

Jim Riddle, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

October 2, 2023

JR = Jim Riddle

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is October 2, 2023, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing

JR: Jim Riddle.

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

JR: No problem.

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

JR: I was born in Newton, Iowa. We lived about seven miles outside of Newton, in rural Colfax Iowa, so that's in south-central Iowa. We had pretty much a hobby farm. My mom and dad both over the years worked at Maytag Company, which is headquartered in Newton. But we did sell sweet corn at a roadside stand. My dad would have a few milk cows. We raised pigs, chickens, some diversified livestock. But also, my mom always had a really big garden. And she subscribed to *Organic Gardening* magazine and followed those principles. Always had a big compost pile. Did a lot of mulching. I grew up helping in the garden and eating fresh food from the garden. But also, back in the woods at our place, we had about a 1-acre spring-fed pond, and I loved to fish. And I knew that that compost pile was where I could find earthworms to use for fish bait. So I had a pretty deep and intimate connection with the composting system, because I could get my worms to go fishing.

But also, just thumbing through *Organic Gardening* magazine as a kid, just reading articles, having an exposure to some of the controversies. Toxic foods, foods that were contaminated with chemical pesticides. And knowing that there was another way. And seeing it firsthand. When we had rich soil from the compost and the plants were well-mulched, they were very healthy and had no pest or disease problems.

And then there was another significant influence that I wasn't so aware of, and that was my mother had been the personal secretary to Mrs. Henry A. Wallace, who was from Iowa. And my mother was from Iowa, and she worked for the family in Des Moines when he was with Hi-Bred seed company, which later became Pioneer. But then when he was appointed Secretary of Agriculture by Franklin Roosevelt, my mother—this was way before my time—she moved to Washington, DC and lived with the family and worked for Mrs. Wallace while he was Secretary of Agriculture. And he's really the person responsible for the Soil Conservation Service and turning around the whole Dust Bowl. And my mom continued to work for Wallace when he was vice president.

And I think there are a combination of influences there, indirectly. Certainly Wallace was a leader in modern agriculture. But also erosion control and conservation. But he also was a very progressive thinker. During my formative years, which was in the 1960s, my mother was an outspoken opponent of the war in Vietnam. Writing a lot of letters to the editor to local newspapers. And I remember talking with my mom and saying, “What difference does it make, one woman in Iowa writing these letters?” But then, coming out of church—we went to a Christian church in Colfax—one day, I remember someone coming up to her and saying, “I’m really glad you’re speaking out and writing these letters.” And I felt this sense of pride, I felt the empowerment. It does make a difference to be engaged and speak out. I think influences on all those levels. The deep ecology combined with conservation and then political action.

AA: Did your mom ever meet Hugh Bennett, or not?

JR: Not that I know of. But there’s a lot in those years. I remember that she certainly met Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt. (5:00)

AA: So then that sweet corn that you were growing, was that organic also?

JR: Yes, but by default. We didn’t really know much about organic standards or any organizations. It was pretty much just following *Organic Gardening* magazine. Our farm was close to Highway 6, which was the main artery across the central US until Interstate 80 was constructed. And we would have a roadside stand. And as kids, we would hoe the sweet corn, we would sit on the roadside and sell sweet corn. So I had very early exposure to direct marketing, too.

AA: And then your cattle, did you pasture them?

JR: Yes, they were pastured. And then selling the cream, we had a cream separator and would sell the cream to Pella Iowa Creamery, I remember. (6:03)

AA: So when and where did you go to college?

JR: I had a scholarship from the Maytag Foundation. And it was good anywhere in the country. And I had in my mind I wanted to study forestry so that I could be a game warden, some kind of outdoor ecology career. And I heard that Oregon State was a good forestry school. So I got in my 1956 Chevy and drove across country to Corvallis, Oregon. And went there one year and studied forestry. But it was a large state school, classes of 500 students, being taught TV lectures, and teaching assistants, and very little contact with real professors. Multiple choice tests. And I got straight A’s at Oregon State while spending my time carving pot pipes. I mean, I really wasn’t applying myself.

I’m the youngest of five kids, and my dad died when I was 13. So in high school it was pretty much my mother and I living together during those years. But then I had my adventure in Oregon, and then I decided to transfer back to Grinnell College in Iowa, which is a small liberal arts college, the “Harvard of the Midwest,” it’s known. About 45 miles from our home farm. So I could be much closer to help out at home. I went to Grinnell, and no more straight A’s. I had never worked so hard in my life. It was very rigorous. And I ended up, I think 3.7 grade point,

something like that. But I majored in biology and political science, so a double major, and then also got a teaching degree during those four years.

But I always had a garden, all through college, except that year out in Oregon. When I moved back to Iowa, then I lived off campus and made sure I had a garden. First in town, and then the second two years, the final two years, I lived outside of town in an old farmhouse and had a huge garden and an off campus girlfriend and had a life beyond Grinnell College. (8:40)

AA: So after you graduated, did you have much connection with agriculture? What did you do next?

JR: Well, yes. Always through gardening. I never even considered going to graduate school. I didn't have a counselor, nobody really directed me towards that. I taught school for a while. I worked in a sawmill. I took care of Grinnell College's environmental preserve for a couple of years. But then, my sister was living up in southeast Minnesota. I came up to visit her, I met this woman who was doing market gardening, and my sister needed some help getting out of a bad relationship. So I decided to pack up my dog and move to Minnesota and help my sister out and at the same time develop the relationship with Joyce. And we're still married. And it wasn't long before I was working with her doing market gardening and selling to a municipal farmers' market in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

AA: So she was already doing the market gardening, and then you joined her and helped her?

JR: Right. Yeah, I was kind of a natural fit in a lot of ways.

AA: How long had she been doing that before you met her?

JR: Oh, less than five years. I don't know the exact number. But it taught us a lot of things. How not to run a farmers' market. Because there were no assigned stalls. It was in the City Hall parking lot in La Crosse. There were no assigned stalls, there was no set start time. It was just show up and grab the best spot you could and start selling as fast as you can. We'd been selling there four years or so, and the Chamber of Commerce in Winona, which is about twenty miles upstream from La Crosse in Minnesota, about a third of the size of La Crosse. When leaders, the extension agent, the Chamber of Commerce, and there was a downtown business association, wanted to get a market started in Winona. And they kind of tracked down people who were doing market gardening, including Joyce and I.

And had a meeting, and we looked around at proposed sites. And there was a parking lot underneath the interstate bridge that goes over to Wisconsin that was available. It gave rain protection to the vendors, and it gave a really nice marketing logo to have the cornucopia spilling out with all kinds of fruits and vegetables underneath the interstate bridge. So you knew exactly where it was located. And we had assigned stalls. We came up with our own rules. So we set assigned stalls and a set start time of 7:30 a.m. And removed two of the sources of tension between growers right from the get-go. We said, "You have to produce it or process it yourself, and you have to be located within a fifty-mile radius of Winona." So you couldn't buy and resell stuff, and you had to be local. So it really was way before the local foods movement. And that still to this day is thriving. It's the place to be on Saturday mornings in Winona. A thriving market.

Like I said, we set out the bylaws, we did our own association, filed with the Secretary of State. Then I was elected president by my peers. One thing we would do, I set this up, between 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 I would walk through the market, see what people had. And then this was before the age of cell phones, so I would go to a nearby restaurant and use the pay phone, dial in to a local radio station, where I would do a one-minute live market update. And then they would rebroadcast that during the morning. So I would say, "There's raspberries in the market! Oh, the sweet corn's starting to come in! Well, it might be the last week for this tomato." And people would come down to the market and say, "Oh, are there any of those raspberries left?" It really built community and awareness. I think that was very innovative. But there were a couple times when I went to use the pay phone, and somebody else was on it. And it was quite the panic when I couldn't do my live radio show. And I would actually interrupt people and ask if I could use the pay phone.

