

Jack Knight, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

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JK = Jack Knight

AA = Anneliese Abbott

JK: My name is Jack Knight. I'm 68 years old. I'm from rural northeast Iowa. I grew up in a farmers' co-op business and have been involved in serving farmers my whole life. That's one of my motivations to be involved with organic. I've also been involved with sustainable forestry and education and environmental activism at a local level. I served on 8 government boards and 3 nonprofits, all in northeast Iowa. But I consider that all adjunct to my work in organic.

My first interest in organic is as much about rural development as it is about any particular environmental or food safety thing. That's how I have approached it all along. Organic farms get better prices and they need more labor, and that means there will be more people in the countryside. I definitely am coming from a very rural perspective on that. And that's a little different from how some folks approach it.

But this is more about a little bit of a bio background. And this has something to do with how I got involved in organic. I was out of college, I was a farm worker, a farm building construction worker (even though that wasn't my degree, that wasn't my education) and I also had 11 years as a grow-all-your-own-food homesteader. That was also just prior, and there was a little crossover with when I actually started to work directly for organic.

AA: Now what years would that have been, when you were doing your homesteading?

JK: That would be '77-'89, about. And I'm kind of a, "been there, done that" with that. But it was very instructive with managing the plant material. My construction jobs, I had a different one every summer, but that morphed into farm work, including orchard work and forestry work, market gardens, basically every kind of farm that you could imagine, I had a history of working on in my twenties and thirties. Which I feel gave me a very good background, and what leads me closer to here today is in 1999 I took my first training being an inspector. And of course there wasn't much inspecting to do in November. But I started doing organic inspection work the following year. And so because of that I was there at the beginning, before the national rule went into effect, and after, and I was there in the transition years, which were very interesting. And I suppose that's the kind of historical commentary you're fishing for as well.

AA: That's part of it, yeah.

JK: Yeah. And let me make sure I continue to cover some bio things before I go on further down this. But I definitely have some comments on that transition. First of all, early on nobody knew what they were doing, to be gracious. And the NOP gave us very few directives other than the rule itself. And the rule was meant to get uniformity between the certifying agencies. And it did

do that for sure. Ironically, in the next decade, NOP auditors would—of course they had very specific audits of the agencies—and would give each agency a different emphasis and directive. And so in a way it became less uniform for a while. Now that has straightened out in the past decade. There is a lot of uniformity. I don't think that's a problem. I don't think that's a problem in the industry anymore. Although it was kind of confusing, and many of us veteran inspectors have worked for lots of different agencies. In fact, if I were to say which ones they were, it would sound like the alphabet, so I will spare the interview that. But in those years when the NOP was giving different directives, different agencies, it was a handful when you worked with multiple agencies. But, you know, those things, from my experience lately, that's not so much a concern. (5:13)

One little soapbox thing I wanted to get on this exact subject is that there's a misunderstanding amongst outspoken critics. There's two kinds of critics of the organic rule and the certification process. There are people inside who really know the system, and they don't think it's strict enough, and then there's just people that holler and complain from outside and really don't understand it at all. Who I've done battle with on social media every winter and I'm tired of it. I will probably continue to. But one of their common misunderstandings is that, before the national rule, organic was stricter. *Nothing could be further from the truth. The opposite is true.* The opposite is true. And I was right there. This was just before the national rule and even a couple years before that.

I was involved in several food co-op startups in the '70s, when I was still in college and immediately after college. And there was some products and some farmers who would be claiming they were organic before, not even privately certified, and also some private certifiers. Now private certifiers existed before the national rule. But I personally witnessed a couple different situations where they were not nearly organic. And I also like to remind these critics—I won't go on and on about the outside critics—but before the national rule California did not have a transition year. You could go every other year. And Rodale was going around the country just saying, "Okay, you can use this word organic." I personally knew one of those farms and orchards, and that orchard was no better than the commercial orchard I worked at. They just had a good IPM program, and yet Rodale patted them on the back and said, "Use the organic label." And for those instances and a few others that I don't recall as clearly, this idea that previous to the national rule organic was purer or stricter, that's just absurd. The opposite is true. Okay, I'm off that soapbox. [Laughter]

AA: If you didn't actually do your own farming, then you can skip the one about farming methods.

JK: No, I can talk about farming methods, in that this was my observation. I've evaluated about 2,000 farms, and I consider the inspection process an evaluation, even though that word doesn't appear. One of the biggest things, this is just real dry agronomy stuff, when I first started it was common practice to till ahead of planting as often as you could. That was a goal. If you could run over the field and make it bare twice in March and four times in April and three times in May—I'm only exaggerating a little bit, I'm not exaggerating too much—that was like, considered the best thing to do. Now—and this changed gradually over the years—now, the best accepted practice, and they're all going further towards this, is to make your seedbed right ahead of planting. Let that whole flush of weeds or cover crop go as long as you can bear it and push your planting window. The ideal would be to prep the same day that you plant, but that's pretty hard

to be in organic. So that is probably the single biggest shift. And it's a positive shift. It doesn't hurt the agronomics of weed control at all.

Which I can kind of segue into, one of the main things I'm involved with is conservation agriculture. I've been a county chairman for 14 years of our county soil and water board, which has somewhat more influence in Iowa than it does in Wisconsin, the NRCS board. The NRCS, some of the rules are state by state. But because of that, and now I'm going to get one of my main points in that I'll probably make later, because one of the questions is about contribution of organic agriculture, and this will rub a lot of my friends and peers and colleagues the wrong way, but I think the most important contribution of organic farming has been to be a positive influence on conservation agriculture. We invented the term soil health. We have kept alive cover cropping and longer crop rotations. And now conservation directives and education and even funding programs are based on soil health, longer rotations, and cover crops. And we have succeeded in changing the narrative on soil health. Just the influence of the organic industry or organic farming itself, keeping cover cropping alive, I consider that the largest contribution to organic agriculture. And we continue to be. And I love to make my colleagues in the conventional conservation world uneasy by bringing it up and patting ourselves on the back. I love doing that. "Oh, let's thank organic ag for keeping cover cropping alive and the idea of soil health!" "Grumble, grumble, grumble." [Laughter] So that's a big, important change. (12:03)

When we first, when certified organic was started, we had no idea that it would be so successful. But unfortunately it's that same success that has driven the industry to what some perceive as problematic in the size of farms and also, notably, the size of farm buildings. And we just didn't anticipate that it would ever get so big, and maybe something different would have been built into the rule. And this is why my friends and peers and colleagues are annoyed with me right now, I can feel it even though they're not in the room. I don't understand how we could draw the line at what's too big. Where would you draw that? It's kind of impossible. And there are structural things in agriculture and demography and farm business and financing that are more instrumental in making these, forcing these changes to larger farms, than anything the organic rule could address. I say that with some reservation in language, but I'm afraid that's just the reality.

