

Mark Retzloff, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

December 11, 2023

MR = Mark Retzloff

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is December 11, 2023, and this is Anneliese Abbott doing an oral history interview with

MR: Mark Allen Retzloff.

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

MR: Well, I'm pleased to be here speaking with you today, Anneliese.

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.

MR: I was a Baby Boomer. I was born on September 25, 1948. Both my mother and father were attending Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. My father had been in the Second World War and after the war had come back and continued his education at Purdue University. He met my mother there, at Purdue University. My mother had come from a very poor family, but she was an excellent student. She was the number one high school student in Indiana in her senior year and got a full scholarship to Purdue. They met at Purdue University. They got married, and I was born in 1948, there in West Lafayette.

Purdue University in Indiana at that time, the late 1940s, was still very much dominated by the agricultural community in Indiana, in the Midwest. But my father became an automobile engineer. In 1950 we moved up to the Detroit area. My dad had gotten a job up there at Ethyl Corporation, which was making the additive for premium gasoline at that time. We lived there, in the Detroit area [in a suburb called Royal Oak], while I was growing up. My mother's older brother had a farm in Indiana. A 160-acre farm, growing corn and soy and wheat and alfalfa. As a part-time, he also worked on the Wabash Railroad. We would go down and visit two or three or sometimes four times a year with them. When I would go down there, I would get the opportunity to, they lived on this farm, and when I was down there in the summer, I would help out, when I was a little bit older, nine or ten or eleven, I was driving a tractor behind a combine. Just barely moving, but following behind. So I kind of had that sense of what was going on with agriculture and farming.

At the same time, my uncle, besides being a farmer, was working on the railroad. And his wife, my aunt, was a teacher. So it was clear to me that, gosh, maybe farmers have to do more than just be farmers to be successful. So that was always in the back of my mind. But anyway, I got to have that experience, because I was living in a suburb of Detroit, so that was the closest I got to agriculture, when I would go to visit with my uncle and aunt. (4:41)

AA: And so then, when and where did you go to college, and what did you study?

MR: I went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor [in 1966]. And this was also during the time of the Vietnam War. At the University of Michigan, like a lot of the campuses in the Midwest, [the students were] a very active component of the antiwar movement going on at that time. At Michigan, and at places like Wisconsin as well, that was a very active part of the student body, the antiwar movement. So I was involved in that, protesting against what was going on in Vietnam, so on and so forth. At the same time, I was conscious of the fact that I had a deferment by going to college. Eventually, when my number came up, I went down and took my medical examination to see if I was capable of being drafted.

And I got a deferment for something that I wasn't even aware of, that I had been born with a club foot. I was aware of that, but I wasn't aware that was a deferment. I went down there, and lo and behold, they just pulled me out of line and said, "Go over there," and I went over there, and he said, "You're deferred. We cannot draft you because you were born with a club foot." Even though they corrected it when I was like one year old, by putting my foot into a cast for six months. Obviously, at that time in my life, I wasn't really conscious of all that, and I wasn't aware of it. After the physical, I went home to tell my parents, and my mother was there, and she explained all the stuff that had happened to me when I was a child, when I was very young, that I wasn't aware of.

So I got that deferment, I went back to school. My roommates and I and my girlfriend moved out to a farm outside of Ann Arbor. We were living out there, and we put in a garden and were starting to get interested in [growing our own food]. And that actually piqued our interest in organic and macrobiotic foods. We had a friend, a fellow named Jim Silver, who was one of the early proponents of macrobiotics in the US and actually was living in Ann Arbor. We got to be close friends with Jimmy Silver, and that's what really got me involved with the macrobiotics. [My girlfriend] and, I got married, my first marriage, in 1970.

And right about that time we were changing our diet to macrobiotics—brown rice and miso and tamari and vegetables and seaweed and so on and so forth. Vegetarian. In doing that, we were having a hard time finding foods. There was a [beginning of the] discussion about organic foods being better, and what was organic? Everybody had a different opinion, but the opinion that I kind of gravitated towards was Rodale. J. I. Rodale and the books that he had written. So we started getting the *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazines, and all the books from the Rodale Institute that they were publishing at that time. And that's really where we gathered a lot of knowledge, back in the late '60s, early '70s about what was going on with organic and natural foods. Rodale Institute was very important for that, because they actually had publications and a magazine that came out monthly, which was filled with information as well, how to do it.

So that was some of the people, the books. There were a lot of interesting books that were coming out at that time, *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, stuff by Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson. I read *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. All the classic books that people were writing about what was going on in sustainable ag and organic. Rodale had somewhat of a definition of what organic was, what we had to avoid, some of the things that you should be using. And all of this was stuff that people were doing, but a lot of it was practices that were used before we industrialized agriculture. (11:20)

When I would go out in the early ['70s], I would go out and talk to farmers at that time about growing things organically, I really didn't have a prescription or outline for that. I just

would really be able to talk to them about what I thought the practices should be. Changing the kind of fertilizer, going to something that wasn't a chemically based fertilizer, using compost or manure, those type of things. Rotating your crops. Using more nitrogen-building crops, like using alfalfa in a rotation. Which made a lot of sense, because a lot of farmers were not just crop farmers but also had the animal component, whether it was sheep or dairy or cattle. So making sure that they were incorporating that into their nutrient plans, so on and so forth. Just on a general level.

And I remember talking to a farmer named Tom Vreeland, and he had a farm just east of Ann Arbor. I wanted to talk to him, because somebody had told me that he was growing beans and wheat and corn and a few other things. So I went to chat with him and asked him if he would be willing to grow, what I was looking for, some white pastry flour wheat, and I was looking for some beans, not soybeans, but things like white turtle beans and those type of things, for soups. And he asked me what I was talking about, and what kinds of practices that would mean, and I told him, "No pesticides, not using chemical fertilizers." And we chatted a bit about it. He kind of looked at me and said, "You know what, what you're talking about is the way my dad farmed here the whole time I was growing up. He never used any of that stuff." And I said, "Yeah, that's what we're looking for."

He agreed to do it. He did make one caveat, which was, he thought it was going to cost him more, and I needed to be willing to pay him more for if he didn't get the same amount of yield, and I would need to make up that difference. And I immediately said, "Yes," not immediately understanding what the impact of that would be. But I felt that he would treat me fairly and that we would have a dialogue on what his additional costs were, and additional time he had to put in, and so on and so forth. (15:08)

So we started with him. We were successful with him and his farm, and he agreed to do more. And he became somebody that we could bring other farmers to to talk about what he was doing, and so forth. And they would have arguments, and then they would turn us on to other farmers who were doing it this way. That's how we built the beginning network of organic farmers in southern Michigan. And as we began doing that and hearing about other people in southern Michigan or Ohio or Indiana, that area, we began meeting with them as well.

And what we were doing, this would come back to Eden Foods, which was a co-op at that time. At that time—this was about 1970—we had decided that the co-op thing wasn't working well for us. We couldn't get people who wanted to volunteer to come in and work with us. So we turned it into a for-profit business, and we called it Eden Foods. That was the first natural food store in Ann Arbor. And that had a life of its own as a food store, and then we moved it into another place where we actually put in a bakery, and we had a deli and all sorts of other things. It evolved into a much larger natural food store.

At the same time, we were running a very small distribution business for the Midwest, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, a little bit into Illinois. Just in that general area. Maybe a little of northern Kentucky; maybe a little of western Pennsylvania, in Pittsburgh or something like that. But just in that area. And we were doing a lot of macrobiotic foods, a lot of grains and beans. We bought a stone ground mill, and we were grinding flour and putting it in 50-pound bags.

