

Susan Futrell
Narrator

Anneliese Abbott
Interviewer

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AA = Anneliese Abbott

SF = Susan Futrell

AA: All right, well this is Anneliese Abbott doing an oral history with:

SF: Hi, my name is Susan Futrell.

AA: And this is part of the organic and sustainable oral history project. So Susan, thank you very much for being able to do this interview today. I really appreciate that. So we are going to start by having you give a little background about yourself and how you became interested and involved in organic/sustainable agriculture and what your involvement was.

SF: Sure. Thank you for having me. This is a project I'm really excited is happening, partly because I think the history, it's so easy to lose some of that as things keep constantly evolving. And I think the history is so important to inform what we're doing today. I grew up in Iowa, and that's where I still live. And my background in working with organic and sustainable agriculture came from two directions. I was involved in a lot of environmental issues and activism when I was in junior high and high school and college. Because I live in Iowa, it's easy if you're really connecting the dots to see that environmental issues like water quality and health and soil connect to agriculture. So I really got my initial grounding in working on those kinds of issues. And then when I was a student at the University of Iowa here in Iowa City, I got very involved very early in the beginnings of the New Pioneer Food Co-op and the natural foods movement. And that helped really connect the dots between food and farming and the environment for me.

I spent about 25 years working in the wholesale part of that natural and organic food movement/industry. Most of that time at Blooming Prairie Warehouse right here in Iowa City, which was a regional cooperative that served about 13 Upper Midwest states, selling and bringing to buying clubs and grocery stores around the Midwest, natural and organic food products. So that's sort of where I got my start. And I have never directly been involved in farming myself. I grew up as a 5th generation Iowan with farming in my background, both of my grandparents farmed here in Iowa. And my dad was an ag economist in the extension service at Iowa State. So I've kind of been immersed in the agricultural world but never farming myself. So for this project I hope maybe I can give a slightly different perspective of someone who got involved as helping to make organic and sustainable food products available to more and more people.

I've worked here, I worked in the wholesale distribution for, as I said about 25 years. I've done a lot of other consulting and activism, got a MFA in the early 2000s and have written a book on the apple growing business called *Good Apples*. And during that kind of shift to focusing more on storytelling and the actual growing of sustainable and organic products I

started working with a small organization in the Northeast called Red Tomato. We do marketing, distribution, logistics, and market development work with fresh fruit and vegetable growers in the Northeast. Mostly mid-sized wholesale growers and some small-scale direct market growers. So right now I would say my work is as close as it's ever been to working directly with on-farm. Part of why I made the shift out of wholesale distribution is to be able to work more closely with the actual production of products. And I love that very much. I particularly love working with apple growers. I think that gives you an overview. I do some writing and consulting still, mostly right now I'm working still full-time at Red Tomato as the program director.

AA: All right, thank you! That's really useful. So, with being interested in the co-ops and then more from the sales/consumer point of view, is there anything you would like to share about your philosophies that got you interested in organic or naturally-grown foods?

SF: Yeah. I think the things that sort of informed that growing interest came as I said partly out of environmental activism work. The earliest thing I could point to is a high school biology or junior high biology teacher really, Laverna High Larson, and my campfire group when I was growing up, which took us out into the woods a lot. And we learned plants and natural systems. Our high school had a virgin prairie piece of property right behind the school and we spent a lot of time in class and out of class out in the prairie sort of learning about that ecosystem. The first book that I remember kind of blowing my mind was *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. And I continued to read a lot of books that tied sustainable food and farming and living to values like a common good, a sense of being systems that benefit through collaboration and through a balance within the system, those kinds of ideas that Wendell Berry, and I read a lot of poetry, so there's some, Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder and Adrian Rich mixed in there as well. Just the philosophy I think fundamentally being about balanced ecosystems and the need to sustain all the different parts of that in order to have that a healthy world. I didn't read Aldo Leopold until much later, although he's such a prominent Midwestern thinker. And I've come back around, and I've been re-reading some of his writing lately about the biotic community and the way humans and ecosystems interact, and it's just phenomenal stuff, really profound.

AA: All right, thank you! And so, with the co-ops, do you want to say a little more about what exactly you were doing, and whatever you'd like to share about the history of that and your involvement, and your perspective on how things have changed over the years?