And notably, on the chicken barn thing. Chicken barn issues are huge. And I'm not arguing for the giant farms. That is not where I'm going with this, and that's where I often get pointed at about it. But, for one thing, they're not CAFOs. There's a door that's open. So you're technically misleading by calling these large farms and these large dairies CAFOs. Technically and legally that isn't what they are. Of course they look like that to the untrained eye. But the genuine critics of organic, I just wish that we would all be technically accurate. Because we would get further. We would be more effective. This is an issue I've had with environmentalists my entire life. And my main point is that things are bad enough, we don't need to make things up. And when you're not technically accurate, your credibility on the issues you are accurate with goes down. I've heard myself as a 22-year-old talking like that, so you know, it's an ever-present thing.

And I've been in a lot of chicken barns, maybe a hundred. And this is the other thing I have to say with some kind of painfulness in my voice: the nastiest ones were small. In fact, the smaller they were, the nastier they were. And I've been in barns with as much as 20,000 birds. And they're better managed. And there's exceptions to that with the pasture guys and that. And the same is true with dairies. Every dairy I've been on that was unsavory—they were small. And amongst the very very best have been some of the largest. I've only been on dairy farms that had

up to five or six hundred. So I haven't been on—in fact, all my comments today should be kept in mind that my career has been in the upper Midwest. And so I haven't experienced the big farms in the Rocky Mountain West and California. So keep that in mind. And here's another part of the rule that allowed that to happen, is that there is a drought exception to the pasture rule. And we thought we were writing those rules for Midwest dairies. And so you build a dairy in the desert, you get the drought exception all the time. Once again, I'm not like apologizing for these giant farms. I just think we should understand and be technically accurate when we're critiquing. What do you do, take the drought exception rule away? And then there's a drought in the Midwest, and how would you feel? It's so much more nuanced than the headlines. I've seen the farms that were milking 500 cows at a time, and they knew how to move them cows every day through a 10 or 20 acre paddock. They're doing a fine job. So it can be done.

I have to remind myself of this list of questions. Oh, philosophies of organic. I find that an interesting thing that you even wanted to know about that. As you've probably picked up from me already, I don't come from a philosophical point of view. Supporting rural farms and small towns by having more people live in the countryside, and better prices for farmers, that's hardly a philosophy. And I don't come at it from a religious or spiritual view even though I've been known to talk to plants. I have to admit that. I don't talk to them in front of every client. And of course, I've been trained and have so much experience evaluating how the crop is doing. To look out over a field and try to understand what the farmer, why it isn't uniform, or why it doesn't look quite right, or why the farm before me looked a little better, and I don't know if you can construe that as talking to plants, but decades of close, close observation, not just in my organic inspecting, but in my other tree nursery and market garden and flower garden work and stuff. That's probably the intersection of being spiritual about it. (19:00)

How you've changed...No, I haven't really changed over time with my relative pragmatic approach to it. Now, philosophies on organic and religious and spiritual views, how they've changed—actually, I have a critique on framing organic in religious and spiritual views. For one thing, let's all remind ourselves that the NOP is a marketing order that prohibits and encourages certain farming practices. If you want to take that beyond organic, you could fold in Fair Trade, or you could fold in that short list of approved substances that critics love to complain about, like copper and sulfur—that doesn't help. And God bless these people, they're my lifelong friends and peers and colleagues, but it's not the NOP. And I really wish, it annoys me, keep your religious views in church! And on a really pragmatic level, if you lead with talking to other farmers and landowners with, “Hey, you're poisoning our children,” whether that's true or not, you've lost them! You've lost them right there. And organic practices have spread to the conventional world of farming too despite that. In fact, because I'm involved with other farmers than just organic farmers, and I'm embedded in the local community, my whole life. And I have found the number one obstacle for conventional farmers to transition and show interest in organic—and they tell me this—they do not like the tone of self-righteousness. They just don't like it. And they write it off because of that. So it's not a personal, it's a pragmatic reason not to lead with that. That's the number one obstacle that's facing organic. It's the same people that have the most fervor and dedication, so there's a real quandary there. There's a real quandary there. I had to get on that soapbox for a second there. I knew that would happen.

To give you a real stark example, and this kind of morphs more into one of your last questions, perspective on past and current trends and opinions. I'm going to separate out the certification angle quite a bit here for now. Just to give a real solid example, I don't think there's any—people outside the organic world don't understand this—there is nothing liberal, greenie,

Democrat, socialist about organic. In fact, religious conservatives and political conservatives, from my experience are 70 percent of organic farmers!

AA: Okay, really?

JK: Yeah, outside of the ponytail-dreadlock market gardeners, and a solid 30 percent of people that aren't. And to give you the extreme example of that, I once had an inspecting contract in Michigan, and I visited Tim McVay's country neighborhood and all his organic farming buddies. So there's your extreme example of the organic farmers. And they were okay farmers. I mean, there's just no way to characterize that. And it certainly isn't, I don't look at it as a liberal or progressive. And that surprises a lot of people. Which I can totally confirm with 20 years of interviewing farmers. The subject of which I try to avoid in every way I can, but you just kind of know. You kind of know anyway.

AA: Yeah, I only ask that question because I know there is this stereotype that, like you said, all organic farmers are Democrats and all that, and that's why I was just curious—

JK: Or leftie-liberal environmentalists.

AA: Exactly. So I was just curious to see how accurate that stereotype is.

JK: Well, just for the sake of clarity and honesty, not all organic farmers are good on other environmental issues. They can just be wonderful organic farmers, have their soil built up, good productivity and everything, and they still push their junk into sinkholes and line their streambanks with junk tractors and have their cows stand around in the spring. It's not a given that they're good on other environmental issues. It's a real quandary, and of course there's not much the certification process can do about that, really, except for me just nudging people a little bit in my personal interview. But that's another myth. Because in the final analysis, farming is an extractive process, even if it's organic. Even the perfect organic farm that has seven different crops and a cover crop going all at the same time, that's not a natural prairie or woodland. And that's why I think we've got to be just a little bit humble about it. As wonderful as it is, it's still people dominating the landscape. I keep looking over my shoulder for one of my colleagues to give me a dirty look. And there's also plenty of wonderful organic farmers that have the prairie strips and manage their woodlands correctly and fence off the streams. And I don't want to sound too critical, because in a way I'm paid to critique farms, in a way. I mean, that's not what it says in the rule, I'm there to "report to the certifier," that's not necessarily what really happens on the farm. There's different things that go on that don't appear in the paperwork. Oh, I'm sort of morphing into certification, aren't I? (26:34)

AA: No, go ahead.