At the same time, I had, during that period, my wife and I, at the end of 1970, moved out to Seattle, Washington. When we moved out there, we joined another macrobiotic community in Seattle. Through that community, they needed somebody to manage an Erewhon natural foods store there, so they asked me if I would do that.

At the same time, I took over a spring water business that a guy named Bob Johnson had started in Seattle. What I would do is a couple times a week, I would drive up [to the dairy]. This company had bought a stainless steel dairy milk truck. And they would take it up to this dairy processing plant up in the mountains east of Seattle. All the water at this plant was spring-fed. So they made an arrangement that if I cleaned out the milk truck every day, I could drive it up there and fill it up with this spring water. And then I would take it down, and I had a route of people in Seattle. I would deliver it in five-gallon glass bottles. They would put them out on the porch, and I would come and fill them up and put the cap on them and take the old ones, and then take those and clean them up and then fill them up again from the truck. Or sometimes I would just fill them up from the truck, right there, take them out and fill them up. [This was the first spring water company in Seattle.] (20:21)

So I was doing that. I was also running a natural food store, and occasionally, there was a company out there in Seattle called Chico-San. And it was a macrobiotic food company, but it was also a distributing company very similar to what Erewhon was doing in the Boston area. And they needed somebody once a month to drive this truck on a [southern] delivery [route] from Seattle down to southern Oregon. So I would do that, partly because I wanted to see that part of the country. I would take the truck and drive it all the way down, stopping in Olympia, Washington, stopping in Portland, and in Eugene, and in Corvallis, all the way down, and seeing the beginning of the natural foods industry with these small natural food stores in all these towns, and one that had two stores in Portland, called Nature's Northwest.

Anyway, I was getting to meet and see what people were doing, and seeing where organic was starting. And I remember, I went into this one store in Springfield, Oregon. And I walked in there, and in the middle of the store, on a platform about three feet high, was this huge billiards table. Right in the middle of the store. And I walked in there, and I had this delivery for them, products and stuff. And I'm like, "Wow, this is amazing!" So I walked over and talked to the woman, named Sue Kesey, who was running the store, Springfield Natural Foods. And they also had a dairy farm, Springfield Creamery, and they were doing organic milk there. First time I'd ever seen anybody doing organic milk. But anyway, we were chatting, and Sue told me in our conversation that her brother was Ken Kesey, who wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and a couple other books. So I thought that was pretty interesting. And here she was, running this natural foods store with a pool table in the middle of it. That was some of the interesting things you would find at that time up there in the organic food co-ops at that time. (23:35)

So anyway, I did that for a year. And then I got tired of living in Seattle. It was just too cloudy for me. When it was not raining it was beautiful, it was great, but that wasn't very much of the time. So I came back to Michigan and went back to Eden Foods and helped [the company evolve]. At the same time, my wife and I had been introduced to a guru named Guru Maharaj Ji. And he was a young guru, twelve or thirteen or fourteen years old. So we got introduced into that whole spiritual community. I was still working at Eden Foods, doing a lot of the distribution work and meeting with people. That's where I met Paul Hawkin, that's where I met Tom Chapelle of Tom's of Maine. I met a lot of people, [many] of the original people in the natural foods industry.

That's where I met Frank Ford, from Arrowhead Mills [in Hereford, Texas]. And Arrowhead Mills was, at that time, the leading provider of organic grains and beans throughout the United States. All out of Deaf Smith County. That's where Arrowhead Mills was, in northern Texas. And Frank had been doing that most of life. His hard red winter wheat was fabulous for making bread. And he was also doing organic vegetable oils at that time. Corn oil and soybean

oil and some olive oil. And he was selling those in bulk, 50-pound bags or 25-pound bags, and the liquids were in five-gallon containers. We had a deal with Frank at Eden Foods. He and another company I'll talk about became our number one suppliers of organic grains and beans for us, from Arrowhead Mills. And he would send us up a truck, and the deal he made with him was, he gave us some terms. And the terms were that he wouldn't send us anything else until we paid for what he'd sent us on the first truck. That's the deal. We'd get it, we'd sell it, we'd pay for it all as we started selling it, and then he would be willing to send us some more.

And then I started working with the Lundberg family in California. Erewhon had told me that they were selling this organic brown rice. So I called them up to see if they would do a similar thing to what we had with Arrowhead Mills, and they agreed. And there were three Lundberg brothers out there. Homer was the one that dealt with me. Very nice man, doing both organic and conventional rice. Both long grain and short grain rice. And I did a similar deal with him. They would send us a truckload of product, and as soon as we paid for it they would send us a second one.

So that's how we got started as Eden Foods and moving those organic products around the country. Two [other] people called me out of the blue. One was Tom Chapelle of Tom's of Maine, and he was selling all these liquid soaps. Tom's of Maine started off as liquid soaps. This was before Dr. Bronner's was really doing it, at that level. Dr. Bronner's was selling into the health food industry, and Tom's was coming out with nice packaging that fit into the natural food store. I started working with Tom's of Maine on that.

And then out of the blue I got a call from John Hay. He was the original partner of Mo Siegel. Mo and John were the founders of Celestial Seasonings. And they called me, and John wanted to know if we would sell this herbal tea in bags. And we said, "Sure." First we asked them to send samples, which they did. But when we got them and saw that they were good, initially they were in burlap bags with a little tie in the top with a little label on it. We started selling that.

One of the things that happened at the beginning of this movement of natural foods, it was happening in a lot of different places around the country. People were finding out, this was before cell phones, this was before laptops, actually before computers in some sense. There were computers, but a lot of this was done in ledger books and so on and so forth for accounting. All of your phone calls were on phones, we weren't doing it on cell phones, so on and so forth. So things didn't move as fast, but they did move. And the movement was growing rapidly, so people were interacting with each other. It was very regional and local first, and then somewhat regional. What ended up happening was that, just like we started in Ann Arbor and the Midwest with Eden Foods and that becoming a distributor, there were other distributors like that in other regions of the country. And then there was some cooperative distribution happening at the same time. And that's what had happened up in Seattle, that was a co-op up there that I was driving the truck for. But at the same time, distribution was starting up regionally, and they were servicing the regional co-ops and small natural food stores that were beginning to happen at that time. (31:17)

That got us to probably about 1973. You asked me some questions—I'm going to give you an overview, then I'll come back to some of your questions, which will add more light to what you have there. So in 1973, I said earlier that my wife had gotten introduced to a guru, and she introduced me to him. And then out of the blue, they were going to have a big program down in Houston, Texas. The organization was called the Divine Light Mission. They were expecting 100,000 people to show up at the Astrodome. That's what they were thinking. So somehow they

found out that I was involved in the food industry. And so they called me up from their headquarters and asked if I would be willing to come down to Houston and help put together all the food for this four or five-day conference that was going on down there, called Millennia.

And I agreed to do it, so they flew me down there. I helped put together the food. First of all, I wanted to do everything natural and organic. So my first job was seeing if I could get product. And I remember, I started calling people around the country and found out that I could get some organic apple juice out of Colorado in drums. Not 55-gallon; probably about 20-gallon, 30-gallon drums. So I bought a truckload of those. We decided that it had to be vegetarian. So we decided that we would do a lot of sandwiches. I got, not organic, but local whole wheat bread. I got natural peanut butters and natural cheddar cheeses and other things like that. A lot of salads, so we were able to buy a lot of that organically that was growing right around the Houston, Texas area. But we also had to get some of it out of Colorado and some of it out of California.

