

Richard Wood, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

June 28, 2021

Location: Remote over Zoom

RW=Richard Wood

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right. So this is Anneliese Abbott doing another oral history interview for the organic history project. And this is June 28, 2021. And I'm doing this interview on Zoom with—

RW: I'm Richard Wood. I am now retired, living on our family farm, which does rent out its farm ground. The farmstead, which is a historic farmstead, [is called] Walnut Grove Farm. We host special events, weddings, artisan gatherings and other kinds of things. And I help facilitate that process. Prior to that, as I will be sharing, I was the Executive Director of Food Animal Concerns Trust. And prior to that, I'll be sharing other positions that I've held over the years. I'm an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, I'm retired, and really have not been engaged with the church much as a local pastor in any way since 1995 when I came to FACT.

AA: All right, thank you! So you want to start with doing a little background, just explain your connection to organic/sustainable agriculture and all those other things you were talking about?

RW: You bet. Contrary to others you may be interviewing, and it will be very interesting, I'm looking forward to your book. People who were directly and very self-consciously involved in the organic and sustainable movement. I was [not directly] involved [but rather] led a couple of organizations that were addressing policy and practice issues that included and grew to respond to organic agriculture, sustainable agriculture, and food safety concerns. So in a way I was a facilitator of the process, but always understood that I was not a farmer. I was a person that helped to facilitate the best response possible. And I came in from the outside and learned from folks that were actually practicing on-farm, raising farm animals, addressing organic and sustainable agriculture practices directly. I learned from them and their guidance.

As I said, I was an ordained minister, and in the 1970s I became the director for the public policy program for the Illinois Conference of Churches. And it was based in the state capital of Illinois, Springfield, Illinois. It was called Illinois Impact. And I served in that position for 11 years. It had a social and economic justice agenda before the Illinois legislature. So I was the chair of the state's Medicaid advisory committee, I got an award from the Economic Justice for Women movement. I got another award from the Farmworker Justice Program for work in helping to improve working conditions in the fields for farmworkers, and things like that. And so that was again a part of this ecumenical effort called Illinois Conference of Churches.

When I was working there, I, you make all kinds of observations as you're on the sidelines of the legislature working on policy and aware of what's happening, and working with the religious community. And it felt to me like there was a vacuum in southern Illinois in terms of engagement and who was showing up at the door [of the legislature] and who was involved,

and all that. Well, then I became aware of a group called the Illinois South Project that came from, that was sponsored initially by the University of Michigan and grad students there in their environmental program. They came to southern Illinois to first initially, at least as I remember it, to address coal mining issues. And in Illinois, Illinois has the largest reserve of coal beneath prime farmland. And they [coal mining companies] were mining like crazy. That's slowed down some, but strip mining in prime farmland was a major issue, and they [the Illinois South Project] came to help address that. So, [when at Illinois IMPACT], I then became aware of the Illinois South project.

And as I was working and talking [with them], they asked for my assistance. And eventually I became their director. And what happened was, they transitioned. They were essentially first a staff collective, where the staff stand around the table and said, "This is what we're going to do," and they did it. And that sounds like a lot of fun. Nobody on the outside. But it didn't work as effectively as they wanted it to. And so they asked me to help them become a different kind of organization. I became their first Executive Director. And we organized a Board [of Directors] made up primarily of farmers, sustainable farmers from the area, and we moved forward then.

So with Illinois Impact and [the] Illinois South project, we did work together from time to time on some very specific actions related to industrial ag. And [as] to organic agriculture, we had legislation that would have limited the growth of non-family farms in Illinois. That was fostered by other groups that we worked collaboratively with. I staffed a broad-based effort of farmers and consumers to draft and seek passage of safe food legislation, such as the Illinois Organic Labeling Act. And if you haven't talked to Karen Hudson, at the Grace Project, you may want to connect with her. I can't recall if she was a part of that, but she certainly was a part of many of these early movements in Illinois as well.