SF: Yeah! There's a whole lot of stories to tell there and a lot of history that also needs to be captured. But I'll focus mostly on the part of it that involved working with the growers and suppliers and all of the small companies that were getting going in the late '70s, mid-to-late '70s, early '80s, that have become now what you see as the organic and natural foods industry. That was at that time really a kind of a loosely affiliated network of people all over the country who were either growing or making things out of or selling or learning how to eat and cook foods in a more natural state. So I started working at Blooming Prairie in 1978. At that time we had a product list of probably 200 products, and they were almost all bulk things that we were buying directly from farms. So we were buying Lundburg organic rice directly from Lundburg in California. The name has just left me, the rice company in Arkansas that for a long time was a major supplier of organic rice products. We got our rice in 50-pound bags and it came straight from there. There were producers here in Iowa growing and milling oats and flour and we bought

our products directly from them. And again, everything was just like 50 pounds, 25 pounds in its most unprocessed state. So I learned a lot in that phase just about the ingredients of things and what people were growing.

Over the next ten years or so, as more and more people got interested in eating more healthfully, I think there was sort of a dual motivation going on there that really informed where a lot of things went later on. It was about personal health and people wanting to eat more whole foods, grains and unprocessed foods, and also about environmental and ecosystem concerns that people wanted to support growers and growing practices that were better for the earth. So I was involved in helping start the network of buying clubs that we were delivering to at the time, a lot of places that didn't have a retail store. Maybe they had a group of people in a church, who were meeting once a month in a church or the fire station or somebody's driveway and picking up an order of food that we were bringing from the warehouse here in Iowa City. So I worked a lot with helping those get going, with educating people about the products, and finding out about the products and expanding what we were doing.

So over the next ten years in the '80s, a lot of what happened was to make those foods more and more accessible. There was more and more packaging and processing of food. So cornmeal started to be corn flakes and tortilla chips, and whole grain oats started to become granola and breakfast cereal and eventually granola bars. And those things that were in 50-pound sacks started to also be available in a 1-pound or a 2-pound bag that someone could actually keep on their shelf and had instructions on the back about how to cook it and where it came from and all of that. So it was a huge shift in the accessibility of that whole, not just the products but the ideas and the growing practices and the philosophies behind them, because it made it accessible for more people. And also they were just vehicles to, this is pre-internet, hard to even imagine now, but there wasn't a place you could just go online and look up information. So having packages and product catalogs, and we did a lot of, at Blooming Prairie we had four times a year a member meeting.

We were a co-operatively owned company, and so the buying clubs and stores that we sold to were part owners of the company. So we had membership meetings for a long time four times a year in different parts of the Upper Midwest. And we would invite the farms and the companies and manufacturers to come display their products and give cooking classes and do things. So there was a lot of intermingling at that time of the source of the product and the users of the product. And I think that's part of what made it so fun and exciting. It was definitely a, I think what people now would call mission-based business, but then it was just sort of a labor of love. The people who were involved, including me, were involved because we really cared about and believed in and wanted to make some change in the way food was grown and distributed. So it was a great time. By the time I left Blooming Prairie I was the director of marketing and had been the director of sales for a long time as well. And we had two distribution centers, one here in Iowa City and one up in the Twin Cities. We were serving about 1300 buying clubs and hundreds of retail stores including the biggest, Whole Foods, and lots of co-op retails and grocery stores that were starting to carry natural foods. And the companies we were working with had gone from being tiny little start-ups to some of the biggest food companies in the country. And it was just an amazing and wonderful process to be involved in all of that.

As I said, the dual motivations for people to get involved in that led to all kinds of decisions and then manifestations in the marketplace that in some ways have bifurcated a little bit, although I think they're starting to come back together again. Although that personal health motivation pointed things in the direction of a lot of marketing and attempts to narrowly define

what was helping and what wasn't. The ecosystem/environmental support for healthy use of the land and healthy growing practices is way messier than that. It's an ecosystem, it's constantly evolving, it's different depending on what you are and what the conditions are. So I think that part of the motivation has moved in more different directions in terms of how people's growing practices have evolved. In the middle of all that was a strong movement to create organic standards at the federal level. That was both about defining these marketing claims so that people could start to promote their products in a particular way as organic, and build the market around that. It was also about protecting the integrity of the growing practices, and these farmers and people who had been developing natural and organic practices and investing their heart and soul and really learning how to do that could hold on to what they had developed and protected a little bit from less, lightweight versions of that, that the typical shopper wouldn't have any way of understanding the difference. There was a strong move to kind of protect the integrity of people who were going the full distance to grow in particular ways from the marketplace that was pretty loose and open, to someone saying, "Well, my stuff's organic," without really knowing what organic meant. So there was both a marketing and a protective element to that whole phase.