But anyway, we also became aware of, there was a federal state market improvement program. It was federal money passed through by the state. So we applied for a couple different grants. One to just help out with our marketing. And then to hire a part-time market coordinator. So that gave Joyce and I experience, applying for and receiving and administering federal grants. So that was an eye-opener. Which then we applied later when we had the inspectors' association, too.

It was very gratifying. It's still a very fun market to visit and just think I had a hand in getting this going. And it's continued on to this day. And there were four core growers. And all of us were organic. And we considered this just being an organic market. And there were other growers that would come and go that weren't organic. And we certainly wanted them. There were a lot of apple orchards, and none of them at that time were organic. There are now. But we wanted apples. We wanted honey. We wanted other things to be at the market. So we said, "No, that's not going to be a requirement. We're going to say you have to grow it or process it yourself within 50 miles of Winona, and that's good enough." And I think the market has really responded. I think a lot of the other growers learned from us about organic practices. We didn't like hold it against them, but we also were not shy about asking top dollar. And they'd see what we were getting for our sweet corn, when they were selling theirs for half as much. And we're like, "You work too hard for this; you shouldn't come here and give it away. Look what you can sell it for." So it helped boost the profits and pride of other growers.

AA: So what year was that, that you started the Winona farmers' market?

JR: Yeah, 1986, and then it really took off in '87.

AA: And how many years were you involved in that?

JR: Well, it was only 1993 where our work with the organic inspecting, and then in '91 we formed the inspectors' association. It was just becoming so demanding on our time. But our farm was suffering. Because you have to inspect other people's farms during the growing seasons, so I'd be off for a week in Michigan or a week in North Dakota, or Illinois, or wherever. Being on the road inspecting three farms a day, come home and hope to cultivate or do something, and then it would rain. It just was really hard to manage. So we gave up the produce farm, that was called Wiscoy Organic Produce, and stopped going to the farmers' market. Other people took over and have done a good job. But yeah, it really was only six or seven years. (17:30)

AA: So can you tell me more about your farm and your produce that you grew?

JR: Sure. We had up to 11 acres in production—well, in rotation. So any given year we'd have seven acres in production and about four acres that would be cover cropped that entire year with clover, alfalfa, we did a lot with rye, buckwheat, oats. Those were our primary cover crops. But we always would rotate, we'd fallow. The land we were farming had been certified organic since about 1975. We didn't come there until 1981. And that's part of the Wiscoy Valley Community Land Cooperative. So it was already going and producing organic grains, beans, sunflowers. They had a flour mill called Sunshine Wiscoy and sold to food co-ops throughout the Midwest. That was phasing out by the time Joyce and I moved there. And there was quite a bit of agricultural land. The co-op has about 360 acres, and of that about 200 is in hardwood forest. But there's about 150 that technically could be considered tillable. Almost all of it is now in native prairie. And that's where a large native plant nursery business called Prairie Moon Nursery is located. So they've been innovators during this whole timeframe for native plants.

And now, currently, that's where our Blue Fruit Farm is located at Wiscoy, at the land co-op. And that's five acres. We used to grow produce on it. But then another organic farmer rented it for a number of years, and he put up an eight-foot-high deer fence around these five acres. But then he reorganized his farming operation after the big flood in 2007, where we got 17 inches of rain in 24 hours. Our field is up on the ridge, so it wasn't flooded. But the renter had a lot of other fields in other locations. And he moved his base of operations about ten miles away and gave up renting our field. So that's when we were left with this five acres of weeds, basically, that even the deer couldn't eat.

And Joyce said, "Let's grow blueberries." And I said, "That's a very easy thing to say, but a hard thing to do." Because our soil is naturally dolomitic, it has a neutral pH, and blueberries of course want a pH of about 5 or 5.5. So we had to do a lot to acidify the soil with high-grade compost, with cover crop residues, a lot of mulch, and then also peat moss and elemental sulfur. And it's been successful. The blueberries are very happy, they're thriving. But as part of the deal I wanted to say, "Okay, if we're going to grow blueberries, let's try some other fruits that like our soil the way it is." So we also grow elderberries, aronia berries, honeyberries, black currants. And we tried a few other things that haven't panned out, like jostaberries and serviceberries or juneberries that we've pulled down, they didn't really work for us. But the others were quite successful and really kind of carried the farm when the blueberries were still just getting established.

So yeah, we sold that Blue Fruit Farm this April to a young couple who worked there for three years learning the ropes. And they're living in the owner-built house that we built. We tore down an old barn and reused the old beams, reused the limestone foundation stone, and for 25 years lived totally off-grid with photovoltaic electricity and wood heat, a passive solar design, very well insulated. And that's where we ran the inspectors' association out of the entire eight years we ran that, was from our off-grid home office. (22:38)

AA: So can you tell me a little more about the Wiscoy Valley Community Land Cooperative?

JR: Sure. It's about 360 acres. It's been going since the mid-1970s. And it's an egalitarian, every member has an equal voice. There's no one leader, no dogma. But we do, right in our bylaws, state we will follow organic practices and value conservation. Most of the others—I think 14

houses—started on this 360 acres. And all of them have alternative energy and were built using recycled materials and wood heat, etc. And the community is a land cooperative, so the members own shares in the cooperative. And we are still members even though we have sold our house at Wiscoy to this young couple. It was an excellent place to be able to do our organic farming trips, the Wiscoy Organic Produce and then the Blue Fruit Farm.

And it's been an incredible place for the prairie business, the Prairie Moon Nursery to develop. And so there's tremendous biological diversity. There aren't chemical farms in the nearby area, so there's not worry about drift and overspray and that. And you just see incredibly healthy populations of frogs, various amphibians, dragonflies, birds, bats. It's really a special place as far as both the biological activity as well as diversity. And there's also a lot of deer. I would hunt, put meat in the freezer. And there was support for that even though a number of the community members are also vegetarians. But they could see what damage the deer are doing, and they wanted to protect their own gardens, too. They were tolerant, there'd be about five of us out of 22 members were hunters.

But yeah, built on tolerance, but also a place to meditate, explore alternative spiritual beliefs, and a great place to share food and fun. A lot of potlucks. We had an outdoor lighted volleyball court, a spring-fed swimming pond we built, a wood-fired sauna, a bandstand where we'd have bands and music. So it was a great place to let your hair down and be yourself.

But also for me, as I got more involved first as inspecting and being on the road, and then training other people and going around the world, being gone for a week or two in Russia or Australia or Japan or whatever, there was a good support network of people who were like-minded, who had ecological values. And it was a low-cost place to live, because we had physically built our own house with our own labor and a lot of recycled materials. So we didn't have a mortgage hanging over our head. So we could take risks and do things like IOIA, we didn't get paid the first six years at all running that organization. And then when we finally did, it was \$1,000 a month, or \$12,000 a year that we were getting paid during the last two years. But we lived very frugally, but yet full of joy. It was a good place to be able to pursue some of our dreams and our values. (27:29)

AA: Do you feel like living in that kind of cooperative arrangement made it easier for you with succession planning, to get someone else to take over the farm, or not necessarily?