I also worked with the Illinois South Project, and when we reorganized, and it had a Board of [Directors who were] farmers, we then called ourselves the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. And that organization continues today. And back then, as we became a new organization, we worked to seek greater accountability over research at the University of Illinois regarding food safety and sustainable ag concerns. And we hosted a number of field days, where sustainable ag, sustainable farmers would host field days where we would walk the fields, and we would invite farmers from the area to come and learn these practices. And as I shared earlier in another discussion with you, it was interesting that no neighbor farmer came. They all drove in from a few miles and learned the process. And then we'd go to another area a little bit further away, and then those neighbor farmers would come by. So there was a new and innovative process that people were not sure was going to work, but they were pretty interested. And it then developed and grew.

And again, at Illinois Stewardship Alliance, we continued a strong focus on strip mining. So that was part of it. And then in 1995 I was invited to become the Executive Director of FACT, or Food Animal Concerns Trust. And I was out working in the [German] Status fields on this farm, helping my wife with her gardening. And I got this call from a search firm. And I did apply and respond. That organization [in] its mission was not specifically focused on the implementation of organic or sustainable practices. But it was focused on the production of safe food, coming from farm animals who were raised on pasture and not fed antibiotics. So pretty much the same.

FACT was founded in 1982 by a man called Robert Brown. And he pulled this [organization] together calling for a focus on how farm animals were raised, particularly wanting

to counter the federal policies that were just growing robust [in] promoting industrial ag. And he wanted to promote better farming practices to improve the safety of meat, milk, and eggs. And it had a humane focus. He wanted farm animals to be treated humanely.

But strategically at the time, he said that we'd fare better in Congress if we didn't focus on farm animals (the old, "Oh, farm animals never have a nice day") but rather, we want to focus on food and food safety. Because food that makes you sick will make your kids sick, member of Congress, and you'd better pay attention to this legislation. And this was a very helpful approach to this whole thing.

In 1984, FACT also launched its NEST EGGS program. And it was an incorporated name. It was a model egg farming system where the hens were not caged. And the reason I share this is that, while these hens were raised on small family farms, the eggs were processed locally, and they were marketed through major grocery chains on the East Coast and the Chicago area. And I'd go to Jewel or Grand Union or whatever and talk to them about buying these eggs. But the project was designed to demonstrate that producing table eggs from uncaged, drug-free hens was economically viable for farmers. And [it] was. Over time, at least 640,000 hens were moved out of cages and raised free range, or raised at least uncaged in these houses. We established a new market niche for farmers, and even McDonald's and Kroger's approached us about supplying eggs for them in that region, around Pennsylvania and Ohio. But their buying request was too high.

But I believe that NEST EGGS is connected to the rise of organic agriculture because it demonstrates and fully expresses the viability of creating an identified market coming from family farms that was responsive to food concerns. And it also was responsive to a specific clientele of shoppers, who didn't just want to go to the grocery store and pull whatever off the shelf. They wanted to know what they were buying. They wanted to understand that this was a valid product, as we do today with organic products that are found in the grocery store. (10:44)

In 1988 FACT launched a food safety program that included for its NEST EGGS farm a *Salmonella enteritis* protocol, or SE, because *Salmonella enteritis*, in coming from shell eggs, was very common at that time. Gave people flu-like symptoms. And what we did was we created a protocol and tested the eggs before they were marketed, worked with the University of Pennsylvania, and created a protocol that became a model, that we brought to the USDA and FDA. And finally through negotiations with them after years, in 2008 I believe it was, a national standard was finally developed. And we were at the table helping that along.

But on the antibiotic front, in 1999 FACT joined with the Center for Science in the Public Interest, which was a valuable member at the table and I think they still are, in petitioning the FDA to rescind existing approvals for subtherapeutic uses in livestock of any antibiotic used or having an impact on human medicine. So subtherapeutic is low dose. It's not meant to address a disease; it's used to prevent a disease from happening. And that subtherapeutic use was a common on-farm practice in industrial ag. In 2004 FACT strongly supported USDA's adoption of a regulation stipulating that livestock producers must not sell, label, or represent as organic any animal or edible product derived from any animal treated with antibiotics. You treat your animal with antibiotics, you don't use that label. And that was a very clear process at that point, which we sought then to accomplish.