So we did that. That program came together. There ended up being 10,000 to 12,000 people there. We were feeding them three meals a day for four days. And that went on and it was rather successful, and I met a lot of really interesting people who came from other parts of the country and helped out in putting all that food together for all the program attendees. (34:41)

I went back to Ann Arbor after that. Probably less than a week after I got back to Ann Arbor, I got a call from a guy who I had met down in Houston who had been the head of everything in the food and housing part of it. Not the program, but the food and housing. And he called me, and he was back in Denver. That's where the national headquarters was for this organization. He called me from Denver and wanted to know if I could come out and help at the international headquarters. They were doing one or two programs a year in the States and other programs in other parts of the world, in Canada and Latin America and Europe. They wanted to know if I could help out with what was going on in North America, with all the foods.

And they had at that time what they called ashrams, they had centers in Seattle and Portland and San Francisco and southern California and Kansas City and Chicago and Detroit and Boston and New York and a number of other places. They asked if I could come, and they said that I would live in a couples' ashram, an ashram which was [for married] couples. Because in the ashram you were single. So my wife and I moved out there to Denver in December of 1973. It was right after Thanksgiving.

That's when I started putting together, in all these cities that I just mentioned, cooperatives called Rainbow Groceries. They were these natural food stores, and they were great. This is where a lot of the followers of the Divine Light Mission would work and help bring the communities together, because they were all into natural foods and so on and so forth. So we had a Rainbow Grocery at that time in Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, Atlanta, and a couple other places. I was doing that, running that organization. And also at the same time, whenever we would do programs, not only was I setting up the food, but I was setting up the hotels and arranging the convention halls and the big places that we were doing it, to put those things together. That was my job with that organization. (38:20)

And I was doing that for [two years]. This got me to 1975. And at that time, my wife and I had divorced. She had moved. And the US government and the IRS decided that religious organizations could not own for-profit organizations. So the Divine Light Mission had to sell off any of the businesses. One of them was all the Rainbow Groceries around the country. And they [also] had some of these stores similar to a Salvation Army, where people would donate clothing

and all kinds of things, and then they would sell them really cheaply to people in need, stuff like that. Anyway, they had to sell them.

I decided with a partner and friend of mine to buy the Rainbow Grocery in Denver. We ran it for about a year and a half, and we decided that it was impossible to be successful. And here's the reason why. Most of the employees there were followers, what we would call "premies," followers of the Divine Light Mission. I just had a hard time getting them to work. They would go back in the back [storeroom] and want to meditate and just couldn't get the job done. So we decided that we would sell that store to somebody else who was in the organization. And my friend, Hasshassan and I, we moved from Denver up to Boulder. And that was probably in 1975. And we were going to open a natural food store up in Boulder. Maybe it was '76. But it was right in that time frame, '75, '76. So we moved up there.

We both went out to raise money, we both went and worked in the construction trade. I was a painter and Hass was a painter. I [also] did other types of construction work. And we did that for about a year and a half. At the same time, we were trying to find a location in Boulder to open a natural food store. Eventually we found one, in 1978, and [it took] a few years to get the money together—we opened a store called Pearl Street Market. Pearl was the name of the street in Boulder at that time. So we opened a store called Pearl Street Market. I think this was 1979.

And then by 1981 we opened another store in Boulder called Alfalfa's Market. And Alfalfa's Markets became known as the store of the future. I was at one time on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine because Alfalfa's had done extremely well, Ann Arbor or Boulder or Madison, Wisconsin, these kind of stores in those kind of communities, those liberal college towns, it was a good fit for that. If you look at Seattle where the store was, it's on Capitol Hill. If you looked in Kansas City, it was in that kind of neighborhood. If you looked in LA, it was in Malibu. In San Francisco, it was in the area of San Francisco where all the hippie-type people were hanging out. So that's the kind of stuff that was happening with those stores at that time, [in early 1980].

We started the Pearl Street Market, and then we opened up Alfalfa's Market in 1982. It was actually kind of the store of the future. That also was where, the challenges we were having with getting organic food were similar. But they were getting better. We were able to get a lot of organic produce out of California, from a couple produce distributors that were doing organic [and shipping] out of California. [One of them was called Albert's Organic.] So we were bringing in that. There was a distributor called Rainbow Distributing. I forgot to mention this, that we had started that when we started the Rainbow Grocery in Denver, we also started the beginning of a distribution business. We were buying in larger quantities and distributing to some of the other Rainbow Groceries at that time. Rainbow Distributing became a distributor in Denver and began distributing to all the other health food stores and natural food stores in the Rocky Mountain area. And that was the beginning of that distribution.

There were similar distribution companies starting in other parts of the country. In southern California, the Bay Area, the Northwest, in the Midwest, in the Northeast there were two different ones up there. Texas Health Distributors was down in the Texas area. There was one in the Southeast, and there was one in the Southwest. And these were distributors that were starting up. They were health food and natural food distributors. Not only were they selling health foods and natural and organic foods, but they were also selling vitamins and minerals and all those type of products that you would find in a health food store. And so those were all starting up in those parts of the country. (46:09)

And the organic food part of the business was beginning to grow. It was really focused at that time in California and in the Northeast, and a little bit in the Midwest. In the Northeast that was being driven by what was going on with Erewhon and the natural food stores up there. When I say the Northeast, I'm talking about probably all the way from Washington, DC up into New England. Distributors were happening there. And the natural products industry, all the retailers were getting together. We had a group called the Natural Network, which was all these big retailers like Bread and Circus, which had four or five stores in Boston, and Mrs. Gooch's, which had four or five stores in Los Angeles. Whole Foods had their two stores in Austin, and they were expanding into other parts of Texas. Nature's Northwest, up in Portland area. And then there was what we were doing in Colorado. And then there was another store starting in New Orleans called Whole Foods Company, not the Whole Foods Market, and that was by a guy named Peter Roy. And then in North Carolina there was Lex Alexander, and he had a group of stores out there. [This group was called the Natural Network.]

So those larger retailers started to add multiple locations, [and the founders] started getting together. At that time we had opened another store in Denver, south of Denver, an Alfalfa's. So those all started getting together. This was back in the early '80s, mid-'80s. At that time, this was when organic was just starting to get going. Most of it was in produce and bulk foods. There was very little at that time, except for maybe, I think Arrowhead Mills was doing some oils in bottles, organic vegetable oils. Some of this stuff that was being done in the macrobiotic world, that would be stuff like soy sauce and miso that were coming over from Japan organically. So we were beginning to see this. But the biggest challenge was, in the whole category of dairy there was nothing going on organically, except maybe for a farm that would service its local community. And there was really nothing going on in the meat area. There was not a lot going on in the packaged goods except for basics at that time. Grains and beans and some oils and tamari and some juices and things like that. But we didn't see a lot of packaged goods at that point.

That all changed with these big stores, because they had a much bigger consumer base, a lot more. And people were coming in and asking for more and more products as they were coming in. Then—I can't remember when this was—but it was in the mid- to late '80s, *Sixty Minutes*, the TV program, did a feature on Sunday night on Alar. Alar was a substance that was put together that they would spray on apple trees to get the apples to ripen all at the same time. But they were also spraying it on salad bars in grocery stores. This was when salad bars were coming to grocery stores. So that they wouldn't wilt. So when people got ahold of what that Alar was, and it was very harmful, particularly to children. And *Sixty Minutes* brought that up. There was a huge outcry about, "Why are we poisoning our children and the salad bars and apples, which is the number one fruit that children would eat?" Alar got banned. (52:00)

But that opened the eyes of a lot of people in the States, particularly women, about what was in their grocery stores. "Why were we the test animals for these chemicals?" And so on and so forth. That really gave a lot of momentum to the organic food movement. But the problem was that we had all these different certification organizations in different states. So for example, when I would buy organic produce from a distributor in California, when it would get to Colorado, I couldn't sell it until I got it certified again in Colorado to Colorado law, which was different. This was a tremendous restraint on trade for us and a huge hassle, to do that. And quite a confusion to the consumer. It says "organic from California," but you're not selling it as organic here. It was just a mess.

