I did field days, I did fact sheets. And then the pandemic started. And of course there were no field days, and there was no conference. And so I got laid off. And in that time, I actually had breast cancer. So it was kind of nice not to have a job and focus on taking care of myself. But I’ve come through it, everything is good.

But then, when I wanted to start working again, I was like, “I don’t really want to work fulltime.” And there’s this thing called Wisconsin Women in Conservation started. And since I had spent a lot of time, a lot of my advocacy work was being on the state technical committee for the NRCS and recommending to the NRCS about organic, I did a whole big project where a whole group of us looked at every NRCS practice and tried to figure out how to make it more organic-friendly. We recommended a couple of actual organic practice standards, which are now—this was like 15 years ago—now they’re coming into fruition. So they’re finally taking our advice. The government takes a while. That’s another thing that I’ve seen.

So I really understood NRCS. I’ve used NRCS programs on my own farm. I was a technical service provider for the NRCS, writing transition to organic plans for them. And then this Wisconsin Women in Conservation, WWIC, they got a grant to help women farmers access NRCS programs. And they have all these learning circles, where they go around to farms and learn about conservation. And one of the main deliverables for them in this grant is to have individual conservation plans written for women farmers. It’s almost like a pre-plan, like getting ready for a plan. It’s not a full-blown plan. So anyway, I started doing that about a year ago, now.

I started in August of '22. And at this point I've done almost 35 plans for them. And that's kind of fun. But I'm very up front. I'm like, "If you want to know about using herbicide, I'm not going to tell you. Because I don't do that. But if you want to do it organically, I'm your person. Mostly I'm here to help identify conservation concerns on your land and possible NRCS practices that you could apply for cost share to get them done."

And of course I have all this experience going out to organic farms, talking to farmers, talking about their land. So I know how to do these land walks and discussions, and then I know all about the NRCS practices. So when I walk around, I'm like, "Oh, yeah, this practice would work for you, that practice over here," and that kind of thing. It's been fun. I've enjoyed that. I'm going to continue doing that now for the next two years also. But that's kind of a sporadic thing. I like going out best in the spring or this time of year, because I look at all their land. So if they have woods, I'm not going to see much in the summer. It's too overgrown for me to get in the woods. But this time of year and early spring is a really good time for me to get out and do my land walks. (14:39)

AA: Can you tell me what your philosophy of organic/sustainable agriculture is?

HB: Well, like I said earlier, it's the solution to so many of our environmental problems. The carbon sequestration, degradation of our natural resources, ways to build up organic matter in our soil. I mean, at this point, we can't just even get by with environmentally benign farming practices. They have to be environmentally beneficial. Because we have got to [concentrate on ecosystem healing and bring] the land [back to] being healthy. And also, too, the fact that organic needs a lot more management, it brings more people back to the land. We have more farmers, which means healthier rural communities, and healthier rural churches, and healthier rural Main Street, and healthier schools, rural schools. You have more kids [in the schools], because you have more farm families. With the conventional industrial model of agriculture, it denudes the land of people. And that is not healthy for us, either.

AA: Would you say that your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about organic farming?

HB: Well, yes, I would. I really feel like we are meant to be good stewards. But I don't believe that we oversee the world. I believe that we need to be a part, and not destroy other life. We are all interdependent on each other. I'm a big birder, I love birds, I love snakes, I love turtles, I love bugs. I'm a beekeeper. I love insects. It's just really important, I think, to leave a legacy. When I first started doing organic farming, I just really felt like I could convince people by being an example. But now I'm much more of a proselytizer. So I've had many, many people come here.

But I have a funny story about that. At one point—I'm talking 25 years ago—I went to the local feed mill and we ordered all these weird cover crop seeds. We ordered buckwheat and chickling vetch and hairy vetch, and they'd never heard of these things. They'd never heard of buckwheat. I can't believe that, but they didn't. And then we said we wanted a bag of soybeans. And they were like, "One bag?" And we were like, "Yeah, we're going to use it as a cover crop." But then—and this was in the days when they didn't have to do this—it didn't say the seed was treated on the bag or on the tag. So we opened the bag, and the seed is all blue. And we're like, "We can't use this." So we called them up and said, "We didn't take one seed out of this bag." And they said, "Well, we can't take it back if the bag's open." And I said, "Well, you can give it

to somebody.” And they’re like, “Can’t you just wash it off?” And we’re like, “No. We can’t.” And I said, “Well, we’re going to come and we’re just going to put it in your dumpster.” Because we had no way to get rid of it. What are we going to do with it?