JR: Not at all, actually. There's a challenge there, because for someone to purchase either our farm operation or our house, they have to become members of Wiscoy. And there's a membership process, where you have to get to know people. We operate by consensus, so everyone has to agree on this new person becoming a member. And people have to like this lifestyle, they have to value rural living, because it's about twelve miles away from the nearest town. And value community, value having other people involved in your life and you in theirs. So it's not like an individual farm or house that we could just put on the open market. So that makes it quite a bit more of a challenge to just find the right people to step in, to transition and pass it on.

In fact, we spent three years training a young woman from Winona who was totally gung-ho, very hard worker. Did great the two years that we were there, and then she took over. We had an agreement signed, we moved to New Hampshire. By that fall, she changed her mind. And so we were here, and all of a sudden all of our plans of transition fell apart. Luckily, there was this other couple, Ben and Natalie, who had visited Wiscoy. They wanted to be part of the

community, but there was no place for them to live and no source of income. So we contacted them and yeah, they were interested. And they moved into our house, that Katie, the other young woman, and her partner Luke, had vacated. Some friends had been kind of keeping an eye on things there, at Wiscoy.

So Ben and Natalie moved there in mid-February of 2021, in the middle of a polar vortex. It was like 15 degrees below zero. But they pulled in with their U-Haul, there were community members there, and they got the whole thing unloaded in like an hour's time. And they were blown away by the level of support and welcome. And then that first year, Joyce and I—I spent two weeks in April, we both spent the entire month of July, and then more time off and on, back and forth, mentoring them, training them about how to manage. All they had done is a big garden and some home canning. So all of a sudden they're in charge of a five-acre fruit farm. Totally new to them. Didn't have experience with organic, with organic certification, filling out the paperwork, there were so many things to learn. And they'd never heated with wood before.

But they loved it. They really have embraced the business, as well as the lifestyle and the community. So we're just really lucky. They've got a little girl who's five years old now, but she loves being a fruit farmer, she loves the attention she gets at Wiscoy. She's the youngest kid around. There's been a lot of kids that have grown up there, but there aren't a lot of kids there now, because we only have three young couples who are in their thirties now. And then the other members are more in their sixties, seventies, so there's kind of two generations carrying the load there now. One senior in high school and the five-year-old. So not a lot of kids.

But yeah, on the one hand they have more of a support network and a lower cost of living than paying a mortgage, because we've been very reasonable, because we want them to be successful. But on the other, it takes the right type of people. And it's not just something you can do on the open market, you sign the papers and walk away. So we haven't gone there this year to help them out at all. And they've been quite successful. So we're feeling really good about how it's going. We occasionally get phone calls or text messages asking us questions, but that's about it. (32:22)

AA: So can you tell me how you got interested in organic inspection, and when you started doing that?

JR: There is a group called the Land Stewardship Project. Ron Kroese was the originator of Land Stewardship Project. And they focused on southeast Minnesota. I don't know exactly how, but I'd gone to some meetings and gotten involved and on the steering committee of Land Stewardship Project there in southeast Minnesota. And one of his sayings was, "Stop treating the soil like dirt," I remember. And the Organic Growers and Buyers Association, which was one of the first certification bodies in the country, based in Minnesota, wanted someone from Land Stewardship Project to serve on their board. And I wasn't available because we were building a house and farming, but Joyce, my wife, got on the OGBA board. And being on the board, she became aware that they were looking for organic inspectors. And there was a training coming up. So she and I both took this training, which basically was just a day of going out to a farm with an inspector, and he would tell us what he was doing and just talk about it. That was it. One day of exposure. And then next thing you knew, I was being asked to do inspections.

And this was at the same time we were organizing our farmers' market, I think '86, '87. I think I did twelve inspections in the first year. And then became aware that there was another group, OCIA, Organic Crop Improvement Association. They also were looking for inspectors,

and I put my name in that and started doing inspections for them. So then I think I did maybe 35 the second year. And it just started to increase in demand, and people liked the work I was doing.

So by 1991 I was asked by the executive directors of both of those certification groups to deliver their training course for them. And that was unbeknownst to each other. And I got back to them and said, "On one condition, and that is that we do one course for both of you. We teach the training, but you teach your paperwork, your standards, and how to be an inspector for your organization." And they agreed, and that was the first time that there had been a joint training by two certifiers anywhere in the US. And the inspectors got together, and in the evening sitting around with popcorn and beer, I remember it was held in Nebraska at a youth leadership training facility, like for FFA. And they had a pool there, they had a volleyball court, and they had kind of a lounge area. And they would make a huge bowl of popcorn and walk away, and turn the facility over to us in the evenings.

And sitting around talking, it's like, "We need our own organization! These certifiers aren't teaching us all we need to know. We need to be able to develop our professional skills." And we all agreed, but who's going to lead it? And this late friend of mine, Phil Hale, inspector from Ohio who's also an artist and fairly outspoken, says, "Riddle looks like a Kennedy, I think he ought to do it!" And I was like, "Well, how do you argue with that? No I don't!" So that's how accidental, random I got drafted into it, heading up the steering committee to form IOIA.

That was in January, it was deep winter. So we spent that year, in our spare time. We had elected a steering committee. We drafted bylaws, articles of incorporation, a slate of nominees. And then in October that year, at the Natural Products Expo in Baltimore, Maryland, inspectors met from around the country. We had a wide-open invitation. And that's when we officially formed and elected our first board of directors, and I was like the president and served in that capacity for five years. I'm the type of person who likes to make myself obsolete. I don't want any organization to be dependent on me. If it's going to survive, it needs to have good rules, the people need to be inspired and engaged, and you need to be able to know when to let go. And so we got someone else to stand for president, Rick Martinez from Florida.

And then we just ran the office for three years. So I was training manager. And that's when we started getting paid. And then after eight years of running the whole show we handed it off to Margaret Stoles, of Montana. And she's still the executive director. When I've talked with her, she doesn't really have an exit strategy. To me, that's a critical thing. (38:52)

AA: So what was it like inspecting organic farms in the '80s? What kinds of things did you see?

JR: Well, the standards were very short that OGBA and OCIA had. And there was no organic system plan as we think of it now. There would be an application form, fairly brief. And really, the inspectors were sent out basically with a blank sheet of paper. You didn't have an inspection report template that you had to follow. There was no training on traceability, or doing mass balance audits, nothing of that like there is now.

And one of your questions asked about the influence of the back-to-the-land and the hippie element. And that certainly was there. And that was definitely the case with Organic Valley. I was their first inspector. And the leadership and the organizers were the back-to-the-land movement. But it really only became successful when it was the well-established dairy farmers who sat on the school boards, who were involved in the churches, who were very involved and well-known in their communities, who really made it a success.

I traveled around from North Dakota to Michigan, to Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin. Upper north central region, basically, inspecting primarily. And you would have your back-to-the-landers. But a lot of them were small-scale, local markets. The real backbone, as I saw it, were what I call the salt-of-the-earth Christians. People who really just saw this organic farming as how God intended us to steward the land, to take care of the creation. And they weren't evangelical. They were just, "This is my values. I'm not going to force them on you, but this is how I live, and this is what's right." And they're pillars of their communities, too. So I saw that in every one of those states that I mentioned. That is the largest single demographic, I would say.

But then another very significant would be the libertarians, the anti-government, very suspicious, involved in gun rights and paramilitary. It wasn't anywhere near the influence as the salt-of-the-earth Christians, but it was a significant part of the organic crowd. In fact—well, this is oral history, so if I tell it, I'm telling it—I inspected Terry Nichols's brother, Jim Nichols, his organic farm there in Michigan. You know, the Oklahoma City bomber. And the same brother is in the Michael Moore film, *Bowling for Columbine*. And so you get a sense. He's just very suspicious. Guns all over the place. It was uncomfortable. And this was before the Oklahoma City bombing or anything, I had no idea yet. I had another guy in Illinois, I pulled up in his yard, there's a howitzer sitting in the middle of the yard. He was doing paramilitary trainings on his organic farm. And other people up in North Dakota showed me their guns and kind of threatened me. So there is that element out there. They don't like chemical companies. They don't like biotech. They don't want insurance companies coming on their farm.