So all of these big retailers, [“Natural Foods Network,”]—remember, I’d said there was this group from different parts of the country—we were all getting together because we weren’t competing with one another. So we were getting together three or four times a year, and we would share best practices, we would share who the distributors were that we were working with, where we could buy things, what kinds of products we were selling, better practices with our employees, all sorts of things. Most of us did not come from business backgrounds. We came from something else that had guided us toward food and changing the way agriculture and the food industry was being done. By seeing these problems we and the consumers were having with trying to understand buying these products and getting clarity about what they were.

So when this organic thing came up, we had just had a meeting of [the Natural Network] talking about some of these challenges. I had a partner at Alfalfa’s, his name was Hass Hassan, and he was the person that I talked about earlier who moved up to Boulder with me. [Having a partner allowed me to agree] to take on the role for this group of large retailers, to see if we could find some way to go to Washington and get this situation straightened out, because it was really a challenge for us, to be a successful business with all this. We saw where the consumer demand was [growing].

Through networking and buying products all over the country, I learned about a group getting together in DC [in 1990, 1991] to talk about an “Organic Food Production Act.” And that was being put together by a group of people, Katherine DiMatteo came with Judy Gillian from the Amherst area. There was Joe Smille, who came down from Canada, who was doing a lot of work up in Canada on organic. Chris Kilham came from the Bread and Circus, and he’d been handling all of their standards and so forth for the Bread and Circus stores up in New England. [Bill Wolf from Virginia, Bill Knudson from Massachusetts, and Faye Jones from MOFA, Midwest Organic Farmers Association.] (56:52)

We got together and started talking. Coming from different parts of the country, we also knew what was going on with the organic certification in those parts of the country, and the emerging groups that were putting that together. We began deciding that yes, first of all, we wanted to have a trade association where we could come together and have one group representing all of us in Washington, DC. So we got into a dialogue to put this together. That’s where we began the Organic Trade Association. We asked Katherine DiMatteo if she would be the original executive director, and myself and a number of others became part of the original board of [directors of] the Organic Trade Association. There was a core group of us.

So I was on the founding board of the Organic Trade Association. I think I was the secretary. And I was also appointed the head of government affairs. And that meant that I and Katherine DiMatteo went out and hired a [lobbyist]. We couldn’t be lobbyists ourselves; we had to hire somebody who was a registered lobbyist. So we hired a guy named Bob Gray, who was a [registered] lobbyist and had done a lot of work in agriculture and food. We brought him on to be the lobbyist for the Trade Association. I became head of government affairs, so I ended up traveling back and forth to Washington about every other month for three or four days at a time the next three or four years.

And that’s when we decided, because when we put together the trade association, we had people like myself [from the Rocky Mountains and others] from the Midwest and the Northwest and others, we decided—and there were some big issues coming up with organic at that time that we began seeing. So the first thing for us was to look at all the [current and draft] organic standards from every place, all the things that were already out there, like the standards from CCOF, the California Certified Organic Farmers. That was a big one, because there were a lot of

people who were getting certified by that. We were looking at Oregon Tilth, that was another one. And Washington Tilth. There were a number of organic farmers up in those areas getting certified, because there were stores where they could sell their products. The same in California. QAI was another one that came out. Joe Smille was representing what was going on up in Canada, with organics up in there. There was the Northeast Organic Farmers Association. There was a Midwest Organic Farmers Association. All of these were burgeoning at that time, beginning to come up. So we were bringing them all in. (1:01:15)

At the same time, we decided to hold listening conferences in four different [regions] of the United States. So we held these conferences, and anybody interested in organic farming, organic products, or organic standards, we would invite. We would hold them, each one was on a different day, and they were usually on a weekend. We would have them come together, we would talk about what we were doing, we would send out what we were doing in advance with the standards, what we were [information and feedback] gathering, what sections we needed. And then we would listen [and adjust and add]. Let's say we wanted to talk about livestock. What were the issues in livestock? Were they different in livestock in New England than they were in the Midwest, than they were in California? So we would gather that. Or how you make compost, or how manure could be used as compost, how it had to be aged, what kind of substances could be used. All sorts of stuff. And different parts of the country looked at it a little bit different. So we wanted to gather, first of all what we were [currently] doing. Then gather those standards, those practices, from as many people as we could around the country, so that we could begin putting together what sections we would have to have into an organic law.

And that's when, right at the very beginning of this, probably right in the first year, right when we were meeting and starting this in Washington, DC, Senator Fowler, Kathleen Merrigan had come on to be a, she'd gone to the University of Texas, and she'd come on to Senator Fowler's staff. And he was one of the ones who the people had gone to about doing something with organic. And Senator Leahy then got interested in that. And he was chair of the Senate Ag Committee at that time. The [House] co-chair was Tom Daishell of South Dakota. Those were the two co-chairs of the Senate Ag Committee. (1:04:45)

What we had, Ed Baron was Senate staff member of the head of the Senate Ag Committee. And he was also the head person in Senator Lahey's staff. So he got interested in the law, in the Organic Food Production Act, putting that together. He decided that the Senate Ag Committee was going to have a hearing on putting together an Organic Food Production Act. So I was chosen to represent the Trade Association at [the Senate hearing].

I had been doing a lot of lobbying, and I realized that there were certain people I did not want to be at that hearing. One of them was a guy who was the head of legislative affairs for the National Farm Bureau. I had met with the National Farm Bureau, and they were adamantly going to oppose the Organic Food Production Act. And I knew the head lobbyist there. And I chatted with him. And I had presented organic. I was trying to figure out what were the big concerns at that time for the Farm Bureau. Number one for the Farm Bureau at that time was that all their farmers were aging out and there wasn't a lot of young people who wanted to get back into farming. And that was a big challenge back then. It still is today, in some ways. But we've kind of changed that, because we've focused young people into a more sustainable focus and something that they could believe in, organic agriculture and regenerative agriculture now, and so on and so forth.

So I said to him, "Organic is all the young people. If you want to get young people back into farming, you should be embracing organic, because that's how you're going to get these

people back into it.” He kind of agreed with me, because he could see. He was meeting the people that I was introducing him to and seeing their enthusiasm. And he told me that he was thinking about testifying on behalf of the Farm Bureau. And I knew what he was going to say, which would not be helpful to us, particularly since it was coming from the Farm Bureau. So what I did was, I asked him what he would rather do than testify. Play golf. So I arranged for him to play golf someplace because he wanted to play golf, so that he wouldn’t testify. I don’t tell a lot of people this, but that was the kind of stuff I had to do to make sure that we could keep the good part of what we were trying to do, so that we wouldn’t be distracted by how conventional was trying to push down organic. Having the Farm Bureau not testify was important to us, which they didn’t testify initially, which kept conventional ag from really having a voice against us during that time.

Anyway, we went on with that, and we held all these listenings, we brought them all in, and then they decided to have the Organic Standards Board put together. We were critical in helping select who the USDA would bring on board for that. I was having regular meetings at that time with AMS, the Ag Marketing Service. And that was the branch of USDA who was put in charge of putting together the National Organic Standards Act. In other words, the Ag Committee could not do it, they had to use AMS to put together, through USDA, what the law was going to be, so there would not be a disconnect between the Senate and House Ag Committee with the law they are putting together, and what the USDA thought it should be.