(18:27)

AA: Now you mentioned in my initial talk with you that you were somewhat involved in the organic standards. Would you mind giving a little more detail about that?

SF: Sure. That's another way that being in the particular role I was in, that was wholesale so we were kind of in-between the growers and the stores and the consumers. So we were early on really committed to just being as transparent as we could and educating our members as much as we could about the products and the growing practices. So pretty early on we tried to develop standards inside Blooming Prairie to indicate which products were grown organically and which ones were not, and to distinguish. And there were at the time more and more were emerging, some private certification agencies that became the resource for helping us be able to say, like, Dave Vetter's popcorn from Marquette, Nebraska is organically grown because he's worked with this certifier, XYZ, and the popcorn from this farm in Central Iowa isn't grown organically but it's natural. So we spent a lot of thought developing the coding systems in our catalog and information and education for our customers and members about what was behind claims of organic.

So when the industry started to, I mean by then it really was an industry, there were so many people involved at all different levels, that people really did start to feel like, "We need the protection of some standards that everyone everywhere in the country will adopt and understand." So the standards committee was part of the Organic Trade Association. The organization that pre-dated that was called OFPANA, the Organic—it's funny, I can't remember what that stood for, but I could certainly look that up. But it was an organization that was started mostly by producers of organic products and then joined by organizations like Blooming Prairie and natural food co-ops and people who were trying to promote and support those organic products. And that organization kind of brought together a whole bunch of voices that said, "We're going to take the risk of asking the federal government to create standards for these products so that there can be some integrity and consistency about them."

And it was kind of unusual in a bunch of ways. One was that an industry voluntarily going to Congress and saying, "We actually want some federal standards here," as opposed to

that being imposed from the outside. And once that happened there was really about a 10-year-long effort of lobbying and writing the proposed legislation. I think I mentioned Grace Gershuny to you. There were people all over the country in leadership roles involved in that. Kathleen Merrigan, who was working for Patrick Leahy, the senator from Vermont at the time became a really key person, and he was a sponsor of the legislation. So she was someone behind the scenes publicly, but very much inside the natural and organic industry, really helping shape the legislation.

So I represented the distributors on some of those committees for a long time to try to keep the perspective of, once there were regulations, how would they then be rolled out and translated into the supply chain along the way, what was going to be certified, what wasn't. One of the big decisions I remember us having to grapple with was the idea of keeping the integrity of organic products all the way through the supply chain, from the farm all the way to the grocery store meant that you wanted to make sure it didn't get mingled or contaminated. And so initially, kind of on paper, there was a move to say, "Of course all the trucks that are shipping organic products have to be certified, too." And because there were distributors at the table, we were able to say, "You know, no, that's not practical. Products ride on trucks with other products. There are thousands and thousands and thousands of trucking companies who don't specialize in only one kind of organic shipment. If we really want organic product to be able to move from the farm to the warehouse to the grocery store we are going to have to figure out a way to make that work with the current infrastructure that's there, or we're just going to create a barrier that we won't be able to move product." So we focused instead on traceability and being able to track the integrity of product all the way from the farm to the store and then found ways to make sure that it was clear how the products were supposed to be handled and those kinds of things.

Anyway, I was really involved both in the education and the lobbying effort to get the law passed. And then there was an industry version of the regulations that was put together as a recommendation to USDA for them to base the actual federal regulations on. So I was on a committee with Bochea [?] to help put those regulations together. And I worked mostly on the distribution part, all the complicated parts of that. That was really, really interesting process. And once that went into the federal regulations process there were lots and lots of comment periods and rounds of debate and controversy in various ways. It took another almost ten years for the regulations to get written and implemented. And I still would say all in all that was a good thing. It has allowed the organic industry to have a footing and visibility and clarity about what those practices are. That has been really significant.

