

**Altfred Krusenbaum, narrator**

**Anneliese Abbott, interviewer**

**February 21, 2024**

**AK** = Altfred Krusenbaum

**AA** = Anneliese Abbott

**AA:** This is February 21, 2024, and this is Anneliese Abbott doing an oral history interview with

**AK:** Altfred Krusenbaum.

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

**AK:** Yeah, thank you for inviting me. It's such an honor to be asked and be part of this oral history project of yours.

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

**AK:** That's a fair question, because I'm actually a city boy from Germany. Grew up in 1956 in the big metropolitan area, what's called the "Ruhr Zone," just east of Dusseldorf, which used to be the heart of German industry. So it's fair to say, no background in agriculture on either side of my family. But what's interesting is—and obviously I know this only from my parents telling me about it—but when I was a little child, maybe three, four years old, I asked them for Christmas for a cow. Where that came from, I don't know. They were desperately at the time looking for a cow, and all they could find was a little blue plastic cow. I remember having it as a cherished possession for many, many years, but over time it got lost.

But then also, on my mom's side, my mom grew up near the Belgian border in a rural area. And although her parents were not farmers, they would be called homesteaders today. They had a large garden, and they had some pigs of their own. But all the farmers in that particular province, they lived inside the village. They had their farm inside their village, and then all the land was around on the outside of the village. So I remember when I visited my grandma, across the street there was a small dairy. They might have had maybe six or eight cows. I actually have pictures of me helping them get the cows out to pasture. So that was my early introduction to agriculture, if you want to call it that. But that was it for a long time, until I first set foot on a farm in earnest when I was 22. (2:59)

**AA:** So then, where did you go to college, and what did you study?

**AK:** Quite frankly, my grade point average wasn't good enough to really get into college, at least not for the subject that interested me. I felt always a close connection to nature, which sounds a little strange coming from a boy that grew up in a big metropolitan area. But I was a competitive rower, was out on the river every day. Connection to nature was important to me. And although no one in our family, neither one of my parents had gone to college, I felt a great draw to go to

university. Forestry was interesting me, and with my grade point average, there was no chance for me.

So I had to get drafted. Back then we still had drafts in Germany. In 1975 I joined the army, got drafted, and then I went voluntarily for two years, which was longer than the draft. The interesting thing is, for every year in the army, you got a full grade point average credit. So by the time I left the army, I still wasn't good enough for forestry, but I was good enough to get into agriculture. I got interested in environmental sciences, but to do that you had to do an undergraduate in agricultural sciences. And that was my first exposure, really. When you study at a university in Germany, you have to do mandatory internships in your field of study. During the semester break, that's what brought me onto a farm in Germany. (5:16)

**AA:** What was that farm like? What kind of crops or livestock did they have?

**AK:** It was, at the time, a very typical Westphalian farm. We're talking like, this was 1977, '78, a very typical farm for the time. It was mixed, so they had crops, they had a small dairy herd of maybe 25 cows, they had 400 pigs they were fattening, and they were raising bulls. In Germany, we do not raise steers for meat, we raise bulls. So a very mixed enterprise. I did three of those internships in Germany, on different farms. And that's where I first really, the idea of organic agriculture came up in me simply by seeing these containers with skulls and crossbones on them in the machine shed. And I asked what they were for, and they said, "Yeah, these are insecticides, herbicides, and they're not good for you. You be careful that you don't get in contact with those. We put those on the crops." And I thought to myself, "This is odd. It's not good for you, but you put it on the land that grows crops that feeds either us directly or feeds the animals whose products we eat? That seems very, very strange." It just made no sense to me, being so naïve about agriculture. That prompted me to really look for alternatives while I went to college. (7:29)

**AA:** Did you complete that degree in agriculture, then?

**AK:** Yeah, I did the undergraduate work and started with the environmental sciences, and was so disappointed. At the time, it wasn't really what I was looking for. I felt, what better way to protect the environment than to work on the land directly? By then I had already gotten so much interest in agriculture that I felt that would be a much better way to pursue it. But I didn't really know how to complete my graduate studies. I took a year off, made some money, traveled. I had a big affinity for North America after reading a big trilogy about the voyageurs that discovered Canada. I hitchhiked across Canada and worked on a ranch for a summer in northern British Columbia. Then, coming back from that experience, it was clear for me that I wanted to get into dairy science. And that's where I finished my degree. (8:57)

**AA:** So that ranch, what kind of farming methods did they use? Were they organic at all, or not?

**AK:** Oh, no. It was just a typical—this is far northern British Columbia, near the Alaska border. And that was typical range land. It was organic by default. They rented a lot of what's called "Crown land," land from the government, next to their own land, and had range riders out there. Yeah, it was definitely a romantic picture of the wild west.