JK: Well, I'm just seeing where, make sure I'm not leaving a big gap between that. I already commented earlier about how the certification process early on we were all just, the agencies and the inspectors, we were just kind of winging it. But the rule itself, let's talk about the rule itself. It's an amazing piece of—I guess it's not quite statutory, administrative statutory—that has allowed to flexibility to allow farming to actually occur. There could be any number of products

taken off the approved list, there could be any number of minor or major practices that could be disallowed. That would make it IMPOSSIBLE to have organic product on a shelf. Some “purists” harp on some of those, what they view as compromises or watering down, but the rule all along has made it possible at all to have organic product. And so in a way it’s fragile. And one of the ways that it’s fragile is that if the zealots got ahold of the rule and changed it however they wanted, there would be empty shelves and higher prices. And I admit that’s a compromise. But when you’re dealing with something so big, and national and international marketing, there’s just going to be what some people perceive as compromise. But let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater is my basic point here. You can pull my soapbox out any time you want.

But our industry, insiders in our industry and our long-term peers and colleagues and friends, we are capable of making huge mistakes. And I would like to point one out, and I don’t know of many other people in the organic world that even think this way, but the support of non-GMO labeling by the organic industry was a mistake. We have given our biggest competitor—and you want to talk about watered-down standards, if non-GMO’s the only criteria! I mean, that’s almost not a standard at all—we have given them marketing clout that competes directly with us! It wasn’t thought through. I don’t know if the organic industry didn’t support non-GMO labeling, I don’t know whether that would have made a difference, but it certainly didn’t do our brand ANY good! Have you ever heard anybody else talk that way, or read that?

AA: No, but it does make sense.

JK: I know, and that’s why I’m really worried about beyond organic and regen organic and real organic, God bless them, they’re some of my best friends in the world. But it’s not helping the NOP certified brand. It’s undercutting it. And it’s giving even WEAKER, far, far WEAKER certifications, more influence. And I’m not saying they don’t have genuine complaints. That’s not what I’m saying. And I’m not defending the big farms or the copper and sulfur or anything particular that they holler about. But if we’re capable of making a huge mistake, we’re capable of making another. And I don’t know where that’s all going to go. And here’s a real thorny one that there’s really no good answer to, is that copper and sulfur are often picked on.

AA: Yes, I’ve heard that.

JK: And that’s mostly fruit production, a little copper in tomatoes. But the critics don’t realize through tissue sampling and soil sampling it’s monitored, and you have to come back, and it builds up, you have to justify their use, show what other things you’re using. But unfortunately the copper and sulfur is driven by consumer demand for a perfect fruit. And if there was a big enough segment of the organic consumer that didn’t want the same standard-looking fruit, they wouldn’t have to use nearly as much copper and sulfur. And there’s the thorniest one of all—and I’m looking over my shoulder for somebody to glare at me right now—this is my opinion, that there are chemical fungicides that not only do a better job but are less harm on the immediate environment and nontarget species than copper and sulfur. But if you would open that door, and just say, “copper and sulfur are really bad,” and they have their problems, and say, “We’re going to allow this very targeted, very limited, justified use, IPM, show us what else you’re doing,” and stuff, and just give a little whiff of these different fungicides, there’s a couple that are basically pretty safe, just think what it would do. You can’t open that door! You just can’t open that door.

It's one of these thorny things—it's a fact that there are chemical fungicides that are less harmful than copper and sulfur! That's true! But what do you DO about it?

AA: Yeah, I've talked to fruit farmers who wouldn't go organic just because of that, because they're like, "Well, the fungicides I use are not as toxic as copper and sulfur, so I use IPM, but I won't go organic." (33:05)

JK: The same thing occurs in the humane, outdoor, antibiotic-free pork business. And two of my good friends are organic pork people. And they do an okay job of managing parasites, but there's at least one "natural," not quite as nasty product that you can use that makes raising outdoor humane-type niche market pork SO MUCH easier, by a MAGNITUDE. It's a similar issue with the copper and sulfur fruit growers and the ones who don't want to go to organic. And that's one of the reasons—and I'm not saying this is a good enough reason to allow something else in organic farming, that's not where I'm going with this—but it is the reason why there is so much more niche market pork than organic. It really limits the market. Once again, I'm not really justifying adding Safeguard—that's the product—to the organic system.

Okay, I'm going to bounce back here a little bit. I did humane outdoor pork inspections for a few years in that other niche market. I was basically bribed away from the organic world to do that. But I really got schooled on pigs. And it really helped me understand why some of the limits were with organic pork. Because it gets to be production costs. If they don't gain as much weight, if a few even die, and there's more management. Because managing parasites without Safeguard is—I mean, it can be done, but it's very, very detailed. Oh my goodness, pigs are touchy. Pigs are touchy with parasites, very, very touch.

And there's also—I guess this is an overall view type thing, is that one of the main barriers in further organic production and further organic products is that the original organic consumer is a vegetarian. And so there's this deep irony between organic production systems—which should be and for the most part are deeply integrated into livestock manure, and livestock on the land, ideally—and the fact that the large majority of health food consumers are vegetarian. I don't know what to do about that. But it certainly has, certainly that's one of the limiting things. Organic pork is a miniscule market. And believe me, these people [Organic Valley] have tried to expand it. Among others. They have tried. And the niche market brands have had small organic pork efforts. I hate to say there's a ceiling on it that's never going to be broke, but there's a deep irony in the difference between consumers and what they—they just won't eat more meat, goldarn them! [Laughter] That really hamstring organic.