And in 2008, we supported changes in the [USDA] labeling efforts regarding the label of production claims, including certified organic and grassfed. And we wanted those claims to be transparent and consistent across the board. And we also asked the agency to strengthen its proposed standard for naturally raised to include restrictions of antibiotics, hormones, and animal

byproducts and not to allow the intensive confinement production practices when there was naturally raised. The same thing was around grassfed. In 2003 the USDA proposed a standard for labeling grassfed meats. And [under their proposal] you could have that label if your cattle are on pure grass 80 percent of their life. Well guess what, all cattle are on pure grass 80 percent of their lives. The last 20 percent they're put in the feedlot and fattened. So we got that changed. And USDA agreed to 100 percent rule. And now grassfed means grassfed, at least as I understood it.

On the antibiotic front as well, we now created and organized an organization called Keep Antibiotics Working. It has 20 leading national groups. FACT staffs it, Steve Roach staffs it along with another person from FACT. And it's a very effective presence in terms of addressing antibiotic use in farm animals. It has in the past issued report cards on how the fast-food chains are doing in terms of their products and what the antibiotic use is in those products. In 2003, when I was at FACT, I visited the McDonald's corporate office in Oakbrook Illinois and delivered over 10,000 letters from citizens across the country concerned about the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria coming from misuse in farm animals. And this was a project of Keep Antibiotics Working [KAW], with the petition drive sponsored by the Union of Concerned Scientists.

So in terms of working to reduce the impact of industrial farming, FACT has been engaged domestically. And also they were engaged internationally (I think they still are), because they sought to use the international policy process to impact industrial ag in the US. They're all [the industry] looking for Denmark or Sweden or England or whatever, wherever we can export our products. So we [FACT and KAW] wanted to work on the policies of those countries to say to the US, "Uh-uh. You ain't, we're not importing your stuff if antibiotics are used." And it did have some impact. We were, through Consumers International, [able to serve as] a delegate to a group called Codex Alimentarius, which basically set international food standards that various countries adopted. And the World Organization for Animal Health.

And in the US [FACT has] been a member of the FDA's Veterinary Medicine Advisory committee and have made presentations to the Presidential Advisory Council on Combatting Antimicrobial-Resistant Bacteria. So we have been engaged at that level seeking policy change as well. So that's kind of where I come from. And that's how I have worked on this issue. I feel like we've had a pretty good record. (16:13)

AA: Thank you so much for sharing all that. So you've talked a little bit about farming methods, and of course you weren't actually a farmer, but with your work with FACT and everything, you had a lot with critiquing and recommending farming methods. Is there anything more you want to say about that?

RW: Well, at Illinois Stewardship Alliance, our work in terms of sustainable ag was guided by working farmers. It was too long ago, I don't have the policies before me, but that guidance was very important, very helpful. But since 2011, FACT, Food Animal Concerns Trust, has conducted a humane farming program, farming with and investing in family farmers who are seeking to raise their animals humanely. And that means without antibiotics [and] on pasture. And by doing that, by providing them grants, mentorships, and scholarships, and involving them in webinars. And it wasn't a top-down thing at all. There's a farmer-grants committee at FACT which I chaired when I was there. But it was farmers around the table, who would review these applications from their colleague farmers to say how well they felt those proposals would succeed in furthering their work in humane agriculture. Some of them were focused on

improving their pastures and becoming more sustainable at that point. Some were focused on how they cared for their farm animals. And overall, as I read their website now, more than 136,000 animals have been impacted in 44 states.