It's had some downsides in that I think the marketing aspect of that, and I'm saying this as a marketer, that's been my whole role in the food distribution is in marketing, I would say that the marketing of organic has in some unfortunate ways oversimplified and created a perception in the consumer's mind that the only kind of sustainable farming is organic farming that meets the national standards. And some of the marketing, this was something I have a strong commitment not to do, is to base marketing on fear and health claims. I don't think that's the reason to buy organic food except for people who have very specific kinds of health issues where that can be important. It's really about creating a more sustainable earth-oriented agriculture. But not everybody felt that way; a lot of companies did a lot of marketing that was based on, eating organic food is the only way you'll stay healthy, you'll get sick if you don't. That has made it challenging over the years for producers that use other kinds of sustainable practices. And the organic standards by nature being national don't always allow for regional and climate and crop differences and production systems.

So I think we're now in a phase where we're dealing with that over-simplified perception that consumers have that there's only one way to be a sustainable farmer and it's to meet these federal standards even if in the local region for a particular crop that may not actually be the best and most sustainable way to produce. So my current work is working with a network of fruit growers in the eastern US. Climate conditions here are very, very different than the more arid Northwest where there's a lot of glacial melt and surface water for irrigation. The climate's really dry, and pests and diseases just don't flourish the way they do east of the Rockies where it's humid and welcoming to all kinds of bugs and diseases. And also where agriculture, particularly apples, tends to be mixed in a lot with closer urban areas, where there are other kinds of pests and production challenges.

We work with a program called Eco-certify, the eco-apple that helps growers find the most sustainable healthy safe practices for eastern apple growing, and we're then trying to help them educate consumers and put an Eco-certified brand on those, to not compete with organic, as in this is better than organic or there's something wrong with organic, but 93 percent of the organic apples marketed and sold in the United States come from Washington State. And that's not a sustainable system if we want to also be encouraging local and regional production. There have to be other standards that can live alongside organic that also represent the highest standards. So that's my current personal mission and professional mission, is taking what I was able to do and learn in the organic movement and now see if we can broaden it to be more inclusive of other kinds of sustainable production. That was a very long answer to your question! But it was a really interesting period, those '80s and '90s years.

(30:45)

AA: Yeah, thank you, you actually answered like two or three other questions I was going to ask. That is great. So, I was just kind of curious, going back to the co-ops, I know the first time I went into a food co-op I was expecting to see like you were talking, all those big bins and bags of flour, and then it actually looked to me a lot just like the grocery store except with more local and organic food. So I am just kind of curious, especially preserving for, say, people in 50 years, if you could just describe what it was like at the Blooming Prairie co-op back in the early days when you were first working there in the '70s, what it was like to walk in there and what it was like to buy food there.

SF: Yeah. So Blooming Prairie was the wholesale. So what our warehouse looked like was pallets in a big open room with big 50-pound bags stacked on them, big 5-pound tubs of peanut butter, and big 50-gallon drums of sunflower oil. I mean, when you walked into that warehouse, it looked like, you wouldn't automatically be able to tell what was there just by looking at the pallets and the bags and the boxes. The local co-op here, New Pioneer Co-op, was one of the founders of Blooming Prairie Warehouse and also one of our biggest customers for a long time. I was a member of New Pioneer since I first came here as a college student. And in some ways I would say New Pioneer looked very much like you just described in its early days. You would walk into the store and see a; I mean, really early on some of the bins were big metal galvanized garbage cans with a big 50-pound bag of oats in one and a 50-pound bag of rice in the next one and beans in the next one, and you would take the lid off and scoop out what you wanted into a paper bag and take it over to the cash register where there was a scale where they would weigh it

out and price it. The signs were written by hand, and the food was there, but it was not displayed and merchandised in a way to tempt you to buy things.