Which brings me around to, the average person would be surprised how much non-certified livestock there is on organic farms. Beef in particular. But if there isn't an organic market for it, it just doesn't make sense to certify, and plus, there's a couple products you can't use then. You're going to get a conventional price for almost-organic meat. I encourage my farmers to have beef cattle. Certified or not. I don't even use the word certified. Even if they're just feeding 50 or 100 during the winter and get rid of them. Even if they just have a dozen cow-calves, anything. Just get some beef on the farm. And right now it seems like grass-based, bird-friendly, carbon-friendly beef is poised for really, really good growth. And it's too bad that certified organic hasn't inserted in that. And maybe it will be a little bit. But the other niche market beef people are poised to really take advantage of carbon markets. It's kind of a new angle of marketing health foods, is the carbon. And overall it's a good thing. I don't know whether organic is going to take as much advantage of it as we could. But the organic beef isn't

necessarily grass-based. There's a percent we require, but it's not necessarily a grass-based product. So that's another example of a niche market that kind of elbows us out. For a different set of factors—management, consumer demand, maintenance, no one thing that makes it difficult for us to insert ourselves in there. I think it's a good thing there's going to be a lot more grass-based meat. I think that's just fine. But it's too bad we're not—well, maybe I'm wrong! I hope I'm wrong! That we're not in on it as much as we might be able to. (39:30)

Let me tell you what the best organic farms I've been on. When they have livestock involved. And they have been raising the forage, and ideally a little bit of pasture in the rotation. And they've been doing it for a long time. They can get to the point—and I document this in the context of an application and inspection report—they can take as much as 35 percent of that farm and raise crops either for human consumption or for cash sale off the farm, use the balance of the farm to feed the livestock, to grow forage for the livestock, and you are not exporting fertility and it's totally sustainable for lifetimes. It takes a decade or so to get there. I mean, you couldn't take a farm and start exporting grain off of it first thing. But these guys have been doing it ten years or more, so they've got this great cash grain cash flow, and their chicken barn, and their beef cattle on the side. God, those guys are doing good. And the soil is just out of this world.

My biggest category of farmer that does that is Amish. They—I mean, I've got some English farmers too that are that good, for that long, but the Amish. Because the Amish are really good about rotating pasture through their rotation. And those folks are kind of humble, they don't even realize what a great thing they've got going on. And if you wanted to pick out an even more idealistic kind of farm, some of these guys run through their rotation about 5 acres of market garden. As well as mixed-crop livestock and exporting off the farm.

AA: So in Iowa, what percent of the organic farmers would you say are Amish? Do you have any idea?

JK: Well, I'm a little skewed on that because over the years agencies—and I ask for it, too, it's not that the agencies pick me out—to be an organic specialist. I ask for it, too. I say, "Give me all the Amish you want." And then they see my work, and they see the Amish aren't complaining about me. So on my own inspection schedule it's over 50 percent. And I don't know, the only way you can get a stat on that is guesswork. Because there isn't a thing on the application where you check. It's there somewhere, there's no phone number, or what we like to call in the inspection world an "Amish phantom phone number." They give you a phone number, but it doesn't really, they never answer it. I don't know if you might want to edit that out, that's kind of a joke we make about the Amish. But I really, I guess my perfect order of this, I just need to make sure I cover what I had in my notes.

I totally enjoy working with the Amish. I love working with the Amish. I also have no illusions about them. They're just people, they make mistakes and that, but I just love working with the Amish. 'Cause you know you're never going to lie to you. Ever. That alone takes a little, puts a little more relaxation in the inspection process. Fraud is not, even some kind of minor fraud in the seeds you bought or something, that's not going to—to be totally honest, there's a few times that they told me things and I said, "You shouldn't have told me that." Either it didn't matter, or it's like, you know. And since I'm really, really close to the end of my inspection career, I can say some of these things. There's things that go on during inspection, where things are taken care of, and they don't appear in the paperwork. Not real contamination issues, or real fraud, no. That's not what I'm saying. It's a really minor thing, like, you need to

open that gate so those animals can get outside. I'll just hang out until they get the corral finished and they open the gate, rather than write it up, put it through the paperwork. Cause anything you write up, it's like hitting a row of dominoes. It might be one minor thing at the first domino, but—I wouldn't be saying this at the other end of my career. I'm a little surprised I'm saying it out loud today. But it's a nose-to-nose, man-to-man thing. Once again, only the most minor stuff. But sometimes it can be that easy. Or get rid of that. (45:08)

If I can tell a cute story, really really early on, really early on, it was the first set of people transitioning to dairy. And the whole family was there, a bunch of people about this short [holds arm about 3-4 feet above the floor] to follow us around, it was just adorable. And initial inspections are always a lot longer and a lot more detailed, initial inspections. As they should be. And I was doing my sweep on the barn beam to look for medicine. (Which should have been in the refrigerator, but I grew up on dairy farms where sometimes you kept the medicine up there). And I was doing this sweep, cursory sweep here and there, where are the most likely places you might put the medicine. And there, in inches of dust, I found a little antibiotic vials. I could tell it had been months or years since they'd given it. But they knew what they were. And all their little kids looked up at me. Even the little kids knew there was a medicine. And I said, "These have been here for years." "Are we still gonna, can we still pass?" I forget exactly what they said. But you know what I did with them? I put them in my pocket and threw them out. And strictly speaking, that wasn't what I should have done.

But inspectors have to use their judgement calls on what to raise hell about and what not to. And even though the organic inspecting job is basically being a cop in a little tiny town where there's never any trouble, that's basically what it's like, at the same time you have to be a hard-nosed detective. And as friendly and engaging as I can be, if there's something wrong, I'm a different person. As you should be. You have to always, you have to always have that hat in your pocket, all the time. And believe me, us inspectors live for a bust. We might not even get once even once a year, or once every 500 farms or something, but we live for it. We live for it. And I've only had a few. And actually, there's one very interesting, in our training, we said, "When is there real fraud, or real cheaters?" He said, "Once about every 300 farms." And that's about what it is, even today. I find that kind of interesting. But once again, I had my career in the upper Midwest. So keep that in mind actually with all my commentary, is that I haven't been on a 10,000-acre lettuce farm in California. And actually, over the years I haven't—(48:41)

Oh, another basic on certification, the certification process itself, is that, I don't know whether many people understand it, is a continuous improvement. It's kind of a bureaucratic thing, probably within the USDA, that they're looking for continuous improvement. And that is why we end up finding some little thing and holding them to account. And just a few sentences ago I said, you know, sometimes I can take care of things on the farm. But I get the directive from the agency—find something wrong. And so we will. Because I think that's from USDA NOP, I think that's how the USDA works. We need to see continuous improvement on these farms. With a verbal apology that's not in the paperwork, I say, "Well, you are missing one seed tag out of a hundred," and write them up.