Now that’s where a lot of the lobbying from the nonbelievers was focused on, at USDA. Big Ag was going to work against it through USDA. Not so much through the Senate and the House, because here was Senator Lahey, who was in favor of it. He was the chair of the Senate Ag Committee, so they didn’t see that they were going to get very far with them. So they decided that they would go after it through the House, because the bill had to come up through the House as well. So that’s where the challenge was. We were working with the Senate, with Lahey, and in the House, which was where the conventional industry was working. (1:10:49)

I did spend a lot of time in the House, though I had never had a really good relationship with Kiki LaGarza, who was one of the co-chairs of the House Ag Committee. And in fact, after the law got passed over him trying to keep it from being brought to the floor at the House, when I went by to stop into his office a week or so after the law got passed, his receptionist wouldn’t let me in the office because he was so mad at me, at getting the law passed. But that’s the way things are.

Once you get the law passed, then you’ve got to put together all the parts of the law so that they can happen. All the rules and regulations and everything else. And that’s where the National Standards Board came in. Those people were selected—we all put in people’s names and stuff like that—but that was selected by USDA. We got some people on there that obviously didn’t support some of our things. But the most part, the majority, we got people who would listen to what we, as the practitioners of the organic farming and food and the ones who were in touch with consumers, what they were thinking organic was. They did listen to us. But we did have some members there that we had to make sure we got them convinced. So we didn’t get everything we wanted with that. We knew that.

So we focused on what we thought were the most important things. A restriction on certain substances, the substances that could be used in making compost, certain timeframes. For example, once you gave a cow antibiotics, the milk from that cow couldn’t be organic for a year. Where in Europe, they made it two months. So right now, you cannot buy any organic cheese or any organic dairy products from Europe unless they’ve been certified to US standards, because

the organic standard in Europe says they only have to keep them out of their herd for a couple months. Anything from that milk in Europe cannot come into the US.

That's one of the changes that kind of stands out. And we had some similar things that we had to do with Japanese products coming in, and so on and so forth. Japan was much more aligned with us on how something had to abstain, could not be organic after some kind of an unallowed substance had been sprayed on it. All those kind of things happening. (1:14:29)

Then we had to look at, where were the exceptions that we were going to make? And what were the criteria for those exceptions? People wanted to know why it took so long for the law to get out and published and be the law of the land. Well, it had to be vetted in our community, and then it had to be vetted with the agricultural community, and then it had to be vetted on the legislative basis, and then it had to be vetted through the agency, by the USDA itself, and then if there was something in food, it also had to be approved by the FDA or someone else or by somebody else who had to make sure all that was being added, so on and so forth.

Eventually, we got the foundation of the law which we have today. And that law [the Organic Food Production Act], there are still things that are being vetted and changed and looked at, as new practices come out or new substances come out or new concerns come out about things. I think it's a good process. I'm not sure that the organic industry is as diligent as we were at the time, when we were putting it together. And I think that this whole notion of regenerative ag and what those practices need to be, kind of laid on top of organic and then adding other things into it, but understanding that it took a lot of time for that organic standard to get to where it is. And a lot of work was done to get it to there. It was vetted through every state. Everybody had an opportunity to make a comment on it. Every organization, every nonprofit that was involved in organic food had an opportunity to make comments on it.

So what we have is something that went through that gauntlet. And one of the key elements of it is constant improvement. As we learn more, or new techniques or new procedures or new information comes to the forefront, it can be adapted. It can be changed. Where regenerative should fit in this, if you ask me, I have my opinion on that. And I also feel that regenerative agriculture is taking it to the appropriate next step, where we have to look at it from a bigger systems point of view, the impact that it has, not just on the hundred acres this farmer has, but how that fits into what's going on globally on our planet. So the dialogue continues. The challenge continues. The evolution of what our standards are continues. And hopefully, the lessons we learned in getting the first organic law passed and making the kind of changes that we need to do as we discover new things, or need to make adaptations based on systems and challenges that we have, that we can do that.

Is it perfect? No. Is it allowing us to move in the right direction toward a higher and higher percentage of food being done organically and regeneratively? Yes. We're seeing courses, programs, and tracks happening in ag schools and universities throughout North America and literally throughout the world. So we've had a huge impact on where it is. Are changes happening quick enough? Absolutely not. And I think we've got to stay the course. We've got to be really dedicated to what we do.

I don't know if that was too long of a thing for you, but I thought it was important for you to hear a lot about that. (1:19:57)

AA: Yeah, thank you very much! And can you tell me a little more about founding Horizon Organics?

MR: Okay. So right at the same time that I was getting drafted into playing a lead role in the Organic Food Production Act—and this was when I was still managing Alfalfa’s Markets. The number one question that I got from mothers, women, was, “I can get everything else organic, but I can’t find any dairy product that’s organic. And my family drinks a lot of milk, or eats a lot of yogurt, or whatever.” So I had a friend, [Marc Peperzak], who was a large dairy farmer in Colorado. Him and I were both in an organization called YPO, Young Presidents Organization. It was people under a certain age who were presidents or CEOs of their companies. And I was in the chapter in Colorado. So I asked him—his name was Marc Peperzak, and him and I were in a [forum] group called YPO, Young Presidents Organization. It was people who were presidents of their organization. You were marched out after you turned 45. Both of us were in our 30s at that time, 35, maybe 37, I can’t remember.

I asked him if he thought he could do organic milk. And he immediately said, “Well, what’s organic milk?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know. We don’t have a definition of it yet, but I know there’s three things. No antibiotics, no hormones, and no pesticides.” And I said, “Do you think you could produce milk using no hormones, no antibiotics, and no pesticides?” He said, “Well, the first two I don’t have a problem with. I think we can do that. But no pesticides, I’ve got to find somebody who’s actually producing it. I can do it on our pastures, but I have to make sure I can find the grain.” I said, “Okay,” and we chatted a little more about it, and we decided that we would put together a feasibility study. Which we did. We hired a couple guys, and we told them what we wanted to do, and they put together a study, gave it back to us, and we used that study, and I got Marc to begin converting one of his dairy farms. (1:23:33)

At the same time, one of the guys who had been helping me out in Washington, [Paul Repeppo], had sold his business and said, “I’ve got some time on my hands, do you need some help in Washington?” And I said, “Yeah, I do.” And so he came out to Washington, DC and spent a couple days with me. We got to chatting and having a drink after work, and I was telling him about what I was thinking about with this organic dairy business. So I chatted with him, and a month or two later, he had gone to a sustainable farming conference at the Michael Fields Institute in West Troy, in Wisconsin. You probably know where that is. And he, at that conference, met George Sieman from CROPP, or Organic Valley. And he called me up. He said, “Hey, I met this guy out here at this conference, and he’s got organic cows.” So I asked him, “Go ask him if he’s willing to sell some of it, and if he is, I’m going to get on an airplane.”

He went and asked George, and George said, “Yeah, I’d like to talk to Mark,” and so I jumped on an airplane and flew out to Milwaukee and over to West Troy. I met with George and asked him how many farmers he had. I think he told me at that time he had five. And I asked him what he does with his milk. And he said, “Well, we separate the milk, and we take all the cream and sell it to a company that’s making clarified butter, ghee.” And I said, “What do you do with the skim milk?” He says, “Well, we just sell it into the conventional marketplace as skim milk.” On the spot, I just told him right there, “I’ll buy all your skim milk from you. And I want to make it into yogurt.” He said, “Fine, we’ll do that for you. When do you want to buy it?” So I said, “Let me figure out what I’m going to do and anything else, but I’m willing to buy all the skim milk, and just tell me what [price] you’re willing to sell it to [us].”