**AA:** Can you tell me more about your studies in dairy science?

**AK:** Yeah. You know, they're fairly theoretical. You don't really get trained for running a dairy farm. You get trained for either doing research, work in the government, like what you would call the Department of Agriculture, work in industry, and so forth. But yeah, for one thing, I wanted to finish the degree. But it became totally clear during that time that I really wanted to get into farming. And during that time was when I in earnest looked for alternatives to the conventional way of farming that I had experienced during my internships. What was instrumental was, I met a friend during those years by the name of Steffen Schneider, and you might have come across that name before, I don't know. That is definitely a person you should also interview. We studied together and had the same degree in dairy science. He graduated half a year before me, and he is really the reason that I'm now in the United States. He immigrated to the United States, and I said, "Oh, when I finish, I'll come along and help you on this farm that you have." And that's really how my whole life's path evolved. (11:35)

**AA:** So what was it like coming to the United States for the first time?

**AK:** It was a difficult departure, let's put it that way. I had a serious girlfriend at the time, in Germany. My parents asked me, "Why are you going over there?" And I really had no good explanations. In hindsight, it was really a gut feeling that told me, I have to do this. And, of course, it was a sense of adventure, going out to the United States. I told you I had this affinity for North America, and I thought it would be a nice summer spent, and then see what life holds for me after that. I rode my bicycle, actually. I landed in Boston and then rode my bicycle from Massachusetts to Wisconsin and got to know the country a little bit that way. And when I got here, I met up with Steffen. And he said, "Hey, you've got to meet my neighbors, the Zinnikers" And that's how I got introduced to my future wife. I really came to meet my destiny. That's it in short. (13:21)

**AA:** You were part of, you said, a cooperative farm?

**AK:** Yeah. Steffen came over here with his wife Rachel to start this farm project that got initiated by Christopher and Martina Mann. Christopher and Martina Mann were philanthropists from Germany that wanted to invest and create organic farmland in the United States. Martina went to school in Germany with my mother-in-law, Ruth Zinniker. And that's how they knew each other. And when they got this impulse to invest and buy land for organic and biodynamic production in the United States, they figured, "What better place to go than where there is already a biodynamic farm?" And those were my in-laws. The Zinniker farm is the oldest biodynamic dairy farm in the United States. That's how they came to the East Troy area in southeastern Wisconsin. [Max and Mathilda Zinniker bought the farm in 1942, when their son Richard (Dick) was 12 years old. Dick married Ruth in 1961. The farm is still operated by Mark and Petra Zinniker. Mark is Sue's brother.]

They bought this land, and at the time the Zinnikers has an apprentice by the name of Nicholas Franceschelli, and they were looking obviously for a farmer to farm this land, and my in-laws said, "Hey, we've got this apprentice. He trained with us." And Nick said, "Yeah, I'm happy to do this, but I don't want to do it on my own. I want to do it together with Steffen Schneider," who he had met at Hawthorn Valley Farm in New York. And Steffen said, "Great, that sounds like a great adventure. Let's do this together." And they were joined by a fellow by

the name of John Bashaw. So those three started farming, and were farming on this farm when I got there in 1983. And after meeting Sue, I really stayed, not for three months, but I stayed for a year and a half just helping them and also doing some traveling during that time across the US.