Seeds—that is one thing that the organic rule is really good on by not being so completely strict on it, because organic vegetable farming would really, really be hurt if we had 100 percent organic seed rule. And yet to a critic from the outside that doesn't really understand and thinks, "Pure, pure, pure—why do you allow nonorganic seed use?" they just don't understand. And that's one of the things I told you is so good about the rule. It makes farming possible. And the organic seed rules are a really good example of that. Oh, we were worried

about it at first. And at first vegetable growers were lucky to find 10 percent organic brands. First few years, then it got up to 50, and now it's in the 85 percentile that you can get organic vegetable seed. I don't want to be all critical here, because I've seen some wonderful developments that way. And seed corn varieties, oh it's just been wonderful how they've improved. Just wonderful. It's just, they've run out of excuses to use nonorganic seed, basically. And that's actually just been buttoned up tight these past few years. There's just so many choices, regionally adapted and that. Soybean seed, too. Organic soybean varieties used to be wimpy and they wouldn't canopy and they'd grow slow and they'd ripen late. I mean, they were good food, in the end they were good food, but they're so much better. They improved quicker than corn for some reason. So that's been really, really—

And organic farmers themselves, in their own country neighborhoods, I get a general feeling they get more respect than they did decades ago. Now there is quite a few organic farmers that sit on co-op boards and zoning boards, and they have a good degree of civic responsibility outside of just the farm. They're pretty good, they're township trustees, and a lot of things. There's a lot I can say, that's on my positive list. Early on they all told me about, and I used to interview about this, it was part of, we would ask why they switched to organic. The NOP, I don't know whether they asked us not to do that, we just don't do it anymore. But the first five or ten years it was every agency that would be one of the questions. It was almost always about personal exposure to pesticides. It was almost always that. It's all on my older reports, I've got lots of poignant stories that way.

To me, that goes back to one of the most important things that certified organic has done. Because on such a large scale we have learned how to grow food without poison. (Ope, copper-sulfur people, time to shut up!) Sorry, they obviously annoy me, as you can tell. That alone certified organic has been worth it. Even if it doesn't—and I don't think it's going to spread to all farming. I think that's a wonderful idealistic fantasy, but the idea that all farming will be organic, I just don't think it's going to happen. But we've been doing this huge, HUGE experiment in growing food without poison. And any other number of farming methods, not just the products that we exclude. (54:28)

You ask for historical perspective? Perspective on current trends? Yeah, and history. Yeah. To start with, let's be real clear that there was no glorious past to organic/sustainable agriculture. With very few exceptions, the history of farming for mankind has not been good. And so that's one of the myths I like to talk about a lot. About with organic farming consistently raising soil organic matter, that's an important historical thing. That's the important thing. And learning to grow food without poison. We're living in a historical moment. We're all living in history. We forget that sometimes. We're right in the middle of history. And we are 30 or 40 years into the experiment to grow food without poison. And I wonder where history will end up, that maybe the whole idea to grow food with poison was a bad idea. I don't think we're going to answer that next year. Maybe in your lifetime, you're about 25 or so. Maybe. There's a chance that maybe you'll have a more definitive answer to that in *your* lifetime. But it may take longer than that. And so I'm really proud to be a part of history that way. I really am. Of course, I might, you might not even see how that all pans out. (56:46)

Past and current trends in organic/sustainable. You know, there's plenty of history about—well, your article was part of it, your articles that I read about you, I think that's been covered pretty good, Rodale kept it going. 'Cause there's always been organic/sustainable farms, but once again that was the exception in history. It's also part of the myth of the American pioneer experience, too, that our pioneer farmers were—just because you didn't have gas-

powered tools and chemicals doesn't mean you were in touch with nature, I'm sorry. One of my hobbies over the years has been an agricultural historian. So that's why I've got this big painful onerous department, and the history of my own land which I own, which is currently 99 percent forested, but it was—I've got to make this a small sidebar, this isn't what you're asking for—it was basically pigged to death to the point where it had in 1935 the first aerial photograph showed maybe five large trees per acre. And the rest of it was just gullied out, pig wallows and gullies and clay hillsides and not a single other plant. In fact, it was the worst one in the whole neighborhood. And when I got it, it had been in cows since 1935. So it was grassed over, but there's still gullies and rock piles. I know because I used to see them on top of the soil. And that is more typical of the history of agriculture than some glorious past. That's offensive. That kind of history's offensive to some people, but you know—I can also look at the soil maps in our county, I'm in a hill county, and so erosion is even more poignant, and some of our worst historically. We have soil types that are labeled for the fact that they have degraded from past use. It's an actual soil type. That isn't really where you're going. You can pull a soapbox out if you want sometime. (59:36)

AA: No, it's all right.

JK: I am currently a board member of the Iowa Organic Association. I have been for a couple years now, and an active member. And even though we're not having in-person field days, I'm a field day organizer, and I will be again in the future. Oh, I love going to field days. I love going to forestry field days and prairie field days; I just love them. I like the education part of it.

Organic certification and all the other certifications. It's all about what the consumers want. And that's why we've got to be more careful with our messaging, about critiquing certified organic, because it's going to drive consumers elsewhere. And once again, I'm NOT downplaying the real concerns! I'm not saying everything is fine! But I don't think we should air our dirty laundry in public. It doesn't help our brand.

AA: No, because I've heard a lot of people are like, "Well, organic doesn't mean anything anyways, so why buy it?"

JK: Yeah. Once again, non-GMO didn't help that either. One of the other things that changed with the NOP, when the national rule came in, OCIA North Dakota you could use herbicide. So tell me that the rules were stricter before. I told you about how the NOP auditors have shifted all certifications being done, and the continuous improvement aspect of it. Past and current trends. The trend is for more organic practices embedded in conventional ag. That's an important trend. Lessons to teach the younger generation. I guess that's what this history project is about. Oh, this is a Wisconsin, project, right? Wisconsin-based?

AA: Wisconsin and the whole Midwest and the Northeast too.

JK: For the Wisconsin part of this, I was there at the beginning of Organic Valley. (1:02:40)

AA: Oh, you were?

JK: I didn't quite make the book. And I'm over being annoyed that I wasn't. They couldn't have everybody in there that helped out. But I was there right at the very beginning. And once again, it was a very humble beginning. We thought we'd be selling cheese to some co-ops in Minneapolis and Madison. Isn't that just amazing? We honestly thought that, if that's what we get done, there was no lofty talk of being a big segment or even a national player. Which makes it all the more wonderful. You saw what hat I wore in here today.

AA: Yeah, your Organic Valley hat.

JK: Although most of my old friends and colleagues have retired from Organic Valley, I'm not sure I would have anybody to have lunch with there again if I dropped by, but I have all these years. Oh, I'm a huge, huge fan of Organic Valley. Absolutely. Plus I'm kind of high on co-ops, too. In dairy farming. Dairy farming itself is just such a bedrock of rural community. Because you're always there, but you always have enough time to go to a church meeting or a town hall meeting or something. I have a lot of nostalgia. The county I grew up in in Iowa was largely a dairy county. The Wisconsin border's almost artificial where I'm at. It looks like Wisconsin, too. But dairy farming, and dairy farming culture, I mean, that's what I grew up in. My dad had a farm business, so I was, even though I didn't grow up on a farm, I might as well have. And so when I knew there was going to be an organic milk co-op, you can imagine how many, many others were very—and they de facto gave me a lot of work. I was the inspector on a lot of those transition farms that were just starting to go to Organic Valley.