But then, there is a very heart-felt, genuine back-to-the-land segment which is so refreshing when you get the people who are just gentle in their approach and very tolerant and welcoming. Another thing that was very different back then was that, as inspector, I would line up who I was going to stay with of the farmers I was inspecting. That was part of making your arrangements and working with the coordinator. "These people, yeah, you can stay there, you'll be doing three in their neighborhood." So you'd have meals with the farmers. And that's, certainly since the law has taken effect, there's certainly more of a third-party distant relationship. We used to be able to share much more advice, "Oh, have you heard of such-in-such," sort of tips on how to improve their operations. And now it's much more of a cold-hearted, objective, "Fill out the form, tell me what's going on, let's check the numbers, let's mark the boundaries, look at the equipment." That's how we train people. You don't stay at people's places. You might have a cup of coffee if they offer. Try to avoid any discussion of religion and politics, and just stay focused on the job at hand. And make sure you check the records, because at least two-thirds of the job is checking records now.

AA: Would you say, or do you know at all, if those demographics are similar today that you were talking about, those three different groups? Do you think the proportions are similar, or has it changed?

JR: Well, there's a whole other one. And that's the people with dollar signs in their eyes. They see that organic makes money. And they really don't embrace the philosophy or the values. They just see that it has a high profit potential. And we certainly saw that, especially when organic soybeans were at record high prices, the demand for export to Japan was driving the American organic soy market. And a lot of farmers jumped in to cash in. Took land out of CRP that would technically qualify, but they weren't really implementing a full organic rotation and organic

management system. So I'd say that has grown. That has grown. But then also the kind of urban agriculture, much more diverse populations. That has grown. So they kind of fill in where the back-to-the-landers were. And you get a lot of the new young farmers who are kind of similar to the back-to-the-landers. They're wanting to do renewable energy. They're wanting to really live lightly on the earth. So they're kind of the new back-to-the-landers. But there's still quite a few of the old hippies out here in the woods and in the organic world. But there's a whole lot more just driven by dollar signs. (47:20)

AA: Do you want to say anything about some of those international trainings that you did?

JR: Yeah. We always had a lot of inspector members from Canada. So it started off international to begin with. So that was the first country outside of the US where we did trainings in various parts of Canada. And then we had people coming from Mexico and Costa Rica that wanted trainings in Latin America. And I really took a very firm position there that if we're going to do trainings in Latin America, it's so important that all of our materials be translated into Spanish and we have local trainers. We really focused on training the trainers first so that the trainings can be delivered in Spanish, with Spanish materials, before we just come in as neocolonialists and just expect everybody to follow our English or something. And we've been very successful with that, especially with Costa Rica, actually. We have people in Costa Rica that took the lead and still are involved in organic trainings in Latin America. So that I think was a really successful strategic move on our part, just showing respect.

And we got people attending from Japan and Australia, and they wanted trainings there. And we did the same thing, we got the materials translated into Japanese and developed a pool of trainers in Japan. I think I made eight trips to Japan that largely were both delivering training, but also training the trainers in the process. And they have in Japan an organic inspector's association, so they have their own body of IOIA there.

In Australia they pretty much speak English, but they operate on a different schedule. It is really interesting, the culture. Like when we would do trainings in Latin America, we expected this kind of, "Mañana..." relaxed, laid-back kind of atmosphere. And sure enough, people would stay up at night partying, making music, carrying on, and then slowly the class would get going in the morning. We didn't expect or know that that would be the case in Australia. But totally, people stay up late, playing cards, playing dice, going to music, whatever. And then at the start time of class is when people start arriving. And then they visit. And then we can finally get rolling once there's a critical mass and people are ready.

In Japan, people would be in their seats, mostly wearing suits, ten minutes before class starts. Totally different. Just really anxious to learn, get the job done. Then they would go out and party. But they had a very different approach toward learning. And a much more focus on food safety, much more on what inputs were being used. Where Australia's much more natural systems and ecology-minded. So some different motivators there. But in all these instances we found local organic farms for us to visit where we could do practice inspections and writing reports and discussing our observations and all that kind of stuff.

I had no vision that getting involved as an inspector and then organizing this organization would lead to international travel. And the one thing that I've consistently seen is just how open people are in the organic community, in the genuine organic sphere, not the dollar sign so much, but the people who are rooted in the land, just how much joy they are willing to, they have in their lives that they share. Even though they may not be materially wealthy or anything, there's

still a richness there. And it's just been wonderful to be a part of that. Very rewarding. And not really part of a plan, it just—"Should we go to Russia?" "Well, I suppose." That was the most challenging trip, there. Every day I just felt glad to be alive, for a lot of reasons. We did a training there in 1994, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. And yeah. Cars would be stopped for no apparent reason and just papers checked right and left. It just was a lot of dysfunction and danger. (53:25)

AA: So can you tell me more about your perspective on the process of developing the USDA organic standards?

JR: So yeah, by the late 1980s there were 30 states that had passed state laws. There were at least that many farmer-run certification bodies that had developed standards and were issuing certificates. And none of them were the same. Like in Minnesota, land had to be, the transition period is three years. But in California it was only one year. So we had product coming in from California that didn't really meet Minnesota state law or the standards that were operating. It was like, "No, that's California organic. It's like almost organic, but it's not really." And so there were just these differences. And I remember testifying at a field hearing of the US House Agriculture Committee about the 1990 Farm Bill, and testifying in support of passing an organic law. And it didn't come from the Agriculture Committee. The Organic Foods Production Act was introduced from the floor, and passed, and amended to the 1990 Farm Bill. But it didn't come from USDA, it didn't come from the agricultural committees. So part of that, there's always been a resentment. It's always been a threat, because it didn't come from within. It wasn't them writing this law, it was imposed on them by Senator Patrick Leahy and Representative Peter DeFazio of Oregon, and Leahy from Vermont.

And the USDA really dragged their feet. The law requires the creation of the National Organic Standards Board. And it was three years before it was even appointed, the first board. And then they held hearings around the country. I remember I spoke at one of the first hearings in Minneapolis. And came up with a series of recommendations based on existing state laws and existing standards and international, IFOAM, the International Federation of Organic Movements, their basic standards, and on public input. And that's all in the Green Book, it's called, if you ever talk to Michael Sligh you'll learn all about that. But it's a collection of all the NOSB's recommendations. So that came out in 1995.

Well then, in 1997, December 21, the first proposed rule was issued. And it didn't look recognizable as an organic standard. It ignored the NOSB's recommendations. It didn't comply with any, even California, standards! When that came out, I was scheduled to travel to Japan in early January. This proposed rule came out before Christmas. And the whole other thing that's been in the background here is that early work we did developing IOIA, developing the international trainings, was done before the internet. We didn't have email. It was a big deal when Joyce and I got a fax machine, because then we could communicate with people in Australia and Japan, and our phone would ring at 4:00 in the morning or whenever, and it would be a fax. And that really opened up doors. Well, by 1997, there now was the internet, and there was the ability to submit electronic comments to USDA.