It was a place for people to come and learn and find the things that were hard to find at the time. It was really hard to get organic brown rice. There just weren't the supply chains to get that to people. So it looked, the honey and the oil were in these big drums with spigots on them. And you would bring your own jar in, take the jar up to the counter to be weighed, and then the tare weight would get written with one of those pens that write on glass and metal. The volunteer, usually a volunteer behind the counter, would weigh your jar, write the tare weight on it, you would go over, fill it up with honey, with oil, and when you were checking out you would bring it back and it would get weighed again, and the weight of the jar would get subtracted so that you paid only for the honey. Peanut butter was really a wild thing because you know it separates, like natural peanut butter separates, so taking a 5-gallon drum or bucket of peanut butter and stirring it to mix everything together, that was a very muscle-building exercise. Then people, shoppers who came in would scoop out the peanut butter then into jars that they brought themselves.

I think that represents this interesting balance that has informed all of this all along the way, which is, that place was amazing, it was such a community, it was such an important place where many, many things came together. People were exploring cooperative housing, and local daycare cooperatives, and getting cooking classes going in little restaurants. And so it was a meeting place, it was a place to find people of like mind, it was a place to learn about farming and food and products. And, it was very inaccessible for a lot of people. If you didn't already know that you were supposed to bring your jar when you walked into the co-op the first time as a stranger, people had to work hard to be friendly and welcoming, not just say, "Oh, you didn't bring your jars, come back."

What started to happen fairly quickly was pretty soon the co-op just started to have glass jars that they sold along with the peanut butter. And then pretty soon after that some volunteers started just filling the glass jars with peanut butter and just putting those out, making it easier for somebody to buy. And the company, East Wind, that I still buy their peanut butter at the co-op—I just bought some yesterday—they started to package the peanut butter, still in the 5-pound gallon buckets for people who wanted to keep scooping their own, but they also started packaging it in 16-ounce jars with a pretty label that said where it came from and the ingredients and the nutritional panel on the side. And that happened with every single bucket and bin and barrel of food that was in that store. It gradually, well maybe not so gradually, but it was a process of balancing the sort of as close as possible to the natural state with how can we make this easier and more accessible for more and more people? And I think lots of things about grocery shopping have evolved in that same way. You wouldn't see, I think something like 60 percent of the US population now in consumer surveys say that they buy certified organic products at least some of the time. That just would not be happening if those products were still in 50-pound bags.

It was really fun, though. I can't overstate the way that community built around those early supply chains. At Blooming Prairie in the very early days we used to rent a truck, actually somebody would drive or hitchhike up to the Twin Cities where there was another warehouse to pick up orders of products that had come from California and Nebraska and Arkansas, and then rent a truck with our order, drive it down, a whole bunch of volunteers would meet the truck and help unload, and then some of the food on the truck would go from the warehouse to the New Pioneer co-op. And they would unload it there, and a bunch more volunteers would bring it up.

So people got to know each other, we got to know the people in Minneapolis, we got to know the people in Ames, in Lincoln, Nebraska, in all the other co-ops along the way. Car Garrich was the rice grower in Arkansas. So we got to know those folks, and there was another warehouse in Fayetteville that we did a lot of coordinated trucking with eventually. The warehouses got together and started some trucking operations together. It was a very rich environment for new things starting and connections and community.

And I think that co-ops today have managed to maintain a certain amount of that. I'm sure it's different depending on the store and where they're at. I still shop at the co-op here in Iowa City, it's the main place I buy my groceries, and spend a lot of time in a lot of stores around the Midwest for a lot of years. They've done a good job for the most part, even though they're bigger and less personal in a lot of ways, in order to have a place that more people can come and shop conveniently and comfortably. They still have pretty strong community roots, and I think that some of that comes from that early history of just having to, we just had to do it and make it up and figure it out. It was great.

(40:55)

AA: So you mentioned a little earlier on the shift from more of bulk ingredients and how of course the 50-pound bags were impractical for people. But it then shifted to not just putting them in smaller containers but then people buy more of processed things, like instead of getting oats they got pre-made granola and all that. I'm just curious if you have any perspectives on like if that was really a good thing or just an inevitable thing that had to happen, any perspectives on that.

SF: Yeah. I mean, I would say mostly, yeah, that was a good thing, and also probably inevitable. If there was going to be an opportunity for more farms and more acreage and more production, if it was going to need to become more different versions that people could use, it was also for a long time one of the places in the grocery industry where it was possible for somebody to come up with their own small product and start up and get a foothold and meet other people and get it in front of a distributor or a retailer. There were just an astounding number of small little companies that got started, you know, making and marketing natural food products. A lot of them were, a lot of the ones that would be familiar to you now were started in California or places where there was more density of either population or fruit and vegetable products like in California.