And since then, in Organic Valley, you've probably heard praise before, their field men do such a good job on the farms. They kind of crack them into shape. If they just barely make the OV cut at first, they are there cleaning things up. And it really makes being an Organic Valley, when I'm at an Organic Valley Farm and I'm the inspector, god, it's so relaxing. You know you're not going to find some horrible shit. You just know you're not going to. There's a few I had to get after for minor things, but they weren't important. They were more biodiversity things. But not the milk room and the cattle management stuff. I always found the OV farms that I was frustrated with—and I don't have to go to my second hand to tell you how many they were, that I was frustrated with and that could have done better—but—and this is out of protocol, but I've always known the OV fieldmen, they know who I am, I've helped them with field days over the years. I'd call them, and they'd go, "Yeah, we wish they'd do that a little different too." [Laughter] But that's so few it's almost not worth. (1:06:39)

Amish and Mennonite, they're a major, Amish and Mennonite are very important to the organic world. And a lot of the Mennonite farmers are also biological farmers. They were the original crossing between organic practices, they've been doing biological fertilizers and stuff all along. But it's the rest of mainstream agriculture that's starting to use the microbials and the better manure management products and health-foodie-type inputs. That's all our influence. And I can't understate how important that is, even though the other side is like, don't admit it too much. I find that infuriating, too.

Yeah, these organic inputs, whether they're microbes or microorganisms, or whatever, and I see them, and one of the things I do to study is I read conventional farm magazines. Every winter I get a big stack of them and I speed-read a bunch of *Successful Farmings* and *Hoard's Dairyman* just so I can get a general understanding of farming. And when I see them mentioning that there's some input that was formally used for organic, and now they're tank-mixing it with their herbicide, I go, "I think that's a plus!" My more fundamentalist peers and colleagues are

appalled, but I'm like, "I think that's progress." In my opinion. I think that's a good thing. (1:08:37)

I've got to put a plug in for Turkey Ridge Orchard. They fly under the radar, I don't think they have field days, but they are one of the most advanced organic practices orchard in the country. They're kind of humble or something in touting themselves, I don't know if you should do that with this. They're really good at managing animals on the orchard floor. And they're also personal friends of mine, too. I respect that they don't toot their own horn too much. I've encouraged them to over the years, but you know what, that's not their deal. They're busier moving the things through the orchard, and they have a market garden on the side, too. Not everybody's into tooting their own horn. And I'm not going to go out of my way to do it for them because that's not their deal. They're just doing wonderful work and have for a long time. And he was connected to Organic Valley, too, the man there. (1:09:55)

That's really the only organic organization I've been involved with. I was in the Organic Inspectors Association for a while. But once I started getting enough work without being in—Organic Valley had to make some, what in the past they thought were difficult decisions, to like expand, but now in retrospect, maybe they didn't expand quite enough! If you think about the giants that have been elbowing them out since, it almost seems silly that we were—I mean, I wasn't at the table, I didn't quite have a ringside seat, I had a front row seat but not a ringside seat—just torturing ourselves about whether to go to another state or whether to get bigger on some level. In retrospect it was every time they got bigger it was the right decision. And once again, maybe we should have gotten even bigger!

Certified organic and organic has kind of been, I'm not going to say a victim, but the problems which I mentioned before, the problems are of success. There's so much success that the standards couldn't address everything that has happened step-by-step. They just didn't anticipate it. And this success has happened so quickly that there weren't enough small farmers or regional farmers or medium-sized farmers, there simply weren't enough to step up to meet the demand. But I think that's pretty much true. And it's kind of tragic. But I think that's some of the, I talked about credibility, what's really gone wrong and what really is wrong, I think we've got to admit that to ourselves, that that's one of the factors. Not that big players can't elbow you out and be unfair and stuff, I'm not saying that isn't part of it, but part of the discussion, if we're honest with ourselves, is that there just haven't been enough people stepping up to do it. I don't know what the answer to that is. I hope I've given you as many questions as answers today, because we're in the middle of something that's still growing, and it could be shifting into something else. And we've got dire competition from other niche markets I think we need to handle correctly to at least give us a chance. (1:13:07)

I don't know who would ever hear this, but why isn't the organic world stepping up with more fake meat products? I mean, there's conventional-based fake meat products you hear about all the time. They're more like meat and stuff. Why isn't there any organic brand doing that? I think we're missing out. Or maybe one's going to be announced tomorrow. But I think we're missing out. Because actually the kind of, they're mostly legumes, although there's other plants in those fake meats—they would give another crop to rotate through an organic farm. I'd love to see an organic farm that's raising some kind of meat, and eggs or dairy, that also has in their rotation they're growing fake meat soybeans for somebody. I don't see that as a conflict or anything, I just see it as another crop that my organic farmers could grow. I hope I'm wrong about that. I hope there's an organic brand meeting them head-on. I mean, it seems so obvious that we, the euphemistic "we" should be doing that. (1:14:32)

I have so enjoyed and been engaged with the organic farming, organic farmers. You know, even though I'm just supposed to be this hard-nosed, by-the-book bureaucratic-type worker, when I'm on the farm I talk farming with them. And I don't think that's a barrier to certification to discuss soybean varieties and inputs. I don't think it is, plus it never appears in the paperwork. I don't think there's an organic inspector in the world that if you cornered them they wouldn't say they push that a little bit, what we're "supposed to talk to them about." So I don't know, maybe I'm exposing some big secret that the NOP auditor's going to come to my door and pretty soon, "What are you talking about on the farm?" [Laughter] I've been involved in NOP audits on-farm. They're—well, they're doing their job. Let's put it that way. It's not pleasant. And that's okay. You know, I need to be held to account and do a better job with how I do things, I'm not complaining, but—Oh, and early on we didn't know what we were doing. Certifiers and inspectors, first five years or so, we would just, we were bold, we would just take anything on, we weren't scared of anything, we didn't know, it was too early to be scared of NOP auditors, because they really weren't doing anything yet. (1:16:27)

So early on, I would be on farms or certain kinds of operations that, for instance, they'd never been certified by anything before. And there I was. But I wasn't intimidated. I don't know what, bold, or foolish, I don't know what you'd call it. Twelve or fifteen years ago, I don't know what you'd call it. It was somewhere in between. But organic farming techniques and inputs have improved so much. That's a valuable contribution no matter where we end up on that.

I like how you've already definitely caught wind that there isn't political partisan thing to it. I'm glad, because it's a big thing that people don't understand, I'm glad that I've confirmed that for you.