And I spent that entire Christmas/New Year's holiday just pouring through this proposed rule, line by line. I took it apart, and where I saw problems, I had a paragraph explaining what the problem was, and then a paragraph with replacement language drawn from the NOSB recommendations and other existing standards and state laws. And I did this just because I was

going to Japan and I felt pressured. I was like, “Now’s my chance!” And so I submitted those before I left and went to Japan. And during that trip I had a big public speech I gave. I met with the vice minister of agriculture in Japan, as well as taught the inspector training course. I had been working with MAFF, their Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, kind of behind the scenes on those things. But they were very curious about what the USDA was doing and why they were ignoring the public and why they had issued standards that didn’t comply. There was just a lot of curiosity on that trip.

But anyway, my comments did get widely circulated in the organic community and kind of became the substitute framework of, “Here’s what we want.” There were a whole lot of postcard comments. There were 275,000 negative comments. It set a new record for any proposed rule USDA had issued. And they really focused on what they called the “Big Three”—genetic engineering, sewage sludge, and irradiation. But there were a lot of other bad things. Like they would have allowed the use of antibiotics for organic livestock. They would have allowed the feeding of slaughter byproducts, which is related to the whole Mad Cow Disease. Historically, both of those things were prohibited. It didn’t require 100 percent organic feed for livestock. Just one thing after another. You could go down the line. And then they did an extension on comments. I didn’t need to have been so hurried. But at the same time, that can bring discipline and focus. And that’s what happened.

So I think the Secretary, Glickman, was so embarrassed and withdrew, actually withdrew that first proposed rule. Changed people in charge, brought in new staff people. A guy from Texas, who actually ran the state’s organic certification program. Lots of others. And went back and came up with a second proposed rule.

But in the meantime, after seeing how bad that first proposed rule was, the organic community was like, “Can we even trust the USDA? Are they a reliable partner? What if it all falls apart? We need a Plan B.” And that’s where I and Emily Brown Rosen from New Jersey and Lynn Coody from Oregon were hired to write the American Organic Standards. And in that writing process, there were several rounds of public comment, where we took comments from farmers and businesses, OTA members. And we also really incorporated the recommendations of the NOSB and came up with—we followed the structural model of the first proposed rule. So it was written as an organic regulation. So that got a lot of attention. We held a number of listening sessions, at organic products expo, at organic conferences, and this and that. And USDA attended them. They were paying attention. And for them it was a huge relief, in a way. “You guys figure out what you want, and you tell us the rest and help us do our job to get you a better rule.” And so that’s exactly what happened. The AOS is actually really similar to the organic regulation that actually came out.

There was a second proposed rule, and I was contracted by OTA to pilot their comments on that. There was a little bit here and there, but it was recognizable as an organic rule. And it didn’t take them long to turn it into the final rule that we have today.

But the one thing that I regret, deeply, is we did not, in any of this, in any of my comments, envision how it could be undermined by the hydroponic sector. And we did not specifically prohibit soilless hydroponic systems from being certified as organic. It just never crossed my mind. Organic has always been about soil health. That’s the word organic, is organic matter. It’s all about our relationship to the land. It’s not just not using prohibited materials. We always said, “You cannot be organic by neglect.” You cannot be organic just by switching recipes. You have to implement soil building crop rotations and actually enhance the biodiversity of the operation.

And now you have massive, huge multinational companies like Driscoll's that are doing everything in a soilless production system where it's either containers filled with sterilized coconut husks, and then all the nutrients are delivered through an intravenous drip system. There's no natural cycling of nutrients, as the definition of organic production says. And there's no relationship to the natural environment. It's happening on a huge level, ground that's covered with plastic, and they put those pots on there filled with coconut hulls. And the drip feeding, and magically you have organic blueberries, raspberries and blackberries. And that was never the vision, that was never part of the standards. It's still not part of the standards, but it's not explicitly prohibited. And that's what they're going on. Even though there aren't any standards for how it should be done, they just don't use prohibited materials, therefore they can be certified organic. And yeah. It's really upsetting to me, as you can tell. It undermines everything we've worked for, basically. Consumers are totally being fooled. They think they're buying organic products. And real farmers are being harmed by having to compete with these fake products that both carry the same USDA logo, even though they're produced totally differently.

AA: So what crops is that most a problem with?

JR: Those berries—blueberries, blackberries, raspberries. And then tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, leafy greens, and herbs.

AA: Is that mostly from California, or from other places also?

JR: Well, it's mostly being certified out of California, but a lot of the production's in Mexico, in Belize, in Peru, in the Netherlands, and in Canada. And in all of those countries, those products could not be sold as organic within their own borders. But yet they can be dumped on the US market carrying the USDA organic logo. (1:06:52)

AA: So what is your perspective on why the first USDA standard so did not consider any of the existing certification standards?

JR: I think it was business as usual in the USDA. They typically haven't had to listen to advisory boards. They've ignored them. So they didn't take seriously the recommendations from the NOSB. And they totally underestimated the organic community's organizational skills and the motivations of both organic farmers and shoppers to protecting the organic claim and the meaning of organic. They totally--I know that for a fact--totally underestimated. They did not expect anywhere near, they'd never had public comments like that before. They just thought they could do what they wanted. And the reality of USDA, and it carries on to this day, it operates as a revolving door between the agriculture biotech industry and government regulators. So people are working for whatever their name is now, Bayer, Monsanto, one year, and then they're in USDA regulating the very industry that they just came from and they're going to go back to. That is the reality at USDA.

But then you combine that with kind of a fear of always looking over their shoulder at what the conventional sector is going to say. And looking at the chain of command, and it's always, the leadership is always from that conventional sector, people who were trained, their education was paid for by that sector. That's where their bread and butter is. Their social networks, everything. So there's this rogue revolutionary system that is inherently a threat to

everything they're doing—using the chemicals, genetic engineering. We reject both those things. And they're totally dependent on that. Their entire system of overproduction is based on exploitation of natural resources and pollution of water. Extraction of water. Wasting water. And here we're coming from foundational conservation mode, of conserving natural resources and avoiding toxins, both on the land, in the water, and in the food itself. So we're rejecting, we're questioning their system of production at the most fundamental level.

And presenting an alternative. We're not just complaining. We're saying, "There's a different way! And the market wants it." And they do want it. But now, with hydroponic they've found a way to undermine it from within. So it's those same voices now that are pushing these enclosed production systems and these controlled systems where they can control all the nutrients, control the lighting. There's not soil to worry about, and recycling nutrients naturally. And they don't have to bother with crop rotations. So the conventional model has now been morphed into this hydroponics. So they get it both ways. They get to maximize the profit and enter this exclusive market while basically following the same old pathways of conventional control, the image of control of nature. (1:11:25)

AA: So then you mentioned that you served on the NOSB for a few years. When was that?

JR: Yeah. I was actually teaching an organic inspector training course in Helsinki, Finland, where the government is the certifier, but they really see themselves as public servants and are genuinely interested in protecting natural resources. I was there teaching them about processing inspections, because they were just adding in processing. They had organic farms and livestock previously. And I was there in January of 2001. And it was Bill Clinton's last day in office and my host came to me. He was with the government, Department of State I think it was. He contacted me to let me know that I had been appointed to the National Organic Standards Board. But it's a five-year term by law. You can only serve one term. And that entire five-year appointment was to the George W. Bush USDA, which was not organic friendly.