After that time, it seemed like there was no room for us on that farm. Sue and I went to Germany and wanted to explore what the situation would be like in Germany, always with the thought in mind to somehow get into farming. And that's how we ended up on this estate north of Nuremberg. And back then, that was before reunification, in 1985. It was impossible to start farming if you didn't come from a farm or marry into a farm. So we worked on this estate, until we got a letter from this community in East Troy, Wisconsin, saying, "We're looking for another farmer," and offered for us to join them. (17:05)

So in 1986, I immigrated. Sue was ready to return home anyways. And we joined this group. By then, another fellow had joined, whose father was the gardener. It was supposed to be a diversified organic farm, but it was as much a social experiment as it was creating a farm, a diversified farm, because we were all about the same age. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians. We farmed all together until late 1988, and then this experiment really broke up. And one of us, John Bashaw, he stayed behind to run the farm by himself. I continued running the dairy for another year, and Steffen and Nick went back to New York. Steffen became the general manager of Hawthorn Valley Farm and is now retired from that, and created an Institute for Mindful Agriculture. I would really recommend you interview him as well.

Christopher and Martina Mann asked us, "What do you really want?" And we said, "We really want a farm of our own." And they said, "Okay, if you go and find the farm, we are willing to buy it, and then you can rent it from us. And that's how we ended up on the farm that we spent the next 26 years on, which happened to be just three miles from my in-laws. And that was just sheer coincidence, because we looked in a two-hour radius around the area. (19:29)

**AA:** So then, when you bought your own farm, what was that like? Was it already being farmed? What crops and livestock did you have there?

**AK:** [We never owned "our" farm, always rented, first from the Manns, later from Yggdrasil Land Foundation.] The previous farmer retired, and as is so typical in the United States, all of their equity was tied up in their farm, so they needed to sell the farm to be able to have a retirement. And that was the reason they left the farm. Although we had now accumulated some farming experience by working this cooperative farm, and through my internships, now farming on our own and running our own business felt like a tremendous and very risky step for us, because we had zero equity at the time. Absolutely zero. So we started with a beginning farmer loan from the Farm Service Agency. Because of that risk and that burden, we felt the best way to farm would be to continue the structure that the previous farmer had, which was on 240 acres originally. He was milking 40 cows, so we did exactly the same thing. In fact, we bought all the machinery from him.

The only difference was that we wanted to cold turkey right away farm organically, and he had been a regular conventional farmer. And that caught the interest of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who at the time was collaborating with Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. That was also founded by Christopher and Martina Mann and my mother-in-law, Ruth Zinniker. They said, "We would like to do a case study on your farm and observe whether a young couple can start out farming and do it right out of the gate with organic methods. In return, we'll put together an interdisciplinary team that will not only observe what you do, but they can

also advise you.” So he [Josh Posner] put together an ag economist, rural sociologist, ag engineering, agronomy, plant pathology, somebody from the vet school in Madison, to observe what we were doing. But as it turned out, we made so many changes, such dramatic changes, so quickly, that instead of them being able to give us advice, it turned out that they basically just observed what was happening.

At that point, I’ve got to back up a little bit, while we were working as herdsmen on this cooperative farm, in 1988 I went to a workshop that was given in just the kitchen of Dan and Jeanne Patenaude, in southwestern Wisconsin. Jeanie had a brother by the name of Bill Murphy, from the University of Vermont, and he gave a workshop in his sister’s kitchen about management intensive grazing, or back then they called it just rotational grazing. There were maybe just ten, twelve people sitting in that workshop. But that was really my first introduction to what I would call management intensive grazing, a term that was later on coined by Jim Gerrish from the University of Missouri. We learned about portable fencing, doing Voisin-style grazing, where you give the animals just the amount that they need and then move them on and let the pasture immediately recover behind the animals. Although I didn’t implement that right away when we started our own farm in late 1989, early 1990, that always stuck in the back of my mind. (25:16)

We started very conventional, in the sense that we were trying to get as much milk out of the cows. We let them outside only to exercise. Very labor-intensive operation. But when our first child was born, all of a sudden my wife couldn’t help me quite as much as she did before, and we said, “Something has to change.” And at the same time, somebody handed me a flyer for a grazing conference that was organized by Allen Nation from the *Stockman Grass Farmer*. This was in 1991, in Wisconsin. I went to that grazing conference, and that really changed the course of our lives, and certainly of our farming. And I met people like Carl Pulvemacher and Charlie Opitz, who were all pioneers in dairy grazing here in Wisconsin. And I made contact with folks from New Zealand who had come over to this conference so we could learn from them. Ever since, there has been a grazing conference organized in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Grazing Conference, every year, and I’ve gone to almost every one with the exception of two.