So once that happened, particularly in the Midwest, there was corn chip manufacturing really early on, a company called Little Bear that was in Winona, Minnesota that started to buy organic corn and make it into corn chips. And we sold tons of that. And that's saying a lot because they don't weigh very much. [Laughter] Just those corn chips were one of the ways that all of a sudden, you know, you could like, there's organic corn, but unless you want to go home and make cornbread, you know, it's just a beautiful bag of yellow cornmeal that you can appreciate for all the ways that it got to you but now there was this bag of tortilla chips, the organic alternative to Fritos. And you could open a bag and eat them for lunch, or take it to a potluck, or share it to your friends. Same with breakfast cereal. I mean, learning to make granola was kind of a rite of passage for somebody who was getting involved in natural foods and trying to learn to cook with whole ingredients. But again, you have a full-time job, you have kids, you're looking at these jars of whole oats, and raisins, and honey. For somebody else to turn that

into granola was huge and wonderful. And you know, it gave a lot of opportunity for creativity, for companies to develop their own versions of that with different, gluten free, or flavorings, that kind of thing. And then perhaps inevitably after that the granola bar as a more convenient form of granola emerged, and so now there's a whole section in the grocery store now for snack bars and granola bars.

So yeah, I guess I think in general that's a good thing. When it becomes a bad thing, and this is a sort of personal political and economic philosophy for me, is when there are many, many entities involved in those supply chains and production, small companies, medium-sized companies, large companies are fine as long as there's a lot of all of it and there's diversity in the supply chain and there's decentralization so there can be regional systems. All of that stuff to me is good stuff. Processing, expanding, getting bigger, growing more acres. When it becomes what a lot of the food supply system has become now, which is very, very concentrated in a few organizations, it becomes inaccessible, less flexible, less adaptable to change. Tremendous power in those big organizations. So a company like—I'm trying to think of a good example—a company like Nestle or General Mills which now, both of those companies now own a lot of natural and organic brands, they can do a tremendous amount of good. They can help to support a conversion of tens of thousands of acres of production over to organic. So I don't think that's a bad thing to have big companies like that. But if eventually there are only four or five of those big companies and they own all the rest of the brands, and all of the marketing and distribution production has to move through those systems, I think eventually that becomes unsustainable, not very resilient and not very democratic. To me the issue is mostly about ownership and regionalization and not about size and processing, if that makes some sense.

(47:14)

AA: Yeah, that's great, because that helps answer my next question, too, which was going to be how you feel about what some people call "Big Organic," about how some very large farms are growing organic produce, and whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. But you would probably say the same, that it depends on concentration?

SF: Yeah. I don't have a—for one thing, I think "big" is a relative term depending on the crop and the region. A big vegetable farm in Iowa is tiny compared to a big vegetable farm in the Valley in California. Like I said, the size per se is not the defining feature, it's what kind of a place is that to work at? Who owns it? How many other places like it are there? How much room is there for a small operation to also get into the market and the supply chains and be available to consumers? Big organic per se, I think is not the place that I would focus. It's on, what do they do with that power? Big means power, economic power, and how is that power distributed? How accessible is it to other players in the market? Those are the things I think—some of the biggest companies in the organic industry have also been some of the pioneers in pushing high standards and strong protections around organic. Some of those things wouldn't have happened without the voice and the power of companies that were selling enough in the market to be able to push some of those changes.

I would say it's a pretty broken system right now in many, many production supply chains just because there's so much concentration, both in the production side but particularly in the processing, wholesale, and retail side. It's, the retail grocery industry in the twenty years that I've transitioned from working in grocery distribution to produce distribution, the retail grocery

industry has gone through round after round after round with concentration so that buying offices that used to be scattered all over the place are in one place in the country. Sometimes they're not even in the US anymore, they have global offices that make decisions about purchasing and supply chain standards. And I don't think that's a good thing. I don't think it fosters resilient systems, I don't think it fosters economic equity and justice, and I don't think it fosters in the end the best quality farming and food. That's part of, that's a lifelong, that's a piece of the philosophy from those early, early days working with co-ops and working with—Part of my environmental work moved into working with some land sovereignty movements in native communities in the upper Midwest, and I think those two got pretty intertwined in my philosophy, too. Who owns and controls and stewards the land? That's the starting point of what happens then in the whole rest of the system. So that's another thread of my philosophy. I worked with the anti-uranium mining coalitions in North Dakota and Minnesota. That by nature, fundamentally was land sovereignty movement of native people in those areas trying to protect the land that they were stewards of. That deeply informs the way I think about agriculture.