But it was at the time, the rule had already been finalized, during Clinton. And it was under an 18-month implementation period until October 2002. And so here was this USDA inheriting a train that was running pretty well on the tracks. And the bureaucrats that were under that administration, I remember the guy that was the head of the organic program had no background in organic agriculture whatsoever. And he told me right to my face, "My idea of a good meal is a Big Mac and a Diet Coke." Okay. And he's in charge of the organic program. And that's his attitude. And that was reflected in his behavior. He actually came to my house. There was an NOSB meeting in La Crosse, Wisconsin. And after the meeting I hosted a picnic at our place. And this guy came, Richard Matthews. And I'm showing him my house, and he says, "You mean this is where all those comments came from?" You know, on the first proposal. He says, "Anybody got a match?" That's his attitude. Burn down my house.

So that's what we were dealing with. But the board really, by far, the majority of the board, 15 members, stood in support of true organic values, organic practices. And we were organized. And we worked well together. And the USDA NOP tried to pull some fast ones at times. They issued, at one point, four directives, one of which I remember would have allowed antibiotics, even though the rule said they were prohibited. They were interpreting it as allowing it. And they did this without consultation of the board. All four of these directives just came out of the blue, out of nowhere. And we raised a good fuss. I don't know that boards these days will do that. But we did it. And we held them to account. We spoke out publicly, press, meetings,

conferences, to the point where Secretary, Ann Veneman at that time, USDA Secretary ordered the NOP to withdraw those directives, meet with the board leadership, and start listening to us and working with us. We had a big heated sit-down meeting with Secretary Veneman.

But you know, there's no pay, there's only reimbursement for your travel expenses to attend meetings. But it's a huge undertaking to serve on the NOSB, to take it seriously. You have to read a lot of materials, you have to read all the public comments on various draft notices, you have to work with fellow members to draft proposed rule changes. But also the review of materials. Because the NOSB, under the law, has sole authority to review and recommend to either add or remove something from the National List. And it takes a two-thirds vote. And the Secretary of Agriculture cannot add or remove anything unless the board has made that recommendation. So it's very unique as a government advisory board in that the NOSB has actual statutory authority. And USDA fought that for a long time before they finally agreed, "Yes, this is what the law says." It took the Office of General Counsel, the lawyers, to get involved and say, "No. They have this power. It's not USDA."

So there definitely were some culture clashes. And the staff people, at that time especially, were not highly motivated. It was kind of where you went in USDA for your career to die. It was not seen as a promotion, to be affiliated with the organic program. So we got some fairly challenging people to work with, especially at the program manager level, during those years. And they were not used to working with a motivated, well-organized, volunteer advisory board. In fact, the first meeting I went to, after I got appointed, the previous chair of the board was disorganized. There was no secretary. No one was taking minutes. And so I asked that question, and it was like, "Oh, we haven't elected one." So I was like, "I will serve." So I immediately got onto the executive committee, where I served all five years. I was either executive secretary, vice chair, or chair. And I started taking minutes. It was terrible, because that's not my strength. But I saw a huge need as well as an opening. And I physically took the minutes the first meeting I attended, which was crazy. But then they started assigning a staff person. And then they started actually recording and having transcripts of our meeting. But there was a hole there where there were really no minutes being taken. That's the priority it was for USDA at that time, until we forced them.

So yeah. I was on the board when, October 21, 2002, the regulation went official. It was implemented. The seal could start to be used. And there was a big event at the Whole Foods in Washington, DC. And the Secretary of Ag at that time was Mike Johanns. I remember vividly him being there, all the NOSB members behind him at the podium. He said, "Everything in this store is organic!" And we're like wincing, "No, it's not." He was that amazed. And I would have been, if it was true.

But yeah, there's such a lack of understanding that we found amongst the government bureaucrats, as well as outright hostility, like the Diet Coke/Big Mac comment. And just a revolving door, where people come from a conventional training, from conventional businesses, and now they're the regulators, and it's really hard for them to embrace, for one reason or another, all of the values that are represented by a true organic system. (1:20:23)

AA: Now you mentioned that you were invited to speak at an organic farming conference in Iran in 2014 and 2015. Is there anything you want to say about that?

JR: Well, yeah. I had been with the University of Minnesota as the organic outreach coordinator, and had done quite a few field days, workshops around Minnesota. And I think because of that

there was a university professor in Iran who was looking for someone from the United States. I also had served on the NOSB and was quite involved in policy work. And so I got this invitation by email. And I thought, “Yeah, and it’s just like, my sister-in-law’s lost in Nigeria, too.” I thought, “No, this is just a scam, it’s not for real.” But I cautiously read it and was like, “Hmm, he’s a professor at the university there. He mentioned a couple of other people who have already confirmed and will be speaking,” and I knew them in the organic community worldwide. Nobody from the US, but from Germany and Australia. So I was like, “Huh. I’m going to turn this over.”

By that time we had better leadership at the NOP, USDA, so I contacted the head of the NOP, turned that around, forwarded it to him, and said, “Do you think this is a good idea? What’s your opinion about this?” And he wrote back and it was like skull and crossbones, don’t touch this. But he also turned it over to people at the State Department. They got ahold of me and said, “By all means, do it. You will be protected, you will be treated well. We have various cultural exchanges going on.” I think the US Olympic wrestling team had wrestled the Iran team in Iran, and then the Iranians came here. The Philadelphia Orchestra played in Tehran. The University of California was working with people in Iran to help make buildings more earthquake-proof. There were various cultural and educational exchanges going on. And so they encouraged me to follow up on it.

And so once I had that, then I wrote back and sought more information. And had to jump through quite a few hoops, too. And I definitely wanted our State Department to know I was going, what my itinerary was. So I did that. I arrived there, came in. Tehran is very interesting because about an hour before landing they make an announcement that you will be entering the Islamic Republic of Iran, and all women must wear headscarves. So you see the women in the plane getting themselves ready, putting on headscarves. And I’m the only American that had flown—let’s see, I can’t remember if it was Frankfurt or Amsterdam or Paris—but then to Qatar and then flew from there to Tehran. And when I came up to the customs agent, he looks at my papers, and immediately goes to get his supervisor. He wasn’t going to approve me coming into the country. Three people had to look through my papers and everything, and then finally they approved my entry. And there was a professor waiting for me.

And from then on, it was just an incredible experience both times. People were very welcoming, very open. I got to go to people’s homes as well as, at the conference I found, both conferences, there were government bureaucrats who spoke in the morning to open things up, like the mayor of Tehran. One of the two different vice presidents—they have several vice presidents, including a female that’s kind of Secretary for the Environment—spoke. Both times it was a different female TV personality or newscaster, a woman who was the MC for the day, so she was in charge there. And yeah, a number of female and male speakers.

And something I’d never seen at a conference before was that at the end of the day all of the presenters were brought back up on stage, and the whole audience—there were about 600 people in the audience, and this was held on the 12th floor of the Chamber of Commerce building in downtown Tehran, so it was pretty high profile. But the audience was invited to ask any questions they wanted of any of the panelists. And they would confront them, they would challenge them. It was very wide-ranging. “Why aren’t you doing more to support organic agriculture at the Ministry?” One thing after another. The conference was supposed to end at 6:00 p.m. the first time. People weren’t done asking their questions until 10:00 p.m. People just stayed. And then when they were all done, everybody came up in one huge portrait-style group

photo. I don't know if you have heard of Vandana Shiva from India. She was on the program with me on the second trip, and we got to connect after the conference.

I had requested that we visit organic farms. The first time they took me to the former Shah's palace and to Shiraz, a historic area. They took me to Persepolis, an ancient Persian capital, 500 BC, all these ruins. Just incredible to think about the ancient civilization. But on the second trip I wanted to see some organic farms. And so we visited an incredible pistachio operation where they raised their own beneficial insects and released them, very sophisticated, very science-based. But also a fig operation where the trees are 300 years old—older than the United States, just the trees that have been in continuous production. Pomegranates—there were a lot of varieties of pomegranates with medicinal properties I didn't know about. So that was really special to travel around the country and see both cultural and historic as well as some of the agriculture.