That really set the course. I came home and I said, “We’ve got to start grazing cows.” We did an experiment the first year on about 40 acres, and then quickly developed a plan over the next three years to seed down the entire 240 acres of what we called our “home farm.” Also switched to seasonal calving, which means we calved all our cows in the spring so that the time of the highest nutritional demand for our whole dairy herd coincided with the time when we had the most pasture available. At the time, a fairly new concept, at least here in Wisconsin—not in New Zealand, but here in Wisconsin. It also made it possible for us to dry up all the cows and get a break, at least a break in the sense that we didn’t have to milk cows, we just had to feed and bed them in the wintertime before they started calving again. (28:24)

So those were dramatic changes that this interdisciplinary team was observing. The principal investigator was Josh Posner, the late Josh Posner who passed away in the meantime, and John Hall from Michael Fields Institute. We struck a friendship with the ag economist by the name of Gary Frank, who really became an influential person for us in the sense that he became our financial mentor. I have to be grateful for him about the way that we learned to manage our business.

Other people that were influential during that time: I read Joel Salatin’s *Salad Bar Beef*. I read the *Stockman Grass Farmer*. [Also Joel McNair, who wrote on organic and grazing related issues for the *Agri-View* paper and later to this day published *Graze* magazine]. All those gave

me the nerve to think a little bit outside the box. Although you can never, when you read about a great idea, I quickly learned that you can never copy it and apply it directly. You have to adapt it to your unique situation, because no two farms are really alike. To that extent, I learned to go on pasture walks, learned to interact with other people who were doing something similar to what we were doing. Although not all graziers were organic, but at least what united us was the idea of reducing our cost of production and reducing our labor by turning the cows out and having them graze and return the manure themselves back onto the land. That's how we developed the farm that we were then farming for the next twenty years. (30:46)

**AA:** How did you market your milk?

**AK:** That's a good point. In the early years, we marketed all our milk conventionally with a conventional milk handler. It was in '93, '94 that rBGH came on the market, bovine growth hormone. And Organic Valley, which at the time was a very small co-op in western Wisconsin, started to look for milk farther afield. We're about three hours east of where their headquarters is. And we thought, yeah, it might be good to get involved with them and get actually a premium for our product, which we hadn't received until then. So we started feeding, at the time we were buying our grain that we needed, and we started feeding organic grain for a whole year. And then at the end, Organic Valley couldn't take us. That soured us a little bit with Organic Valley. My ego and my pride got in the way, and I said, "We don't need to market our milk organically. We can just ship to the conventional market, farm organically, and make it work."

For almost another ten years, that's what we did, until in 2003 we said, "This is not satisfying. We have a premium product, and we really want to get it to the people that really appreciate it for what it is." That's when we made another effort with Organic Valley, and they took our milk because by then they already had a truck in the area.

Prior to that, in the year 2000, again driven by that, we wanted to get our milk, maybe add value to our milk, produce a value-added product, and get into the market. We formed, with four other graziers, the Wisconsin Dairy Graziers Cooperative. And we got incorporated as a cooperative. The university had a cooperative department that helped us with that. We started making cheese once a week, cheddar cheese. We found a cheese maker to make the cheese for us, we found a truck to pick up the milk. We were the furthest south, and the Adamski Farm was the farm in Green Bay, the furthest north, and three other farms in between. We all knew each other through the dairy grazing movement.

And we started making cheese, and we quickly discovered that making cheese was not the difficult thing. Selling it was the tough thing. So we tried to find ways to differentiate ourselves in the market. The researchers at University of Wisconsin-Green Bay analyzed our milk and found that it was higher in conjugated linoleic acids, CLAs, and omega-3 fatty acids. We used that on our label, which was Northern Meadows, to differentiate ourselves in the marketplace. Yeah, we might not have had the best help in the people that we hired to sell the cheese. But I think what was ultimately our demise was that the consumers weren't ready for health-based cheese. They wanted flavor—which I feel our cheese had—but these health claims were, at the time, not a big thing in the marketplace. In a sense, we were ahead of our time. We had a volume that wasn't really big enough for national distribution, but it was too big for local sales in local shops and local stores.