(52:11)

AA: So related to all that, and earlier you had talked about local versus organic especially in regards to the apple growers. So I was wondering if you would want to share your perspective on how important local has been over the years and if that's become more important, say, than it was in the late '70s, or if it at one point was more important and now is less important, or how you view that.

SF: That's a great question! I mean, I guess I would say that it's more important now than it was in the late '70s, at least in terms of production, in terms of the farming side. It's almost like it's flipped around. In the early days, all of the purchasing side was really local, the little co-op or the little buying club or the little natural food store, or here and there the usually guy in the grocery store who thought they should have a little natural products section in their grocery store. Those were all really localized in all the decisions. So it didn't matter if the rice came from California or the oats came from Montana. Although we did love buying from as local a company as possible, it was more about just getting to those few people who were scattered all over the place and not so important that the products themselves came from, you know, a hundred miles away. Now I think because those supply chains and systems have been so concentrated and the purchasing stuff isn't as much local anymore except in the case of the co-op food system, I would say doing what we can to invigorate regional—to me, local and regional are almost interchangeable because depending on where you are it's not really about distance from your table, it's about, does the Northeast, or the Midwest, or the upper Midwest have the ability to feed itself with products? Does it have a vibrant agriculture that's producing diverse types of crops so that all the apples aren't coming from Washington State and all the milk isn't coming from Texas and California and all the lettuce isn't coming from California? If we really want to have those crops that can be grown effectively, and lots and lots of places have that kind of diverse growing, then the local, the interest in local, people wanting to know where their food came from and to know a farm that's nearby. And even what gets called “agritourism,” I don't think of as tourism that much, you know people going to a farm with their kids to pick strawberries or apples or joining a CSA so that they have a connection with where the food comes from—that's not tourism for me, that's really fundamental building of a kind of food

system that keeps a vital connection there. So I think local is increasingly important and it's going to get even more so. But local in a more regional sense, not local like it has to be from 50 miles away. I don't think those kinds of definitions get at the heart of the matter. I think the heart of the matter is, is there a system that's supporting everybody, the eater but also the people who are growing the food?

(56:26)

AA: Yeah, thank you, that's really helpful.

SF: And I mean, so just for 50 years from now it'll be interesting to look back, but Vilsack just made an announcement yesterday or the day before about a new \$4 billion investment the USDA is going to be making in revitalizing things like more local-scale packing and slaughterhouse in the meat industry. I don't know what all is rolled up in that yet, but the Department of Agriculture now at the top level for the first time I can remember is talking about the food system needing to become stronger at every level, not just at the more concentrated level. We'll see 50 years from now if that turns the ship. It seems like it could in a good way.

AA: Yeah, one other thing that I'm interested about that you mentioned was how some people were interested in the organic food for health reasons, and then others for environmental reasons, and I'm sure a lot of people for both. So I would be curious on your perspective on how those two factors, which has been more important over the years or how they've kind of balanced each other out, and if there's been any shifts you've seen in that.

SF: Yeah, I think that there has been an intense controversial tension inside the organic community for many, many years around that. And I guess I think it does still sort of ride along the personal health versus what's best for the ecosystem divide a little bit. But it's driven a lot by a kind of purist approach to both of those things. And I think it's been really damaging in the long run that there's an element of the active part of the organic movement that has chosen to sort of narrow the definition of what's okay and what's not in this kind of purist form. So, for example, that might lead to a company wanting to make claims like, "Our products don't have any pesticides in them," when in fact organic growers use pesticides, they just use different ones than conventional growers. There are health issues for sure involved in all of that, and things that do or don't translate into the actual food that you're eating, and your health, but this idea of sort of building your identity around purity and what you're not and why you're better than everybody else is a market-driven motive. It's not a dumb thing to do if you're trying to carve out a position in a market and get people to identify you as a product that they want to buy.