So we agreed that we would put together our agreement in documents. I went back with my friend who had told me, he came to Boulder to visit, and I said, “Hey, Paul, you want to do this with me? Because I think it’s going to take more than just one of us to do it, and I’m pretty busy going back and forth to DC right now, and other things I was doing.” So he said, “Yeah.” And I said, “Okay, I’ll take care of all the stuff on the farm end. What I want you to do is start

putting together”—and we had agreed, him and I, that we were going to do yogurt first. He had asked me from a retail standpoint, and I said, “Yes, by far, besides milk, the number one product is yogurt, that should be organic.”

Because he couldn’t get any whole milk, we decided that we were going to do nonfat yogurt. There was very little nonfat yogurt in the marketplace. So we found somebody who could do the organic fruit for us, a company in California. We determined that instead of an 8-ounce cup of yogurt and a quart of yogurt, we were going to make a 6-ounce cup of yogurt, and the quart size would be slightly smaller as well. The reason is that we knew we were going to have to pay more for all our organic ingredients, and we felt that if we made [the cup] two ounces smaller, the consumer probably wouldn’t mind. We got ahold of the National Yogurt Association, and in reading some of their [research] information, we found out that the majority of women consumers of yogurt were not finishing the entire cup after one serving. So we decided that, okay, maybe this would work. (1:29:03)

Well, we came out with a 6-ounce cup yogurt. That was our product we had in the marketplace for the first year. And then we came out with a quart-size of plain yogurt and vanilla yogurt. Our first [cup] yogurt flavors were raspberry, strawberry, vanilla, coffee, and plain. We selected all of those because obviously those were the most popular conventional yogurt flavors at the time we did that. We started with the [cup] yogurt, and also the quart yogurt, and then we started adding products [to the portfolio]. Eventually we added milk, and then we added butter, and then we added cheese, and then we added shredded cheese, and then we added cheese sticks, sour cream, cream cheese, all over a period of time, we added all those products.

And then each one of those had to be processed in a different plant. So what ended up happening was, we would produce the yogurt once a month. I would fly out on Sunday night to Madison, and what we did was we found out that this plant in Madison, what they did was the Pasteurized Milk Ordinance, the PMO, requires that dairy plants clean out their entire plant once a week. So we found out that the plant at Madison was doing it on Sunday night and early Monday morning. So as soon as they cleaned the plant, we could run our product through there because it wouldn’t be contaminated by non-organic. And then they could run their conventional right after we were done, and they didn’t have to clean it.

That was what we did with that plant initially, and that’s how we did it with everyone. At one point we were probably processing in anywhere from 30 to 35 different plants, all the different products around the country, by the end of the time that we were at Horizon. But we always did it the same way. We did it after they cleaned, and they could always follow. In reality, there was a lot of extra capacity in the dairy processing and manufacturing around the country, and so we didn’t have any problem finding people who were willing to add our processing into [their] plant. Since we gave them the procedures, and we had somebody there initially so they got it right, and we had all kinds of tests we took to make sure that they hadn’t “cheated” a bit, or stuff like that. (1:32:32)

So that’s how we got going. And during that period, we started off with the original farmers that Organic Valley had. They were shipping the milk out to whatever plant we needed them to. We had a really good relationship with them. Eventually we agreed, when they wanted to do milk and after we had established the marketplace and were selling it around the country, they wanted to come up with their own Organic Valley milk. We agreed for them to do that. They never really challenged us in the marketplace, but there were some co-ops and some other stores that preferred their brand to what we were doing out there with [Horizon Organics].

But we always worked together. I probably had visited forty or fifty of the original dairy farmers and their farms in Wisconsin and that whole region, the Kickapoo Valley and so on and so forth. Became very close friends with a lot of them. I've brought two different classes of freshman high school students from Colorado out to Wisconsin and had them placed with organic dairy farmers for two days, to get an experience of what it would be like to be on dairy farms. We worked a lot with Organic Valley. Yeah, there were some people who were on our case because of our scale and our size and so on and so forth, but in reality, we changed the dairy industry. Natural Horizons and Organic Valley together. We also worked closely, when Gary Hirshberg at Stonyfield wanted to start doing organic yogurt, I helped him find the dairy farmers to get started in New England, and what he needed to do, and so on and so forth.

Because for me, I was transforming an industry, a commodity. I was transforming milk into organic. Yes, I had a business, we were selling it all over the country, and these other people were being competitors. But the reality is, they were also fellow journeyers on the journey with me, in changing the way we look at organic dairy and organic production in the United States. Dairy was the one that got that out to mainstream America. (1:36:15)

Did I answer some of these questions?

AA: Yeah, I think you've answered most of them, up to that point. And then when did you leave Horizon?

MR: Okay. We went public—I think it was '98. We went public in '98. And that's when the business started changing, at that point, because we were bringing on some additional people. We had the board change, because we were a public company. We eventually got purchased by Dean Foods. And Dean Foods was the combination of Suiza and the Dean Foods out of Chicago, when they merged. A merged company. Dean Foods and Suiza, at the end of the '90s, had been consolidating and purchasing up all the dairy companies in the United States. And at that time they were the two behemoths in the industry. And then they merged. And then Suiza had made an investment in us when we went public. So they got very interested and continued to be interested in what we were doing, and when they merged with Dean Foods, together they had got White Wave, the soy milk and tofu company, which was a Boulder-based company. Because they had made an investment in Horizon after we had gone public, and they merged with Dean Foods, they decided that they wanted to own the entire natural dairy business, the soy and the dairy, the cow business. So they bought us.

I had a three-year non-compete. And during that non-compete, I took on the role of CEO, I was on the board of a company called Rudy's Bakery. And Rudy's Bakery was a natural foods bakery in the Rocky Mountain area that was doing some expansion outside of that. I was on the board, and we decided that we needed to make a change in leadership. What I found out was that they were selling their bread for less than it cost them to make it, which obviously you cannot do for long and continue to stay in business. So I had called the board members and told them that I thought that this was a mess, they didn't know what they were doing. So they asked me, since I didn't have a fulltime job at the time, if I would be willing to do a turnaround. I said, "Okay, I will, but I'm going to turn it into an organic bakery." Which I did, because I knew where I could get all the organic ingredients, so I started getting the organic ingredients, and then we changed it to an organic bakery.

And then I found out, I realized that by learning what was going on in the bakery business, the bread business, that if you took bread as soon as it cooled down out of the oven,

and you put it in a blast freezer at 10 degrees below zero and got it frozen to that temperature and kept it at that temperature, that you could suspend the staling of the bread. And you could ship it frozen anywhere in the country, and once it got there, you could pull it out of the freezer and let it thaw out, and you had fresh bread. So I called up all the people that I'd been selling organic milk to around the country—retailers, distributors, and so on—and asked them if they'd be interested in organic bread. And they said, “Sure.” I started shipping that out, and quickly Rudy's became the number one organic bread in the United States. (1:42:11)

But my non-compete was ending. So I went back to my old partner at Horizon, Marc Peperzak was still doing his dairy farming. It was a large dairy farm, and he was still selling his organic milk to Horizon, off of his farm. And he had another farm that he'd built up in Idaho as well, so he had two organic farms at that time. He was selling that milk through Horizon. And he said to me, “What should we do next?” Because he was one of the original shareholders at Horizon. I told him, “Marc, I think my dream is to make organic milk affordable and accessible to mainstream America.” Because that's where I saw the challenge was at that time. He says, “How are we going to do that?” I said, “Here's how we're going to do it. We're going to—80 percent of all milk in the United States is sold as store brand. And it's always cheaper than the brands.” He said, “How do they make it cheaper?”