So by 2003 we stopped making cheese, and by 2005 the co-op finally dissolved. By then, each of the farms had gone their own ways. Four of us became certified and started shipping to

the organic market. And the first farm, the Elders, actually immigrated to Australia, where they're still milking cows to this day. So that happened in the run-up for us to start shipping with Organic Valley. We were really proud members of the Organic Valley co-op until the day we stopped milking. Our farm was uniquely located between Milwaukee and Chicago. We tried to keep it neat, and so it was attractive for the co-op to use us as what they called "farmers in marketing." So they brought a lot of groups out to our farm, big producer groups, big buyers, consumers, and we hosted many field days for the co-op on our farm. (37:37)

**AA:** Is there anything you want to say about your grazing management, about the crop rotations you used, anything like that?

**AK:** Yeah. So by the early 2000s, our farm had grown to about 320 acres, and in the early 2010s it grew to 400 acres by renting additional ground. On the home farm, the 240 acres, that was really all the land we could reach with the animals. That land was in permanent pasture, which was, maybe during early in the year we needed maybe half of it for grazing our cattle. The cattle herd had grown to about 150 cows by then, 140, 150. Then we had young stock. We also raised 40 bull calves a year for dairy steers, and that was a direct marketing enterprise that fell mostly on my wife, Sue. She sold all those steers in quarters directly to the end consumer. So we had about 300 head of cattle on the farm.

Then half of it we made hay on, and as the summer progressed and we needed to extend our grazing rotation, we put more and more land into the grazing rotation. On the land that was off the home farm, we had a crop rotation of oats and peas, or triticale and peas, with alfalfa-grass underseeding. Maybe three or four years of alfalfa-grass, then we took a first cutting off in the last year of alfalfa, put in sorghum-Sudan grass, got two cuttings of that, then put red clover down as a green manure crop. In the following spring we were back to oats and peas with underseeding. So that was the crop rotation on the acreage where we couldn't get to with the cattle.

On the home farm, it stayed in permanent sod that we either frost seeded with clovers, every acre every year, or sometimes also drilled in some grasses to thicken up sod if we had some winterkill, for example, or to introduce new species. That was the way that we farmed the farm until the day we abruptly had to stop farming. (40:56)

**AA:** You mentioned that you were involved with the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program. Can you tell me more about that?

**AK:** Yes. I should maybe back up a little bit. Right from the beginning, when we started farming, I felt a great need to train young people, because I started to realize that the trend here in the US was that young people wanted to get into farming that didn't have a farm background, that came from a non-farm background. I could really relate to that, because that was my story. I had very patient mentors that I learned from, so I felt the need to give back in the form of making our farm available for interns. So we had live-in interns almost from the first year we started farming, that helped us in exchange for room and board and maybe a small stipend. Usually just in the summer, very rarely year-round. We had folks from Germany, Switzerland, France, Ecuador, and on very rare occasions from the United States.

It was in the mid-2000s that we became a little dissatisfied with this intern program on our farm. We really were looking for more formalized dairy career paths. We felt the best way to

do that was to provide an opportunity for young people to build equity. In 1995, while researching the milking parlor that we built on our farm, I took a trip to New Zealand that I organized with the help of the Center for Integrated Ag Systems, who at the beginning of the internet in 1994 supplied a few grazing farmers in Wisconsin with a modem to connect with grazing farmers in New Zealand, to learn from their methods. Because of that connection, I was able to organize a trip to New Zealand, and in ten days visit thirteen farms there. Primarily to research my milking parlor that I built the next year, but also to see about their farming methods and learn about how people there get into farming. They have a very formalized career path that starts with what we would call an internship or an apprenticeship, but then they have what they call “share milking,” where people provide labor in exchange for gaining equity in the form of cattle.

So that idea was always in the back of my mind, and in 2005 we started with our first share milking couple and provided them with a way to not only earn cash, but also earn equity in the form of cattle. We kept that up until we stopped farming in 2015.