When at FACT I did, as I'm sure staff now does, I'd go out to the farms, I'd visit them, I'd learn from them and come back and share. And it's that kind of bottom-up relationship that's been so important to our developing any kind of policy at FACT. We've had grants [and] we've had mentorships where we've put together one farmer expert with another farmer who wants to learn in a mentorship relationship—to learn how to function and work on sustainable and organic practices, humane practices. And we've had scholarships [to farmer conferences]. I mean, now there's a lot, you know, MOSES, there's a lot of great conferences going on. In Ohio. And we provide scholarships now to farmers to go to those conferences, as well as [providing] webinars. It's all exciting work and I feel it really makes a difference. (18:55)

AA: Thank you. So is there anything you want to share about your philosophies of organic farming? I know you've said a little bit about that earlier, or not just organic farming, sustainable agriculture, all these different things.

RW: Well, I think I've pretty well addressed that concern. Part of it comes, though, out of the next question on personal perspectives. And as I shared earlier, I kind of came to my work through a religious perspective. And my initial desire to work with FACT came from my observation of living in rural communities and growing up in rural Illinois, that farm animals only have value in terms of industrial ag only as a commodity to be marketed. And that always struck me as strange. As a kid, of course, you see this cute cow. But as an adult, seeing farm animals as simply a cog in a wheel didn't make any sense to me. My belief was and is that all God's creation has intrinsic value and must be responded to in those terms. And that includes farm animals.

So when I got the invitation to work at FACT, that connected. And I saw that from a theological or religious perspective as something that was very important. Our work on food policy rests on the foundation that we are to accomplish God's love and justice for all people and to promote and preserve God's creation. And again, I'm an ordained United Methodist minister, and the sermon's about ready to end. But this is the concept that provides the frame and the focus. It doesn't give us answers, but it provides the frame by which we then respond to what is put before us. So, Amen.

In addition, all that FACT does is informed by the actual experience of farmers and the science. And FACT works hard at both ends. We work with scientists, scholars from universities and others. And we also work very hard with farmers to be informed in all that we do so that actually our work then is respected by both farmers and those we are impacting. I was invited to the table with the Industrial Egg Producers to negotiate Salmonella controls. And I was at the table, around the table, the USDA, the FDA, their lawyers, the ag industry, their lawyers, and me. And we won. And that's because of this respectful relationship that we had because our work is based on the science and actual experience of farmers, and they know it.

So that's always [the way it has] been, I was invited to serve, as well as Steve, on the FDA's [Veterinary Medicine] Advisory Committee. And I actually got FDA's highest award, [the Commissioner's Award]. They can give the Commissioner's Award to anybody. And I asked the director of the Veterinary Medicine Advisory Committee, who had told me I was going to get this award. I said [to him], "Don't you realize that I'm about to stand in that podium and

blast you [this agency]?” And he said, “Yes, but you’re going to do it in an informed way, in a way that’s going to help and help bring change.” And that’s what FACT has been, and that’s where I am. And as I view our relationship to the universe around us, respecting all that is, that’s kind of the context for our work. (22:49)

AA: Thank you so much for sharing that. And is there anything you want to add about your personal perspectives--and kind of those two questions are connected, so you commented a lot, but anything else you want to add?

RW: On this question 6 was [regarding] perspectives on organic certification. Again, I really follow the lead of others. Other than I really want it to happen. And as I was at FACT, I mean, we really had some real concerns about how access to pasture would be interpreted when organic certification was first coming about. There was a major dairy that I was aware of that was certified organic and sought that label. And their access to pasture was that the cattle in those pens could look out through an open gate and see pasture. And that was “access to pasture.” It didn’t work. And the same was true in Massachusetts with a number of egg farms there that were certified organic as well. And they had doors open, but the hens could not get out. But that was “access to pasture.” And that’s been a very big concern that I hope has been addressed and changed over time.

So we are really concerned about that. And I hope that people can trust the labels. That’s been a big concern. Trust the labels, that they are what they are, so that as a consumer, when I go to the store, I know what I’m getting. (24:36)

AA: Thank you. Is there anything you want to share on your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities and organic and sustainable agriculture, and how that’s changed over the years?