“Well, the way private label makes it cheaper is, we need to own everything. We need to own the cows, we need to own the farms, we need to do our own feed, we need to own the processing, and we need to own the distribution. Because somebody makes a profit margin at each of those steps. And if we own all them, then we gather all of that margin, and we can sell it cheaper because we're gaining additional margin.”

He said, “Okay, how are we going to do that?” “Well, we've got to own it all.” So we put together a plan, how we could do that. And we took it out to the marketplace, the financial marketplace. And because we had been successful as a public company, as Horizon, we had a lot of people who were willing to give us money to pull this together. And we ended up taking the money from an organization out of Boston [called Charles Bank] that was managing the money for Harvard and MIT's endowment. Very smart group of guys who were willing to give us the money to buy the farms, the cows, to build the plant. So that's what we did.

And today, Aurora Organic Dairy sells the vast majority of organic milk in the United States. It sells all the [organic] private label milk in the US to Costco, Walmart, Target, Kroger, Safeway, just about all the leading supermarkets and food markets in the United States, under their brands. We produce that for them and ship it to their distribution centers, and they ship it out. For example, I have a home on Kauai, Hawaii. And I can go to the Costco on Kauai, halfway in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and I can get Costco's organic milk in a three-pack, and it's made here in Colorado.

So that's how we really evolved the organic dairy business to a place where it is mainstream today. We've brought about our goal, which is making organic milk affordable to mainstream America, and accessible to mainstream America. You can do those things if you really put your mind to it and find people who can do it, get people together and build a team and work hard at it, you can bring about that change. And these other people and other companies in the organic industry have done some spectacular stuff like that.

My personal partnership with the people who started Organic Valley continues today. They're still dear friends of mine. We get together at trade shows to chat. We know that we built something, and we want to see it continue. I'm now beyond organic, I'm into the regenerative and all that, and I'm involved in a lot of other organic companies. (1:48:09)

One of the things I've worked on, I wanted to go back to this, as my ten-year term at the Organic Trade Association was beginning to wind up, at that time—in 1999 I became president of the Trade Association, and at that time I was seeing that there was [still] a lot of confusion [in the marketplace]. We had done a study with the National Marketing Institute, and I kept thinking that there was a lot of confusion out there with the consumer. And lo and behold, the NMI did a study with consumers and found out that at that time, in 1999, the majority of consumers felt that natural foods were the same as organic foods. And I looked at that, and I said, "That means the Trade Association has failed in one of their number one objectives," which was to communicate out to the American public what organic food was and what the great value was, to the American public, from an environmental standpoint and a sustainability standpoint, and health and wellbeing. But people just thought that it was the same as natural. And that's because the big natural food stores had been very successful in talking about natural—Bread and Circus and Whole Foods and Mrs. Gooch's and all of that.

So I started an organization, I left the Trade Association and started an organization called The Organic Center for Research and Education, which was all about the consumer, about what organic food truly was. And by doing that research and that education, we started working with the universities and working with people who were doing education, with the certification organizations like CCOF and so on, NOFA. And I put together a board of people who were really experts in communicating to the consumer. One of them was James White, the senior VP of Safeway. Just a lot of people who really could be valuable to the organic industry, to be able to get the knowledge about the benefit of it far and wide out into North America.

Within two years, our budget was greater than the Trade Association. And we would have a dinner every year at the Natural Products Expo in Anaheim, which we would pack the entire building. And we would raise a lot of money, because we were doing research and we were doing education to the consumer, and people who had companies that had organic products realized that we were doing the work that the Trade Association wasn't doing at that time.

Eventually the Trade Association came to me and said, "Hey, can we merge with you?" And of course I said yes. I wanted the Trade Association to be successful; I was one of the founders of it. I just wanted them to get back on track to what they really needed to be doing, which was this research and education. Because that's why people were giving [The Organic Center] money, big companies, because we were helping promote their products by talking to the consumer about the value of organic. That was a big shift for the organic industry, in that.

And that was, unfortunately, one of the things that contributed to—the Trade Association never really has done the kind of education and research that it should do. They spent their time mostly on continuing to legislate and get the law put together in Washington. Which needs to be done. But the fact of the matter is, other organizations and other groups have taken over the work of communicating to the consumer. It hasn't been the Trade Association. When I go to their sessions on research, I'm one of the only three or four or five people who show up, which tells me that they haven't put an emphasis on it. Because there's a lot of really good research going on around the country. I mean, even the stuff that you're doing is really important. Gathering all this information, the history and so forth, and putting it down in a way that people don't follow in the footsteps they don't need to follow.

So anyway, that's kind of getting you to where I got to. After that, after Aurora, I retired from Aurora in 2010. Continued to be on the board of a number of organizations and companies. I've been in the palm oil business for the last decade, in bringing organic and sustainable palm oil into the United States and getting that as a substitute for a lot of stuff. It's much, much more

sustainable than any vegetable oil that we use in the United States. And those type of things. Pushing along and moving those things forward. (1:55:13)

Let me go back through some of this stuff, Anneliese, and make sure that some of these things you asked me, that I was able to get to. Land grant colleges. Where did you go to school?

AA: I went to Ohio State for my undergrad, studied agronomy, and then I studied environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

MR: And you probably have learned, by going to a land grant college, the academia—even though I sit on the board, two boards at the University of Michigan, I sit on the ag school at CSU, Colorado State, and the business school here in Colorado, and I sit on a couple boards of Michigan. I find that real innovation is going to come from what's going on out in industry, out in the people who are doing it every day in business. That's where the innovation happens out there. Now from a technical standpoint, yeah, can you validate things through universities and the research and so on and so forth? But the reality is that in academia today, the focus there is, for the most part, on making sure that they get their tenure. And once they have their tenure, it's very difficult to influence what they do their research on.

Now, I think what we're finding is that the younger people that are coming up and getting into academia and into research are bringing, that's where the new ideas and the new research is really happening out there. And also, through institutes which are part of but outside the university. I'm not clear about the ones that you have at the University of Wisconsin, but I'm sure there's ones in the ag school that are doing some of the work that's not really, but affiliated in some way with the university. I see that in some way in Minnesota, there's some great stuff going on up there, but it's done through an institute that's associated with the University of Minnesota. The same thing here at Colorado State University. They're slowly getting much more involved on a day-to-day, because I've been on that board at the ag school for the last decade and pushing them that direction. But I don't see a lot of that happening.

I see it's a good training ground for people. I don't see where the resources are there to bring about the kind of real change that we need to see to make a difference in what's going on in the world today in food and ag. It's going to be done through industry, putting the money in, making it happen. (1:58:54)

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

MR: Well, my philosophy, first of all, is to—one of the key things for me is to make sure that we don't disturb it too much. We don't disturb the land. The least amount you can disturb the land, the more that we let Mother Nature do what it needs to do. Now, that is most important when we're looking at stuff that hasn't been disturbed much. When we're looking at farmland in, say, the upper Midwest or the Midwest that's been farmed, some of it for 150 years or more, 170 years. Probably for the first 120 years, there wasn't a lot of harm being done out there. But agricultural practices today are more like mining than anything else. And that has to change. There are practices out there that have been proven, and we're seeing it more and more, that actually are beneficial.