This interest in bringing young people into farming has lived strongly in both Sue and I for the whole time. And then when we had to stop farming due to a sudden illness of mine, Joe Tomandl, who had started the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program, said he was looking for an educator in Wisconsin. That’s when I took that job. It was always a part-time job, but pretty occupying for a while. That quickly grew into the first federally registered apprenticeship in farming in the United States. It’s registered with the Department of Labor, and it’s a formal apprenticeship just like in plumbing, electricians, carpenters, and so on. I worked for them until December of ’22, when I retired from that job. (46:31)

**AA:** You mentioned that you did some work with the Living Lands Trust. Can you tell me more about that?

**AK:** As I mentioned earlier, we rented our farm, and we rented it from Christopher and Martina Mann. When they got older, they had accumulated maybe 1500 acres in the East Troy area. Our farm wasn’t the only farm. There was the cooperative farm, our farm, and some other lands. As they got older, they started to get concerned about what would happen to those lands once they would be gone. In the year 2000, they formed Yggdrasil Land Foundation. Yggdrasil is the tree of life in the Norse myths. And because that was hard to pronounce and hard to spell for most people in the United States, just a couple years ago we got rebranded to Living Lands Trust. So I’ll use that name going forward.

So they formed this land trust in the year 2000 and transferred our farm and the orchard they owned in California, were the first lands they put into this land trust. They donated it to this land trust. From then on, we were renting the farm not from Christopher and Martina Mann anymore, but from the land trust. At the end of my farming career, they asked me whether I would be willing to act as a liaison between the board of directors and the tenants, or land stewards as they called them, here in Wisconsin. In the meantime, my title was land stewardship advisor to the board. I continue, to this day, to work for them on a very part-time basis. (49:12)

**AA:** So then after you stopped farming—that was in 2015, 2016?

**AK:** Yeah, 2015, and in January 2016 we physically left the farm.



**AA:** Did they find someone else to run the farm then and continue that dairy operation?

**AK:** There was a steward on there for—it took about a year to find somebody, and that person unfortunately didn't work out. They stayed on the farm for maybe a year and a half. Then the farm sat idle again, and now there is another couple on there, but they're running a beef herd on the farm. The dairy facility sits idle. (50:03)

**AA:** Can you tell me more about your involvement with the Michael Fields Institute?

**AK:** The involvement with Michael Fields Institute was really through this case study on our farm. Other than that, although geographically they're very close to us, four miles away, we were always on the periphery. We were not really involved in their programming. So the first few years of the case study, Michael Fields just came out and supported Josh Posner, the principal investigator from UW-Madison, with the case study, taking soil samples and such. But beyond that, we didn't have direct involvement with Michael Fields.

**AA:** You mentioned that you were on the board of directors for MOSA?

**AK:** Yeah, I'm still on the board of directors for MOSA, the certification agency, one of the Wisconsin certification agencies for organic farming. That was only possible, because I was certified by MOSA, that was only possible after I quit farming. Otherwise there would be a conflict of interest. I'm still on the board, and my term is running out the end of this March. (51:55)

**AA:** Is there anything more you want to say about Grassworks?

**AK:** Grassworks, I had no involvement in serving on their board. But Grassworks has really been influential in the grazing movement. The dairy grazing probably had its heyday in the '90s and early 2000s, but they still organize pasture walks, primarily the grazing conference in Wisconsin. They coordinate various grazing networks in the state, but their focus is shifting more from dairy to beef and other ruminants, and even small animals like chickens and so forth. If there would be a disappointment on my part, it is that dairy grazing really never got the traction that I was hoping for. What was important for me when I started farming was to be able to showcase or be a model for organic dairy grazing on a commercial scale. That was always very important to me, versus just farming on a very small scale. I wanted to really have an impact on agriculture, because I saw that need of stewardship for the land in the United States. As I look back, that is probably a small disappointment of mine. Even direct neighbors that saw how we farmed for 26 years, farmed successfully, I could not convince them to adopt those farming methods and grazing methods. That probably has been a bit of a disappointment for me, although there might have been an impact in areas that I could not even tell, just through contacts I had with people and so forth. (54:35)