But the other path there is a more nuanced one that says, "We're less about purity and more about doing the right thing as much of the time as possible, more and more, and learning more and more as we go so that what was the right thing ten years ago might not be the right thing now, because we either know about harm and damage that we didn't know about then, or we know about new advances and techniques and things that we weren't aware of at the time." So, the idea of all of that as more of an evolving changing interaction that has tradeoffs in it, that has complexity in it, and that isn't in my mind really helped along by attempts to carve out narrower and narrower.

I know a lot of these people and I have huge respect for them and their motivation and beliefs, but I'm not a fan of this move now to create a regenerative organic, like an even better than organic organic, because I think in the long run all that's going to do is again, for most people, what they want is to do the right thing more and more of the time, have it be more and a more a part of their life. And I would go back to that example I said, on paper it looked like it made a lot of sense, every truck that carries organic products should be certified. Okay, great. Then no organic product is going to move very far across the country for a long long time. And I just don't think that kind of purity is helpful. I think in the end it comes from a protective rather than a generative kind of place, and that we're better off finding the ways that we can move forward together imperfectly. And there's some very influential organizations and advocacy groups that have built a lot of consumer loyalty, and power, and money around those kinds of messages. And I'm not a fan. I think it's damaged things in the long run. There are others, like Rodale Institute for example is one of the organizations that's really involved in creating this regenerative organic new certification level. I have huge respect for Rodale. They do tons of research, they are primarily a research and education organization, they're not a product marketing group.

So I think there's value in what's happening there. It's when it turns into a sort of a fundraising product-marketing as the primary motivation that I feel it can just veer off track, and there's plenty of that out there. There's more good than not, though, that's what keeps me going. Fabulous people involved in this movement, I would still call it a movement, and the people that I met when I was in my '20s, like Dave Vetter, at Grain Place in Nebraska, Fred Kirschenmann, who was in North Dakota at the time, Denise O'Brien is the founder of an organization called Women, Food and Agriculture Network, and she and her husband still have a beautiful organic farm in western Iowa. Grace Gershuny, who's up in Vermont. There are a lot of people who have been at this a long, long time, made a huge difference in my world, I think in the world. That's the heart of sustainable and organic. It's very much alive and thriving.

AA: Well thank you very much for sharing that perspective. It's really great to hear that. So is there anything else that you want to say, that you would want people to know in 50 years if they might be listening to this?

SF: In 50 years if you're listening to this I hope for your sake that there is a vibrant, well-funded public science and public food sector that is supporting what it will take for farmers to continue farming this way and for the rest of us to continue eating this way. One of the things I have learned over the years is how vital the land grant research system and the public support of sustainable agriculture has been behind the scenes. It's just a piece that you would never know about unless you were kind of a few steps back in the supply chain, that these public scientists who are constantly researching, "What do we do when brown marmorated stink bug lands in Pennsylvania in a probably container ship from China, and within ten years is eating and munching on and breeding into every food crop we grow in the country?" And most of those growers who grow those food crops don't want to go back to drenching their farms with pesticides. So there's a whole USDA-funded public science program that's been for the last ten years researching natural predators and trapping systems and pheromone and all kinds of ways to manage that invasive pest so that when you buy an apple or a blueberry it can continue to be grown sustainably and those farms don't lose their crops and their trees. So for 50 years from now, if you've learned anything from the lessons of the past, I hope it's that a sustainable

farming and food system is a public good, and it requires public support for it to happen. It's not on the shoulders of individual farms, or private companies, or even on the shoulders of consumers who so-called vote with their dollars. It's none of that is fundamentally what is going to get us there, although all of it contributes. I just want to put that plug in for public investment in the kind of farming and food we want to have. That's my soapbox.

AA: All right! Well, thank you very much, Susan. Is there anything else you want to say before we end the recording?

SF: I don't think so. This was great. I so appreciate that you're capturing these stories, and I look forward to being able to hear some of them in the future.

AA: All right! Well, thank you so much. And I forgot to say the date at the beginning. This is June 11, 2021, and we're doing this interview over Zoom. Thank you again very much, Susan, for taking the time, and I hope you have a great day, and we will see you later.

(1:08:25)