So then they thought we were kind of weird. And then on a Saturday afternoon, the mill closed at 2:00. And everybody came here. They didn’t even tell us they were coming. Luckily we were home. They said, “Give us a tour of your farm. We want to see what you’re doing down here.” So we showed them everything. And they were like, “Oh, this is so interesting. Oh, now we get it. Now we understand. We just thought you were kind of eccentric, but now you’re making sense.” They just recently retired, and some new people bought the mill. But they became, the number one bagged feed they sold out of their mill was organic chicken feed. And they service organic farmers all over the county. They drive out to Albert Lea [Seed House in Minnesota] and get organic seed, they go to La Crosse and get organic seed, and they are kind of a hub for organic. I’m going to take a little bit of credit that I helped with that. (20:26)

AA: So do you think there was any connection between organic farming and the hippie counterculture or the environmental movement, back-to-the-land?

HB: Oh, definitely the back-to-the-land movement. Kind of like questioning, why do we have to do it this one way? Yeah, for sure, it definitely did.

AA: And then were you involved in any social or political movements that overlapped with your organic farming interests?

HB: Well, I was on the land conservation committee for Crawford County for nine years. Now I’m on the board of an environmental organization. Trying to think about social stuff. I mean, I’ve been a member of the Kickapoo Exchange Food Co-op for forty years, the local food co-op, the People’s Food Co-op in La Crosse. I definitely believe in the co-op movement. I lived in a co-op household for a while. I’m not sure what else. Of course, I have worked for various political, people who run for office and things like that. And I still got to Washington D.C. every year and advocate for organic with our congressional delegations. (22:10)

AA: What are your views on the current USDA organic certification standards?

HB: Oh, I think they’re very good. I think they could be better in some areas. But to use the word organic, you have to have at least 95% organic agricultural ingredients. Certified organic. And then the 5% can be like baking soda, if you’re making muffins. But all the agricultural ingredients have to be organic. And I look at that the same way with the organic standards. I think like 95% of the organic standards are really good, and then there’s this 5% that we’re trying to get better.

AA: And how do you feel about the Real Organic and regenerative movements, these alternative certifications separate from the USDA standard?

HB: Well, the Real Organic is an add-on. You can’t be Real Organic certified unless you are already USDA certified. So it’s not an alternative. And our farm is Real Organic certified. So obviously I like it. I really do not believe that a hydroponic should carry the organic label. Very

strong on that point for a whole variety of reasons. First of all, it doesn't offer any of those environmental benefits that farming in the soil and the environment does. It doesn't do carbon sequestration. It doesn't improve the environment for beneficial insects. I can't tell you how many farmers, just run-of-the-mill farmers in the middle of Iowa, have told me that after they went organic, they started seeing more birds and more wildlife, "We started having foxes and pheasants and eagles. All of these things came back to our farm after we gave up the chemicals." Hydroponic doesn't give you that. So there's this greater thing. Not to mention that in the organic law, it mentions soil like 18 times. You have to improve your soil. Well, you don't grow in soil in hydroponic, so you're not doing that. So all the benefits, too, that consumers believe that organic is giving, part of the reason that consumers buy is because of this larger environmental ethic. That's not giving the consumers what they're buying. It's a sham. And a scam.

Basically, hydroponic relies on 100% liquid feeding of nutrients. So it's kind of like plants on steroids. The plants themselves don't have any interaction with soil, that's the way nutrients pass from the soil into the plant. Remember I said more antioxidants go into plants in the field, and they have to compete with weeds? They don't get any of that with hydroponics. They just exist. And it's really just the hydroponic people wanting to get the benefit of the organic premium in the marketplace without doing any of the work. It's very unfair to the soil-based farmers who are doing what's supposed to be done. Because it is more work. But then you get this massive benefit from it environmentally and in the food. And I think even in the farmer's satisfaction. Because these hydroponic operations are really just like factories. They're not farms. And so I'm very against the hydroponic [using the organic label], obviously. [They should promote their own systems and not use the organic label.]

And the regenerative, Rodale Institute has an organic and regenerative label, and I'm okay with that. But the other regenerative label, again, is just to me like a scam. Because if you grow a cover crop, yay, I'm so happy you're growing a cover crop. But then if you terminate it with herbicide, you've now lost 70% of the benefit of that cover crop. And, you've gone the other way and killed soil life with the Roundup or whatever. You've actually gone the other way. So any regenerative label that is not also organic, to me also is a sham. Because they're using the same tools that got us into trouble to begin with. (27:36)

AA: And so what do you think are the most important aspects of organic farming history to preserve and pass on to future generations?

HB: Well, I will say that I really like the definition of organic in the rule. It's there to preserve ecological balance, it uses cultural, mechanical, and biological methods, it's site-specific. Recycles nutrients. I think that's a really excellent definition of organic. Restoring the ecological balance. That's going to take us generations to accomplish. And I do think that the next generation, the problem is they should really do their homework and make sure that when the word "regenerative" comes up that they understand that unless it's organic regenerative, it is not the same. And it basically keeps becoming these marketing ploys, where the chemical companies keep trying to find a way to not have themselves look bad and try to gain consumer confidence.