RW: Well, it certainly has improved and been a key factor for us at FACT. In the early ’60s and ’70s as I mentioned the University of Michigan provided the base for the development of the Illinois South Project, which became Illinois Stewardship Alliance. And then we had to go after the University of Illinois to keep them focused on things that mattered as they were concerned about that. But the University of Illinois extension was very helpful with the Illinois Stewardship Alliance as it began working on sustainable farming practices.

When I was at FACT, we had an excellent relationship with a number of—and we still do, I’m sure—with a number of universities and places. [For example], we had a great relationship with Texas A&M, and a professor there, Dr. Ted Friend and his graduate assistants. And one of the foundations, a charitable trust, noted that what was happening in west Texas [and] west-central Texas, was that a lot of the smaller dairies were moving into this big open land and becoming huge, corporate operations. And in the process, the farm animals, the dairy cows, were suffering as a result. And so we were called in and had a joint project with Texas A & M and the graduate assistants, beginning in 2006, to conduct FACT’s humane and sustainable dairy research project, where we found and documented heat stress in dairy calves and cows and identified ways to address that. And that [study] caused management changes that I assume are still in place to this day. It didn’t decentralize the dairy industry, but it did address those [husbandry] changes for the cows in those situations. And that was a very helpful relationship that we had with them [these dairies and with Texas A&M].

[The] University of Iowa, Iowa has also been very helpful. And a number of [other] universities. And Steve Roach and Larissa McKenna from FACT will have to provide you a fuller list at that point. (27:07)

AA: Thank you. So we've gone through this quite quickly; we still have a fair bit of time. Is there anything you want to go into more detail on? Like I'd be interested in hearing more about the Illinois Conference of Churches and that side of it. I'm really intrigued by the connection between churches and sustainable agriculture. So anything else you'd like to share about that, I'd be really interested in.

RW: I would be too. And unfortunately with my background being involved more in a social justice agenda, I was not directly involved in the later movements there. And I even googled before our call the United Methodist Church on food policy, and wasn't able to quickly come up with something. But I will do some further research and share that with you as I find it. Because interestingly enough, in most cases, in terms of organizational structure, we [at FACT] have not connected with the religious community that much, which I find pretty strange. And it's kind of a missing part of our work. And I think this interview will help promote that kind of further work to see what is happening and what we might address.

In terms of current trends and future trends and lessons for the younger generations, my concern has to do with communities of support. And that can [include] the religious community as well. Particularly where I am now, in northcentral Illinois, those who are in organic agriculture and sustainable agriculture, there aren't that many networks [or individuals] addressing those [organic and sustainable agriculture] concerns and working together. Several years ago my family came home to our farm to raise poultry on pasture, if you can believe that, and I did not say anything. One of them visited Joel Salatin's farm and came back to build chicken tractors. And they're still sitting in the shed over the way. And they actually did raise those hens and pullets and chickens on pasture, moving them every day to new ground. And then it came time to slaughter. And that was not a pleasant experience for them or any of us. And I think that stopped them from moving forward into the next round.

And I believe that here and elsewhere that finding the slaughter and processing facilities for humane and organic and diversified farms is an ongoing problem. I remember visiting a farmer up in upstate New York, [who] was out raising cattle on pasture. And she was sharing how again it was so difficult to get access to a processing plant to have those cattle processed for market as meat products. And she said she actually had to kind of befriend the guy, not get on his bad side, in order for that to happen. And I know here in west central Illinois, at least recently, slaughtering facilities for small farms have gone further and further and further away. And when you are wanting to become an organic farmer, or wanting to raise livestock on grass, the whole infrastructure needs to be there. And that even comes down to fencing and getting approval from where you need to get approval for changing fences and fence lines and boundaries. I mean, there's quite an intricate infrastructure that needs to be addressed so that more farmers, more people can move into organic farming. And I think that's very important for all of us. (31:29)

AA: Thank you so much. Is there anything, like I said, we still have more time if there's anything you want to add, if there's anything else you want to go into more detail on, feel free to do that.

RW: Let's see. I think I've pretty well, I think that pretty well covers it, as I look through my notes.