**AA:** Do you have any idea why that might have been, why dairy grazing didn't take off as much as you had hoped?

**AK:** I think part of that is the lack of support. It's not as sexy as farming a big confinement dairy with lots of concrete and lots of inputs. Industry is not that supportive, because there's not much to sell to a dairy grazer besides some fencing equipment. The same goes for the university. There has been some areas where there were efforts made, like the Center for Integrated Ag Systems really was focusing on grazing research. I helped them to found the School for Beginning Dairy Grazing Farmers, that was housed on the campus. So there were some efforts made. But there was not a big support from the whole system behind it. And that consolidation of dairy farming to bigger and bigger farms is ever more accelerating and developing. As the dairy graziers like myself are phasing out, there are very few that come behind us on the scale that is required today to even find a market. So Organic Valley is a market, they're just opening up again, but for the last few years they were not taking any new farmers. There are barriers for someone today to start a dairy grazing operation. I think that if there could be more support from research and industry, that might change. Ultimately, I think it needs to be driven also by the consumer wanting that milk and that kind of product. [I see current growth and future potential for dairy grazing in smaller, value added or raw milk direct to consumer dairy farms]. (57:47)

**AA:** Related to what you were saying about working with the university, what is your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities in general, or the University of Wisconsin in particular, and organic agriculture?

**AK:** On one hand, we have the first organic chair at the University of Wisconsin, with Erin Silva. But the large-scale support from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, I'm still missing that, I still don't see that. I think the grazing networks and producer-driven education, that's what's providing most of the support for grazing to this day.

**AA:** Is there anything you want to say, you said you've attended almost all of the MOSES and now Marbleseed conferences. Is there anything you want to say about that and how those have changed over the years?

**AK:** I said I attended most of the grazing conferences that were organized by Grassworks. But I've been to a fair number of MOSES, now Marbleseed, conferences as well. They have been very instrumental for the growth of organic farming in the United States. As you probably know, they grew from maybe 90, 100 participants to almost 3000 over the years. Actually, Josh Posner and I, in one of the early conference he gave a presentation on that case study on our farm. But the livestock component of the conference has occupied a smaller and smaller portion of the conference. It's now mainly focused on grain and vegetable production. There's some on livestock, but it's getting smaller. That's at least my impression. And particularly for dairy, it's getting much smaller. (1:00:29)

**AA:** If you were to summarize your philosophy of organic farming, what would that be?

**AK:** As I pointed out earlier, if it wasn't for organic farming, we wouldn't be farming at all. The philosophy that drove us to farming was really a biodynamic philosophy. I wouldn't call myself a biodynamic farmer, but I would call myself an organic farmer with a biodynamic philosophy. And what I mean by that is, I might not have been always very dogmatic about applying all of the biodynamic preparations, but certainly used some of them, many of them. But it was

primarily the philosophy of the spirit behind all living beings, and that includes the soil, the plants, the animals, the humans on the land. There is spirit behind them. And that has really been our philosophy, that the whole farm is a whole farm organism. It's a spiritual being as well as a physical being. We have to nurture the whole of it. So to that extent, our goal was—and I think that we have achieved that—we left the land better than we found it. It was hard for us to leave the farm. It's still hard for us to think back on that, because we didn't leave it on our terms. But such is life. You've got to move on.

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

**AK:** I don't know about religious beliefs, but my spiritual beliefs, for sure. They are definitely connected to farming. I just tried to explain that, that we feel there is a spirit behind all matter. We try to honor that and respect that in the way that we treated the land, the plants, the animals, and that whole cycle. That's what creates health. If the land does well, the plants do well, good health transfers into the animals, and ultimately into the products that we humans eat. Food is really healthcare. That's how I look at it. And if I walk over my land, it was as much a spiritual experience for me as it was a physical one. (1:04:14)

**AA:** Is there any—you mentioned biodynamics—is there any person or publication that strongly influenced your philosophies?