AA: Yeah, what I'm finding is that there's this stereotype of what organic farming is, and it's kind of a narrow stereotype, but the reality is a lot more diverse. And so that's why I'm asking some of these questions, to try to figure out the scope of that diversity and some of the different ideas and things that people are bringing to organic farming.

JK: Yeah, let me take a break. (1:18:00) The chicken barn issue is huge. And it's intractable. I don't think there's anything that can be done about it. If you let 20,000 chickens out of a barn, it just doesn't, it just can't, it just doesn't happen. And then you've got—and there's some aspects, like it's considered a humane thing with some of the outdoor access things, but if these animals were really outside, both chickens and the dairy animals, outside, outside pasture, you'd lose all the manure! And there's some humane-type rules that just fly in the face of environmental sensibility. They're just ridiculous as far as that goes. And this is a really, really painful thing to admit, but cities are big. They're full of people concentrated in one area. This agrarian ideal that we can have local food and everybody can come out to the farm and buy their eggs and stuff, it's just a fantasy! And these are really hard choices. I don't think they are hard choices. It's just bigger picture stuff. It just doesn't lend—We forget this in the Midwest sometimes because there are more areas of the country with the small town-farming intersection where it would be possible to have a lot more local food and production and distribution. But most of the country isn't like that. It's just not realistic. And I'm saying this with pain in my voice. It just logistically doesn't make sense.

The one example, the one real simple example I have is that in my county there's a few thousand farms. And 14,000 people. You take three farms and you can feed the whole county. What do you do with the rest of it? And that's not the most extreme example in the Midwest.

There's counties with that many farms and 5,000 people for hundreds of miles. So when the zealots start hollering about local foods, it's like, "Yeah, that's one-tenth of the answer." God, I hate to say that, because I love those people. Some of those people are my friends and that, but that's why you need a third-party certification, because we can't all know our farmers. It's just logistically impossible. As admirable as that is, it's just not—And local food production is up against other structural barriers. Let's say you're a market gardener and you've got local lettuce. You leave it sit out in the sun for 10 minutes, and your lettuce isn't as good as the hydro-cooled stuff from a billion-acre farm in California! It's just more complicated than that. And there's been some efforts in Iowa a couple times over the years to, because we had some really good soils for carrots, and there's large-scale agronomic experiments, and they worked. But when you're competing with California that has the coolers and the washers and the bagging facilities and the carrot diggers and they can do it 50 weeks a YEAR, and then you superimpose that somewhere where if you're *lucky* you can dig carrots two months a year, and justify the equipment and the handling and the washing—you just can't do it! You just can't do it. We need to learn to resign ourselves to what we can't do and focus on what we can. Plenty of carrots at farmers markets four or five months a year, but let's not pretend that we can turn the whole thing into that. And that's painful what I'm saying. I'm grimacing to say it. But we've got to focus on what we can make progress on. (1:22:38)

Oh, and another thing that outside the industry critics don't understand is that modern dairy barns, even though they look big, right, and there's a lot of cattle in one place, a modern dairy barn is *so* much better than the old dairy barns.

AA: Than the stanchion barns.

JK: Yeah. So much better. Even on big conventional dairies—and, in fact, there's not really much difference—cow care and cow health is so much better due to big modern barns. Of course I know dairy farms inside and out. But people that just aren't familiar with it, they just see a photograph of 300 cows in a row and they're all eating out of the same trough, and they go, "Ahhhh!" It's like, "Well, it's not as bad as it looks." You can't let those critiques eat away at the organic brand.

So one really, really early on, and I would try to do as many farms a day, especially when I was a long ways from home, and I'd be there sometimes at dark to finish up my last inspection. And I always liked to end the interviews with, "Well, what are you going to do now? What's next? What have I kept you away from that you need to get back to?" and kind of end it that way. And the guy had already started, he's a dairy farmer, and he had somebody else milk so he could do the inspection with me. He was moving a little bit of straw aside over his little worm bed. And he is picking up worms and filling a couple 5-gallon buckets. And he said, "You know that field that's at the far end of the farm? It never got much manure over the years. I'm going to walk these buckets of worms back there and spread em out before I go to bed." That's what organic's about, you know? That's what it's about, is things like that. That's one of the many things that kept me going. That's just one of my best stories. (1:24:58)

There was others, too, that are just as—I'd come to the farm to do an inspection and this guy, this man walked out of the field. This was in Nebraska—see, I've done Iowa and every state that borders Iowa—and he had sunflowers and he had sunflowers on his certification list, and it was a hot day and he looked borderline sunburned, he had calluses on his hands like you just wouldn't believe. And he was out in the field pulling up weeds by hand. He didn't think a thing

of it. He'd almost seem like something out of a John Steinbeck novel or something, only he was a real person and a real organic farmer. That's the other thing that organic farming has kept alive, is hand-pulling weeds on a field scale. Which might be coming back. There's been great weed control improvement too, with the new electric weeders and flame weeders. There's been great improvement there. Great improvement. And just an understanding about how to manage weeds. And also, a part of that was learning when it didn't matter and let it go. You know, that foxtail really wasn't very hard on soybean yield, really. It looked awful, but we've learned to not get all upset about a field that looks like that. And I have seen some weedy soybean fields in my day, incredibly weedy fields.

Oh, and I've just seen these wonderful examples of cow care, too, and I don't mean the buildings and the technology, people so involved with their dairy cattle, they're just like almost at one with them. This one guy in particular, he didn't milk them going right down the row, he had some other sequence, maybe knew which one's milked out, anyway, he would just let them out one at a time, and he would just slowly walk down, there wasn't this big orchestrated thing that he had, because his cows were so calm. They always turned the right way and slowly walked out. And he had been somebody that had managed, he had been the herd manager for bigger dairies like his whole life, and he was about 45 or so. And this was his first herd of cows. It was endearing. It was endearing to watch. To know he finally had his cattle. There was even one—these cattle were so calm and so trained—there was even one calf in there that was suckling in the midst of the other cows that were being milked and waiting to be milked. I don't know if I ever saw that any other time. But he wasn't worried about him bumping into the other cows or trying to suck on somebody else. He had that calf really trained. And OV and other small buyers made it possible for people to continue to be that way. Especially early on, the first ten years, OV was like, they kept a lot of very small dairies going until they could build a little bigger barn or build a parlor or whatever. It turned out to be more progressive and slightly larger farms, but that was part of the early idea of it. (1:29:05)

One of my more outstanding stories was, I was inspecting the Amish in the Cashton area. And once you've been on a few farms in a particular country neighborhood, you really get a feel for what the soil's like and what the yields are going to be and stuff like that. That's part of our job, to understand that. And if we see an abnormally high yield we've got to look closer and stop. So you get a feel for what yields are in that area. It's always in the back of your mind. As good a cop as you are, you've still got to always keep that in the back of your mind. And this, we took the walking tour. The Amish love to walk and they love to take you on their little tiny buggies as well. They get a kick out of that, taking you on them. So I asked for one whenever I could. But this farm, the soil was not, the soil was distinctly worse than the other ones in the neighborhood I'd been on. And also it was one of the ones that was a little more level than some of them in the neighborhood. So that didn't add up.