I mean, look at business. There was this GMO labeling law that got so watered down— [when] Mike Pompeo [was in the Senate]. It originally was going to be mandated that if it contained genetically modified ingredients that it had to be on the label. Now, it's voluntary, and you can just put it in a QR code if you want, so it doesn't even have to say anything. You just have this QR code. You don't even have to say [anything about the GMO content]. And they

have this really pretty label, and they call it “bioengineered” instead of “GMO,” because nobody knows what that means in the marketplace.

We just have to keep fighting to get agriculture across the world to change. And I know Bayer is not going to like it, and Novartis isn’t going to like it. There’s another story. So I’m also the chair of the Organic Advisory Council for the Department of Ag here at Wisconsin, there’s an Organic Advisory Council. And again a few years ago, someone from Monsanto—when it was still Monsanto—they had a branch in Madison. And he wanted to come and talk to us. And I’m like, “What?” So he was going to come in the afternoon. We met in the morning and talked and said, “We’re not going to be confrontational, we’re not going to yell at him.” We were all like talking like, “We’re going to be civil.”

So he comes in, and he goes, “I want the gloves off! I don’t want you to be nice to me.” He didn’t know that we had said that, so that was pretty funny. And then we said, “Why do you want to talk to us?” He goes, “Well, the truth is that we keep making these GMOs, and we have to keep stacking and stacking and stacking and stacking more pesticides in there, because the insects become resistant, and more herbicides in there because the weeds become resistant. And you guys don’t use it at all. The farmers are freaking out because we sell them a product, and in two years it’s no longer viable. But you guys don’t use any of this! How do you do it?”

And I was like, “Wow.” So we told him about our processes, and the systems, cultural, biological, and mechanical, and working within the ecosystem, and simple things like crop rotation. And then at one point I said to him—this was before the 2,4-D and dicamba was approved, but it was in process. And I said, “Why did you choose two known carcinogenic herbicides for your “next generation” to deal with the glyphosate resistance?” And he said, “Well, it’s because the glyphosate resistance happened half as quickly, we thought we would have forty years and only had twenty. And we didn’t have anything else. It takes a long time to figure this all out. But 2,4-D and dicamba have been around for a really long time, and so we already have some weeds resistant to them. So it was easy for us to pluck those genes out. But luckily it’s not the same weeds that are resistant to the glyphosate. So then we can just start stacking them.”

And I said, “Did you just hear yourself? You’re already starting out behind the 8-ball. You’re going to use these horrible [carcinogenic chemicals], you’re going to have people spraying 2,4-D all over the countryside.” And he goes, “I know, that’s why I’m here, because I think it’s horrible.” I don’t know how long he kept his job. Or if he wanted to keep his job. (33:52)

AA: That’s really fascinating. So do you think even in the chemical companies, of course they have to market the chemicals, but are they starting to realize it’s not a sustainable system?

HB: No, it’s not, it’s a treadmill that’s basically going nowhere.

AA: That’s really interesting. So is there anything else you want to share before we end the interview?

HB: Well, let’s see. Just that there’s still really good stuff going on. A lot of the groundwork, it keeps moving, but we have to keep working at it. We want organic to be the dominant form of agriculture in the world. We have a long way to go. But I will say that in Europe, there are some countries like Switzerland and Austria, they’re like 30% or 40%. Denmark’s over 50% certified

organic. And I actually went to Denmark and talked with organic producers about this. And what happened is that Denmark is this peninsula that juts out into the North Sea. And so fresh water is a really precious commodity there, groundwater. And when their groundwater started getting polluted by chemicals, the government came in and said, “We can’t have this. We’ve got to start getting away from agricultural chemicals, because we won’t have any water to drink.” So what they did is they put a tax on the agricultural chemicals. And all the money from that tax went to technical assistance and paying farmers to make the transition [to organic]. And the thought was, the early adopters who were taking on—now this was in 1996—the early adopters who were taking the biggest risk are going to get the biggest payment. Because they’re the smallest group with the largest group of chemical growers. And over time, as there are more organic producers and the markets grow and the education grows and the use of agricultural chemicals lessens, there will be less payment, but they’ll be getting a lot more technical assistance from their compatriots who are also organic farmers. And that’s where they stand now. And they’re at 50%.

When I was there and a farmer told me about this program, I said, “Oh my God, that would never happen in the United States, that they would tax the chemicals and give it to organic farmers!” And he stuck his finger in my face and said, “Never say never.” So I thought, okay. We have to move along. And a lot of European countries, the fact that their agricultural land is very limited, they have big populations, they really respect that land. And they want to see it treated right. For the long haul. This land has been tilled since like the 1500s. We here in the United States kind of have this limitless frontier mentality. But it’s not. Look at how much topsoil we have lost, especially like in Iowa. More than half of it, or even three-quarters of it is gone. We just can’t keep abusing our natural resources. And the planet is telling us so with climate change and earthquakes. We are not doing the right thing. And organic agriculture, not just for food and the environment, but also for social, by getting people back to the land, giving them good, healthy work to do. There’s a lot of people who would like to be farmers. But we don’t make it easy for them. So I guess that’s my parting shot.

AA: Well, thank you so much! (38:58)