**AK:** The person who really introduced me to it was Steffen Schneider during my studies. And then, as I mentioned, I was looking for alternatives to conventional farming. I did a lot of visits in the '70s, when the back-to-the-land movement was really big. I saw some, what we would have called back then, communes, that were really concerned about eating well, eating healthy, themselves, but were not concerned about society at large. As I mentioned, that impulse to create change in agriculture, be a model for agriculture, was always living in me. That was not a good solution. It wasn't really until I set foot on biodynamic farms in Germany that I said, "Wow." That really impressed me. It's hard to describe. It was just the atmosphere on the land, on the farm, the interaction of the farmers and people on the farm with the land. It really impressed me. I read then some books, the *Agricultural Course* by Rudolf Steiner. I read the book by Herbert Koepf, who was an agronomy professor in Germany, of biodynamic farming. All that influenced me greatly prior to even starting farming here in the United States. (1:06:18)

**AA:** Do you think there was a connection between organic agriculture, the environmental movement, the back-to-the-land movement, or any other social or political movements?

**AK:** I was personally not involved in any social or political movements. Also not in policy making or politics as far as it involves agriculture. I always was more the do-it-on-the-land. I wanted to lead by example, so to speak. So yeah, I cannot really speak to that, what influence those back-to-the-land movements and other social movements had on agriculture.

**AA:** What is your view on the current USDA organic certification standards?

**AK:** I feel that standards are important, first off, because there are so many people who cannot buy directly from a farm. If you can buy directly from a farm and the farm is totally transparent, and you can see how the products are raised, I think that certification is not that important. But the vast majority of consumers don't have that. And for those it is important to have certification standards. The enforcement of those, that's when the problems come in. I appreciate that there are watchdogs out there, like the Cornucopia Institute and others, that highlight how some farms find loopholes in the certification standards and farm by the letter of the law but not by the spirit of the law.

**AA:** So what's your opinion about the Real Organic and regenerative critiques of organic certification?

**AK:** I cannot really speak to that, Anneliese. There are always movements that try to differentiate themselves in the marketplace from other certifications. I think this whole certification is getting very complex. There are so many different certifications and labels out there. I think it's starting to get very confusing for the consumer. (1:09:38)

**AA:** What do you think are the most important aspects of organic history to preserve and pass on to future generations?

**AK:** What of the history is important to preserve? I think what is important to preserve is, what really is the reason for farming organically? We just spoke about certification and the marketplace, and I think what is important that we not lose, and where the history of organic farming can help, is the importance of why we farm organically. We farm organically, not to make more money. We farm organically to steward the earth, to preserve the most precious resource that our society has, and that's the soil. Because without healthy soil, there's no society ultimately. I think that's what all the organic pioneers, really what drove them to farm organically. It wasn't really to make more money. It was this sense of stewardship, of stewardship ethics, that really drove them to develop organic methods or bring organic methods back into agriculture. Look at my in-laws, Dick and Ruth Zinniker. For many, many years, for the vast majority of their career, they didn't receive a premium for their product. But they farmed biodynamically because they felt it was the right way to treat the land. I think that's where the history can really help to remind us of that. (1:12:18)

**AA:** Is there anything else you want to share before we end the recording?

**AK:** What I want to share is that I really appreciate your effort in putting this history together, of the different personalities that shaped organic farming in the United States. I just want to mention a few more names that were really instrumental over my career. Jim Gerrish, I think I might have mentioned his name at some point. He worked at the University of Missouri and wrote several books on management intensive grazing, and he labeled that term, really. Dr. Paul Detloff, who was the long-time staff veterinarian with Organic Valley. He helped so many people in the organic livestock movement with teaching them how to treat their animals without antibiotics, without synthetic inputs, without hormones. Temple Grandin, Burt Smith, and others who taught many farmers a more stress-free livestock handling. Fred Provenza, from Utah State, another person you might maybe want to contact. He is now retired and lives in Colorado. He did

a lot of work on animal behavior and the interaction of ruminants with the land and epigenetics. Those are all some names that came to mind, that were really influential to me over the years in shaping, not only who I am, but also the way that I farm. [Of course also many of my grazier friends I had farmer to farmer talks with. I learned the most of interacting with other organic and/or grazing based farmers.] And I'm super grateful for all these people that I crossed paths with over my career. [Last and not least my wonderful wife Sue, without her steadfast support none of my work would have been possible.] I just hope that somewhere people that have access to this oral history learn from it and carry the organic movement forward, which is so badly needed here in our country.

**AA:** Thank you so much for all of that!

**AK:** Thank you, Anneliese.