And I noticed this right towards the end, he wasn't certified dairy yet so I wasn't in the barn, but I noticed there was this row of weeds about 12 or 20 feet wide that went out a few hundred yards. And so from a distance I say, "What's going on there?" And it turned out—I figured this out, he didn't know it because he was a young Amish man, he'd just gotten the farm maybe a year ago, maybe two years ago. And it turned out, the person that owned that farm before had filled the spreader and just turned it on until it was empty. In one place. In one strip. He said, "That's a pile of black dirt so high I haven't moved it around yet to make use of it, plus it's so full of nettles and stuff." He hadn't bothered to spread it out. Of course it wouldn't have cured the whole farm anyway. But here that young Amish man, you know, that's going to take

him a lifetime to turn that farm around from however many decades of just one strip, never bothered to put it on anywhere else. So, the perseverance I knew he was going to have to have impressed me. And he just seemed undaunted. You know, that's the farm I got. So that was kind of inspiring too, to know, future inspiring that he'd taken that farm on. And he was going to manage cattle on it, so there was a good chance it was going to be improved. That's another example of, there wasn't a glory days of how things used to be. And every farm I've ever been on, the field that was the furthest from the barn was the worst. I figured that out really quick. And then, the previous story of the guy walking the buckets of manure back there to set out by hand. That's the flip side of that. (1:32:56)

I've got other inspiring stories. But the whole experience has been inspiring, not just any particular story I've got for you. It's gotten better, it's gotten better with neighbors. I can tell you some bad spray drift stories of neighbors intentionally doing it over the years. But overall community diplomacy is just so, so much better than it was. So much better. And there's sometimes that I'd see, whether it was the livestock or the soybean crop or the wheat crop or something, I'd look at it, and I'd think, "God, I hope that's the food I'm getting." Some farms more than others. "I want the food from this farm." There are, amongst all the organic farmers, there are a subset of them that are just even better. They're even more outstanding. And sometimes it would be hard to pick out exactly why. I made up a thing just for myself: "This would make my inspector's choice grade." Even though you couldn't exactly put your finger on why that field or that bin of grain just looked so much better and felt so much better. And that's the magic of organic, that we're all trying to capture. We're looking for the day when more and more of them, when everybody is that gentle with their cows and every field of chest-high soybeans that you just wanted to take home with you, when everybody's there. Some of them just glow more than others. That kind of keeps a person going with all this, too. (1:35:30)

The other thing that inspires me is when your organic neighbor decides to grow hay again or puts in a cover crop. I mean, that's not as spiritually uplifting as these farms I just described, but there's an incredible amount of worth to that, too. I've really been glad to be a part of it. And it's been good to me. It's been good to me, too. And now I'm 90 percent retired. This is the first year I'm just kind of on call for samples and spray drift incidents, but maybe I'll get five calls like that all summer, maybe. So I'm basically retired. I'll get involved with field days when there's a lot more of them next year, of course. What have you got for me? Have you got, did I cover each of those categories?

AA: I think so.

JK: You've been an awful silent interviewer.

AA: Well, that's because you already had your answers to all the questions, so I didn't even have to ask them. I think you've answered pretty much everything I had, because I gave them to you in advance and you wrote down all your answers.

JK: Is there anything you'd like a bit more on? Did I give you enough for a bio?

AA: I don't know. If you want to go a little more into the bio, you can.

JK: Well, I covered where I came from, and my work background before I started.

AA: Oh yeah, did you talk about what got you interested in organic inspection, like why you decided to do that as a career?

JK: Well, several of my good friends were immediately involved with the Organic Valley startup. And they were also immediately involved with the beginning of the Independent Organic Inspectors Association. And it just seemed like a good fit because I had so much experiences with farms, with work, so I felt comfortable being on a farm. So that was, it's less of a direct thing, but I did remember even before I really knew anything about it, Rob and me, I would travel to work as a farm construction worker, and farm after farm I'd see where the crops looked better when there was a rotation involved and beef cattle on the farm. And then I'd drive by 99 farms—this is in Iowa, I did most of my farm construction work in Iowa—you drive by 99 farms where it's just corn-bean, even back then. And the crops looked kind of wilted, or they just didn't look quite as good. And then you'd drive by a farm that had some kind of rotation—back then they were even growing oats, way back then—and it looked better. That was the first thing that sparked this idea that there's another way to do it. I guess that was the first original spark, that there was something else going on. Because that was before I was really much of a gardener or anything, before my farm construction morphed into doing different kinds of farm work.

My work with organic has just been a part of my other work with tree farming. I was a naturalist writer for a short while on trees. I considered my work with planning and zoning and writing land use ordinances. I'm really all about how we interact with the surface of the earth and the plants on the surface of the earth. And luckily I was able to find a career that actually made money in the organic world that enabled me to have these wonderful hobbies and side work and volunteer work and all these other aspects of how we interact with the surface of the earth and plants. I'm not sure what I would have done for work, you know for real cash work, if that hadn't have developed. Also, I was living in Wisconsin at the time, and working mostly in Wisconsin, and I just happened to be there, and my friend group were part of the OV startup, and inspector association startups. And actually I got my training, even though the training was full, one of my best friends in the whole world was managing the training, and she got me in. Otherwise the whole thing would have been delayed a whole year. So there's some serendipitous things too. But it was also just intentional. I intentionally got into it, too. But a little bit of that is being in the right place at the right time. That was part of it too. (1:41:24)

Oh, the land I own. I bought land in '75 and it's a tree farm now. That was part of my working with plants and the surface of the earth. So that kind of rounds out my bio. I live right where I was born. I'm a rural local but at the same time I have this other cultural creative sensibilities. Which suited me well to be in the organic world, too, to have both. I guess that rounds out the background a little bit.

AA: Yeah, I think you've covered pretty much everything that I wanted to ask. Unless there's any last thing you want to say, I think we're probably good.

JK: I think I got that in. Anything you want to fill in after you've read or transcribed that, we can communicate. I've been kind of outspoken here, but at my age you can be outspoken and kind of get away with it a little bit more.

AA: I'm just going to say for the recording here that this is June 21, 2021, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing Jack Knight. (1:43:13)