One of the quotes that I have on my mantle in my office is by Chief Seattle. And you may know this quote. This came in a letter to President Franklin Pierce in 1852. It says, in his letter to

the President, here it is, 170 years ago: “Will you teach your children what we taught our children, that the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all of the sons of the earth. This we know. The earth does not belong to man. Man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

And that kind of, once I found that quote somewhere, it’s been kind of a basis for my work in the world, that we’re all part of this web. If we’re going to make a difference, we have to go out and make it. We can’t depend on others. We have to be there doing it. And for me, I’m always looking and searching out, seeking out the smartest people, the people who are doing it, the people who understand the big picture and what we have to be doing, and who are out there being heralds rather than keeping quiet about it. I think we have the intelligence, we have the techniques, we have the ability to bring about the change that we need in this world, with agriculture and the food industry being at least 30% of the problem. That’s where I’m going to work for the rest of my life. I’ve devoted a lot of my life to understanding where we need to make the different changes.

So that’s where I work, Anneliese. I’ve dedicated my life and career to that. I work with lots of young people. I mentor people. I advise people. I’m on boards. I was just at the Future of Colorado Ag conference this week or last week, for three days. And I’m doing this constantly. Because I want to get this word out. And I won’t be satisfied until I can walk into every retail food store in the country and find these type of products being ubiquitous on the shelf, where people can buy them, and that we’re bringing about that change out there, that our water, and our air, and our land is clean again. (Beginning of Part 2)

I got my degree in the Conservation and Resource plan at the University of Michigan. I’ve been on the board for the School for the Environment and Sustainability there for 20 years, and I’ve been on the board of the Center for Sustainable Systems at the University of Michigan, and the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility at the business school here in Colorado. I was one of the cofounders of the Master’s in the Environment program that they started at the University of Colorado. And Phil Taylor, who started Mad Ag, I mentored him when he was teaching as a professor. And now he’s out there, and I’m on his board. I’m just embedded in it. Applied Ecological Institute, AEI, which is in Wisconsin. I’m on that board. They’re doing a lot of great work with bringing about land change and so on and so forth. Building tools to measure carbon impact down to ten meters below the surface. That’s where I’m focusing all my time and energy, in that realm. Working with people, helping to provide guidance and assistance to them.

So that’s what my life is about. I also spend a lot of time, as you noticed, because I spend a lot of time at universities, I spend a lot of time with people who are beginning their careers and trying to make sure that they get on the right track, that they find the right type of inspiration, that they can be successful out there in bringing about change. (2:22)

I think you had a question here about Aurora. Farmers saying it’s too big.

AA: Yeah, I’ve heard criticisms of it from some people.

MR: It’s not about how big it is. It’s about how you make it big. When people at some point say that the organic business is too big because we can supply everybody, wouldn’t that be great? But it’s how you make it that way. Are you taking care of people? Are you taking care of the land? For me, one of the very hottest topics going on right now in food and ag is nutrient density. Knowing what your food eats and how that gets transferred into what we eat. It’s become evident

in the last few years that the AMA has always had this, and the food industry's always looked at 100 different nutrients which are important to us. But in reality, there's probably over 1000. And AMA is now beginning to understand that, and our food industry at the depths is beginning to understand that that's why, when roots are going deeper, that's where we're extracting those type of minerals, which are really important for our health. That's where we get the zinc, and the zinc is critical for us. But we're just finding that stuff out. We're just doing that kind of deeper research, finding out that Mother Nature has a lot figured out. We've just got to play by her rules, not by our rules, our human rules out there.

Do I struggle with that kind of stuff? I struggle when I think about it, but I don't struggle with it, because I know that there's people out there who are just getting focused, and if we get that information out to the broader public and if we really know that we can do it, we'll make it happen. I'm confident about that. I'm not so confident that our politicians can bring that about in this world. I just hope they don't destroy too much of it so that we do have something to work with.

What other kind of questions do you have? (5:48)

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

MR: I think number one is the connection to the soil. That is so important. Fertile, productive soil is important to providing us with the kind of food that has the appropriate nutrition and nutritional value and nutrients that we need to be healthy, to function appropriately in the world that we live in today. Which has a lot of things that are really beating down on those things. So I think that's really important. For me, it's elevating the soil. Looking out my window there, I can probably see 50,000 acres out in front of me right now. And I can see that a lot of it is undisturbed, because I'm looking up into the mountains. But the stuff that's on the plains here, as soon as it gets killed, without knowing what you're doing or what the purpose of that is, so many people in this country have no idea about that whole cycle of life, the soil to the food to us, and how that comes back down, back into the soil and back to us.

I don't know how we teach these type of things, Anneliese, but we've got to get more and more people understanding the real value of organic farming and what that means from a kind of broader lifestyle, broader approach to our environment and the way that we work with one another in our world. They're all interconnected. And there's a lot of truth to how important the type of food we eat is to our wellbeing, both mentally and physically. Most of the people that I know who are eating good food and believe in organic, their mental capacity seems to be in a better place, and their health seems to be in a better place. The things that they do in the world seem to be doing better things in the world. I'm not saying that other people aren't, but I'm saying that people who can get that part of it seem to get the other parts of what we need to be doing in the world, going about the type of work, the kind of peace that we want in the world today.

I try to focus on food and agriculture, and what role we can play in bringing that about. Other people may do it through other things that they do, whether it's a specific technology, or by being just an educator. There are many, many other ways to bring this about. But mine was to make a connection with the marketplace for consumer goods, how they're made, how they're brought to the marketplace. That's been my job. (10:18)

AA: Thank you! Is there anything else you want to share before I turn off the recording?

MR: I'm sure that we could sit here and chat about a lot of these things for a few hours or so. But let me see, I made some notes here. You asked me about what books and publications. A couple: *Farmers of Forty Centuries*. There's a book that I've always enjoyed. Obviously Rachel Carson's book is a critical book, *Silent Spring*. I like the book by Charles Massey, which I kind of think is somewhat of a bible for regenerative ag, *The Call of the Reed Warbler*, have you see that book?

AA: I'm familiar with it, but I haven't read it yet.

MR: I think that he gives a really good history of it. I like the stuff that David Montgomery is writing, *What Your Food Ate* was one of the books he wrote. The other was *Growing a Revolution: Sustainable Food and Agriculture* by Wes Jackson, which was about bringing our soil back to life. I read a lot. I was just looking at the book I'd read most of the other day, it was *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship* by Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman. These guys are great thinkers. Another one I like is by a woman named Laura Lengnick. It's called *Resilient Agriculture: Cultivating Food Systems for a Changing Climate*. These are the things that inspire me, push me to do the things that I do. And these books are by academics or other people, and they're much better at writing than I am.

I think for me, being in the organic industry for so many years in my life, one of the companies I've been involved with for the last three decades is a company called Traditional Medicinals, which is a tea company, which is doing fabulous work in forty or fifty different countries around the world with herbal teas and ingredients. And they're all organic. They work with communities there, hunters and gatherers and herbs all over the world. And they're almost all organic now, and many of them are moving into regenerative, a lot of these growers, and they're helping them with all sorts of things. It's realizing that you've got to do this all over to bring about this change. In a world which is not as friendly as it should be towards what we're asking it to do.

AA: All right, well thank you so much! Was there anything else you wanted to share before I turn off the recording?

MR: Well, I think as you go along, Anneliese, and you come up with things and ask, I'm assuming that I'm not the only one that you're interviewing.

AA: No, I'm interviewing a lot of people.

MR: As you move along and begin to see things that you feel are connecting, I'd be happy to have a chat with you about that. And if you come up with somebody else you would like to talk to and you don't know how to get ahold of, I can help you.

AA: Yeah, that would be great!

MR: The most important thing for me is that you're adding to the history of what's been going on in organic and regenerative ag. And I think that's really important.

AA: Well, thank you. (17:17)