AA: I had a question about Illinois IMPACT. You had that IMPACT all in caps. Does that stand for something, or not?

RW: No, it didn't. It was just a term. It was a national organization as well that was a religious one working on food safety, and then we were the Illinois arm. And it stood for nothing but having an impact. It was a well-supported group by congregations and representatives from foundations across the state and also across the nation. And it actually, I was [personally] helped because I had previously worked for a US Senator in Congress and that helped with my federal work as well with Illinois IMPACT on the policies that they addressed.

AA: I was also curious about the NEST EGGS program. How long did that last? That doesn't really exist anymore, do you have any—

RW: Let's see, it started in 1988 and it ended in the late '90s, I believe. I'll have to look that up. I did not come at its beginning, but I came as it was really taking off. And our role, Steve was to visit the farms and help them at that point. I'm just looking to see here if I have a date in terms of when it ended. I did on an earlier doc, but I think I got rid of it. But at least it lasted, probably ten years. I'll find that out. But it was very successful. Actually, it [was] started first by our founder, Robert Brown, going to Switzerland and studying models there as to how to raise hens that were uncaged. And then he brought that back to the US. It started first in New England, and then went to farms, basically Amish farms in Pennsylvania. And there was one farm in Illinois that continues I believe to raise uncaged hens. But it's a large indoor operation. The operations that we worked with in Pennsylvania were smaller operations. But they were also indoor, uncaged and indoor. They were not free range. And a lot of consumers want free range. The problem is, one is pathogen controls, but the other is just collecting eggs from free range hens. Where are they? So [on] these farms the hens were indoor.

Now, though, FACT [is and] has supported [free-range poultry production]. And I'm very much aware, I've visited several farms where the hens were in pastures with dogs that would monitor any predators. And then at night would go into mobile housing. And then the eggs would be collected, because they'd also go in the houses to lay their eggs. And that was a very successful way of farming. But not NEST EGGS, that followed NEST EGGS, but NEST EGGS kind of modelled that approach. [It kept its hens inside and uncaged, and this project predated organic.] That was also highly successful. I don't think, though, they may not have been modelled as organic, they were modelled as uncaged. But they could have been organic as well, because they certainly fit that niche, or that approach.

So it was very successful, as I shared. We ended the [NEST EGGS] program because when I started going to these huge [grocery] companies to market our eggs from these small farms, I was now standing in line behind all these other producers or representatives from companies that were doing the same. And it was a for-profit company for a nonprofit. And [so] we said, "Hey, we've got our niche, let's declare victory and leave." So we went out to each of these farms and we got them connected with someone else who was doing the same thing, or we helped a couple of them start their own companies for raising and marketing their eggs. So it was a very successful project. (36:32)

AA: So I noticed, just at the grocery store, it seems like even large brands of eggs now are labeled “cage free.” Do you think that program, and I know there’s been debate over as to whether that’s really good the way they raise the cage free eggs, but do you think programs like that helped make that change?

RW: They helped, but you’re really, just as with the organic label, you need to be very cautious. Now the organic label has substance to it, but free range or uncaged still is a free label. There are certifying groups that I follow that when their label is used, that means that it’s an authentic label. I usually look for eggs that are both from that certifying group and the USDA organic. Because now I do trust USDA organic. I hope that’s okay to do. But then I know that there is accountability. And that’s the question, what kind of accountability exists over these farmers and the claims that they are making? That’s true for organic, sustainable, free range, uncaged, whatever.

AA: Well, thank you so much. I’m trying to think, I’m not sure if there’s any more follow-up. I mean, if you want to go into more detail about what you were talking about God’s creation and how that influences how FACT and all that, I’d be curious in hearing more about that if you want to go into more detail.

RW: I think I’ve given a long enough sermon on that point. You know, when I was reading [my notes] out loud, it took me a full hour to read it, at least. But I think we really have covered the topics and what’s here. And I think it’s very good. Well, thank you very much.

AA: You’re welcome. Thank you. (38:43)