But the one thing that really struck me is, especially from the vice president for the environment—Abtakar, I forget her first name. But she really stressed how organic, just like those salt-of-the-earth Christians in the Midwest, this is how the Creator expects us to treat the creation. So just totally consistent with the Koran, with the teachings of the Koran, in terms of our relationship to Mother Earth. So that was really neat to hear that. And in Japan, I experienced a very similar thing. We would visit Shinto shrines, and a foundational belief in Japan is you're born Shinto, which means, essentially, "of the earth." And the Shinto shrines are very humble, always in forests or nature settings where there's no monks or anything. It's a place for meditation, reflection, and to feel your connection to the earth. All of these belief systems, the people that I find who really understand organic, are the people who understood that we are children of the earth. It's inescapable. We are of nature. And I saw that in Iran also. So that was pretty eye-opening. I hadn't expected that. (1:29:53)

AA: Is there anything you want to say about your work with the organic cost-share programs?

JR: Well, a little bit about Minnesota. Minnesota does not have a government-run certification program. But they, for many, many years, have had what is technically called the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force. It's essentially like an NOSB, but getting more for the state. And I served on that a total of 19 years, off and on, during my time in Minnesota. And the Minnesota Department of Agriculture is the only department of ag that I know of that organizes the state's annual organic farming conference, which is held in January in St. Cloud, Minnesota. North of the Twin Cities. And it draws about 600 people. It has an excellent trade show, really cool workshops, keynotes, etc. And I've been involved with that conference and did various workshops, did keynote, did booths when I was at the University of Minnesota, etc.

This was 1997 when it first started, and I was working both as an inspector and then running IOIA. I was invited to a meeting of the task force of Minnesota, where the state senator—who has since passed away—Janet Johnson, wanted to increase the number of organic farms in Minnesota. And I had worked as an inspector, so I heard a lot of farmers complain about the certification fees. I've also been involved in various cost-share programs, we put in some catch ponds, we'd done some tree plantings at the Wiscoy Land Co-op, with cost-share money. And so I came up with the idea, why couldn't there be a cost-share program to help reimburse a portion of certification fees? And Senator Johnson liked the idea. She put a staff person on it to work with me to develop legislation. She got co-sponsors.

It was a Democratic-controlled Senate, and the Republicans controlled the House. I testified on behalf of the bill in both the House and Senate. Really pitched it as regulatory relief to the Republicans in the House. The farmers are doing everything to take care of the land, prevent erosion, protect water quality, and they're having to pay annually to show they're doing this! Why don't we help them out? And to the Senate we pitched it as economic development, because General Mills had just come out with a Sunrise organic cereal. We passed around cereal, these cherry tomatoes that we had grown. And it passed overwhelmingly as part of a budget bill, \$35,000 appropriation. They paid farmers \$200, two-thirds of the cost of certification.

Now, our governor was the independent, the former wrestler, Jesse Ventura, and he went through the budget bill and did line item vetoes. Things he didn't like, he stamped with a rubber pig stamp. And the cost-share didn't get the pig, it survived, and it became the first in the nation. And I had friends in North Carolina, and Vermont, and Iowa, all of whom followed suit and got state cost-share programs. It was growing, and in 2002 I worked with Senator Paul Wellstone, who was a good friend of mine. In 1988 we had been roommates together at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta for Jesse Jackson, before he was US Senator. So Paul and I went way back. It was quite a loss to lose him. But we got the cost-share into the 2002 Farm Bill, where it's stayed ever since. It currently pays 75 percent certification costs, up to \$750 per farm. But now certification has gotten more expensive than that, and even that's not enough. So we're asking for it to be renewed, but also modernized and updated in the current Farm Bill. We'll see what happens. (1:35:03)

AA: So how involved have you been with organic farming organizations over the years?

JR: Yeah, a couple. It started off with that relationship with the Land Stewardship Project, but they never really have embraced organic. They don't want to offend Minnesotans especially, so they are supporters but they don't use that word. So I did it as redirecting my energy, because to be organic has meaning. All these other phrases—sustainable, renewable, natural, regenerative—when they're well applied, they are good, but they're so open to interpretation and corruption. And that's exactly what happens. But I saw that organic had a chance to have meaning. So I got more involved with MOSES, the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service. I was at their first conference when there were 90 people, and there were numerous conferences in later years where there were over 3000 people. And did all kinds of roles in that organization, especially at the conference, but also hosting field days at times. They would always do a preconference day-long workshop called Organic University. I did workshops on organic certification, on blue fruit farming, at Organic University, and then numerous workshops during the conference. I did the keynote for that conference, keynote for Minnesota's conference.

I've also, for twelve years in a row, spoke at North and South Carolina at the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association's annual conference. And they do embrace organic. They would often do a pre-conference, day-long workshop for farmers wanting to get certified, on how to fill out your paperwork, keep your records, what do the standards mean, stuff like that. And then spoke at the conference, did a keynote there one year. I've spoken at a lot of different organic farming conferences around the country—around the world, actually.

There's always been a need for an organization to represent organic farmers at the national level. And I've been part of the National Organic Coalition as an advisor and have been on the board of Beyond Pesticides and worked with that group. But it's still, it's a coalition. So there was effort underway to form what's now the Organic Farmers Association. I got involved

right away, and I chaired the steering committee for one year that drafted the bylaws and came up with the whole organizational structure. But I made it clear that I was in the process of retiring from farming, because that was during the time when we were getting ready to leave Wiscoy, move to New Hampshire. But I gave a year to help that organization get started. We're still members, but I'm not on the board or policy committee, because it's really for active organic farmers. But very supportive. And now that we're in New Hampshire we've gotten involved in NOFA-New Hampshire, the Northeast Organic Farmers Association, the farming association out here. Working with other groups, like MOFGA in Maine and NOFA-Vermont and some other regional policy stuff (1:39:04)

AA: So you mentioned that you worked for the University of Minnesota as an organic outreach coordinator. Can you tell me more about that?

JR: Yeah. When my term on the USDA was coming to an end, I really had treated that as my fulltime job, my number one priority during those five years even though it paid nothing. But I just knew that somebody had to. You had to take it seriously, be prepared, and really make things happen. So when that was coming to an end, I was approached by the director of the Southwest Research and Outreach Center of the University of Minnesota, where they had one hundred twenty (120) acres certified organic for quite a number of years at their research farm. And she wanted to add two positions, both half-time, one organic research coordinator and the other one organic outreach coordinator.

And so I took that position and was able to work from my home. Because the research and outreach center where the organic land was was a four-hour drive from me. I would go there once every couple months, and I organized the annual organic field day that they hosted, and other winter workshops at the center. But primarily worked from home and did a lot of various outreach, answered questions, posted information, took phone calls, wrote some publications like how to protect from GMO contamination. I met with faculty, there was a student organic farm on the St. Paul campus, which is the agricultural campus of the land grant. And then they have various organic research. They have the nation's largest certified organic dairy herd at a different research and outreach center, at Morris, Minnesota. So I worked with faculty there, worked with field days that they would put on.

And it was very interesting because, on the one hand, on campus they have the Cargill Center for Genomics, so biotech front and center at the university. But at the same time, they have I think more certified organic research land than any other land grant in the country. And they have the largest certified organic dairy herd. So they're really trying to go both ways. They've got a very active student organic farm, where they do market gardening right there in St. Paul. So there's enough faculty and students that are interested and supportive, but at the same time, there's this train that's on the tracks and chugging away, supporting biotech and chemical agriculture. There's certainly no turning or derailing that train. (1:42:27)

AA: Have you encountered many anti-organic attitudes at the University of Minnesota?

JR: Yeah, but not to the point of undermining or detriment to the organic portfolio that I personally encountered. But yeah, there were definitely people who would directly challenge things, and skepticism. Or I would be invited as kind of the token organic person to speak to some class or something, and you could tell that a lot of the students had been pretty well

brainwashed that, oh, this is a nice idea but it doesn't really work. That would come through. But nothing like—I mean, I spoke at Iowa State, and there was outright hostility. And they've got organic land, too, and the faculty Kathleen Delate. But she's just always struggling. And, in fact, she organizes the state's annual organic conference, but they hold it in Iowa City at the University of Iowa instead of at her own Iowa State University campus. So there's some real tension there. (1:43:46)

AA: So what is your philosophy of organic farming?

JR: Well, it's working with nature. Basically, it's understanding ecosystems, and then producing food in harmony with those ecosystems to the maximum extent possible. Enhancing biological diversity, recycling nutrients through composting and crop rotations, and protecting both water quality and water quantity, and producing fiber and healthy food that's not full of toxins and yet has nutrient density from healthy soils that will sustain populations into the future. Civilizations collapse when they ignore soil health. You look at history, that's just the reality. Our best way to preserve human life on Planet Earth is to protect or build soil.

AA: Do your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about organic farming?

JR: Well, yes. I do believe that I am a child of the earth. I am a natural being. So my survival depends on a healthy planet, number one. And I take inspiration from nature. I take solace. I get my own health—mental health, physical, spiritual health. I'm richer when I spend time working with soil or taking a walk in the woods. And I've done that since I was a child. I went to church, but I just felt like it was going through the motions, and it was interesting. But where I felt spiritually sacred was in the woods. That's where I felt a sense of belonging, of enlightenment, of just, I think it's really important to relax and be, and learn from nature. And when you farm, you really have to listen and learn. What is nature telling you? How can you improve? And then if you keep records, you know what you did wrong, you know what worked, you know what's right. And that's where certification helps impose some discipline, because you keep records and you can improve how you relate to the earth.

AA: Is there any person or publication that has strongly influenced your philosophy?

JR: Well, certainly my mother, I would say, and just her gentle—and she had a sense of wonder. Just a joy that was evident from relating to nature. She wasn't New Age, she wasn't like that at all. It was just her core. So that would certainly be the top influence. But when it comes to the practicalities of how to be a successful organic vegetable farmer, the writings of Eliot Coleman. But for inspiration and enlightenment, I certainly was influenced by both Rachel Carson and the writings of John Muir. But probably the most by Aldo Leopold, the land ethic, and just helping understand ecology, ecological systems. (1:47:52)

AA: So do you think there was a connection between organic farming—and you mentioned a little about the back-to-the-land—what about the environmental movement and other social and political movements?

JR: Oh, surely. Yeah. I think I already covered a lot of the leaders, the people involved in policy work. In organizing Organic Valley, for instance, or Stonyfield, or CCOF, the Organic Farming Research Foundation. Deadheads. You know, people who were looking for a different way of relating to the earth and relating to each other and didn't buy into the conventional silver bullet-chemicals-type system. But rather took those values and turned them into a business. So yeah, a lot of the organizers really have come from the back-to-the-land movement that saw the need for organic standards, for getting these things down in writing, and then finding ways to implement and enforce them, I would definitely say that a lot of the leaders in that part of the organic movement had strong roots in the back-to-the-land movement. But you see a crossover certainly with the GMO labeling issues. That was an issue I got very involved in, and a lot of energy went into that. But a total crossover with renewable energy. So many organic farmers having solar, wind generators, doing things differently, being leaders in those areas while also leading in organic.

AA: So I've interviewed some other people who talked about, especially during the '80s and '90s, how much synergy there was between what you were talking about, those different elements, the hippie back-to-the-landers and the Christian farmers, and how they were able to work together to form a lot of these organizations. Have you seen that similar kind of cooperation?

JR: Oh, yeah. For sure. And then even to the Plain Community, the Amish and Mennonites. They're very suspicious of government or any kind of interference or having to answer to someone beyond their religious beliefs, but yet they see the value of organic certification and the organic market, and they have been at those meetings side-by-side with the salt-of-the-earth Christians I mentioned, and the hippie back-to-the-landers, and they're all finding a common language in organic.

AA: Are the Plain Community a significant proportion of organic farmers in the areas you were inspecting?

JR: In parts of Wisconsin, yes. And very much so in Ohio and Pennsylvania. (1:51:15)

AA: So you were talking a little bit about the hydroponics and how that's your biggest concern about the current USDA standards. What is your opinion about Real Organic and regenerative trying to have alternative standards?

JR: Well, I really appreciate the Real Organic Project and the work they've done to shine a light onto this systemic fraud the USDA is allowing to happen. With no rules, they have nothing to stand on whatsoever. The NOSB has never supported it, never made a recommendation for what the rules should be for hydroponic to get certified. And Real Organic hasn't just walked away. They've kept that pressure on and provided no-cost certification that people can then use the ROP seal and identify themselves as real. So I think that's been a very valuable contribution.

Now regenerative organic certification that Rodale has put together, I think is quite admirable. I don't know what the market is. I don't know how many farms—certainly nothing like the thousand that are in the ROP system now. But just that word “regenerative,” it has no legal meaning. And you see Monsanto and the biotech industry using it. They have shaped it to

be precision farming, which just means using chemicals wisely, but using chemicals. It's a total chemical dependency-type system, and yet they're framing it as regenerative because it uses cover crops. It destroys stuff with chemicals and you don't till the soil because you're planting in a dead soil.

So I really struggle. These, especially young people are driven to these, "Organic is old, it's lost its meaning, it's been corrupted." And yes, there are real problems. But you embrace permaculture, you embrace sustainable, you embrace regenerative, and none of these have meanings. You can't challenge them in court. You can't say, "No, USDA is off-base, and they need to disallow what they're currently allowing with the rules." These other phrases are unprotected. So it's frustrating to me that especially young people devalue, they don't understand the amount of effort, the amount of sacrifice that people have put in—that's no reason to embrace it—but they don't embrace the meaning of having a legally protected claim. Which I think has real value. And we just need to be aggressive, make sure that it is enforced. I certainly haven't turned my back on it. I'm teaching a course just in a couple weeks for Vermont State University on the organic regulations and teaching the inspectors exactly what it does. And we'll talk about how it's being abused. But here's what it actually means, according to both the law and the rule. (1:54:54)

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

JR: Well, it goes back to J. I. Rodale, the concepts from the 1940s of building soil health. Healthy soil equals healthy plants, healthy animals, healthy people, and a healthy planet. Just to me, that's golden. It's right up there with the Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If we want to survive on earth as humans—you know, the earth will survive—but if humans want to continue to survive, we've got to get serious about taking care of soil health. Because we can sequester carbon in a massive scale using organic methods. But not using hydroponic being labeled as organic; that's just the opposite. That does nothing to sequester carbon. Or enhance biological activity, biodiversity. So I think understanding the roots and holding ourselves to those roots, because those roots are deep. And they work. They simply work. They produce abundant, healthy food, free of toxins, while protecting the ecosystem and natural cycles. So I think the more people can understand and respect that deep history, the more they can value what the true meaning of organic is and can help defend it going forward.

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

JR: I don't think so. I think we've covered it.

AA: All right, well thank you very much! (1:57:07)