

Steven Pincus, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

December 2, 2022

SP = Steven Pincus

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is Anneliese Abbott, and this is December 2, 2022, and I'm doing an oral history interview with

SP: Steven Pincus.

AA: So Steve, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview today! So let's start, why don't you tell me a little about when and where you were born and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

SP: Well, I was born in West Philadelphia and lived in a row house until I was about 13 years old. We had a front lawn about the size of a piece of plywood that we cut with our scissors. And that was about my connection with the land. I loved being outside. I really enjoyed parks, I just always enjoyed that part. But I knew nothing about farming. I never had even set foot on a farm until I moved to Wisconsin when I was in my middle twenties. So I started farming with no background. None at all.

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

SP: After high school I went to college at Penn State. And I was studying physical sciences, basically. I was a physics major, that was my interest. Chemistry was kind of my hobby through my boyhood. And I really learned nothing, or nothing that I could remember about biology or botany or about plants. Organic chemistry was the closest I ever came to actually studying plants. And I did return to college—we can get to this later—when I was in my early forties at UW, and picked up a lot of what I had missed the first time around. (2:01)

AA: So what inspired you to move to Wisconsin?

SP: I was in a situation where I had dropped out of college. I was in college in the sixties, from '64 to '68. And it was a very turbulent time, a lot of antiwar protests. And a lot of other stuff going on. It was really exciting, but I kind of lost my focus on my studies, especially what was needed, studying math and physics. And dropped out of college before graduating. And a friend of mine was a conscientious objector. He was drafted but had conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War. And he was assigned to work as an orderly for a low-level job at University Hospital in Madison. And here we were in Philadelphia together, after leaving college. And I just said, "Hey, can I come along? I've got to get out of here." I just needed a change of scene. Things weren't working out well. So I went to Madison. Madison had a great reputation as a political and cultural hotspot at that time, like it still is. And from there we moved

to Milwaukee. He got transferred; he wasn't really in control of exactly what he was doing. But I went along there. And, when I was in Milwaukee, that's when I started to get involved with food co-ops.

AA: Okay. So tell me more about the food co-ops in Milwaukee that you were involved with.

SP: Sure. It didn't exist at first, but one day—and it would have been, I don't know, let's say 1970—I was just visiting a friend who lived in a house with a bunch of other likeminded people. And there was a meeting, like an organizational meeting going on in that house in the living room for something called a food co-op. I had no image of what that was. So I wandered into the meeting, got very excited, and kind of joined up. And I was in a position where I could throw myself in. I was 22 years old. I was looking for something positive to do. My political activity until then had basically been saying, “No, stop this, don't do this” to the government, and I wanted something that had a positive effect.

And so I was able to take a leadership role, and I quit my day job. I was able to live on very little money at that time. And became an organizer and first manager of what became the Outpost. That was 1970. It wasn't yet called the Outpost. It was a small food co-op called the Kane [?] Street Co-op. We were not into organics as such. I still knew really nothing about that. And I was, it was political. It was really political, more than about food. But people came in. People came into the store and started saying, “Hey, you should get better food in here. You should get whole grains. You should get the good peanut butter.” Something like that. And I started to educate myself and the other people involved.

And when that first co-op, the Kane Street Co-op, folded after about six months, because we were running it—we didn't have enough business experience to keep it together. And again, it was mainly as a political movement or political thing that we were doing. We took a winter off, kind of re-organized, and opened up as the Outpost Natural Food Co-op. Again, a very small store at the beginning. Really shoestring. But we had a mission. We had a vision about food. It wasn't nearly as political. It was more about changing the world by changing what we ate, or what people ate. And that's where it got started. And again, I was in a position to, we had co-managers at that store, the second time around was better organized. (7:01)

AA: Who were some of the other people that helped you start the Outpost?

SP: Well, Michael Stevens, who's now living in San Francisco, was one who was really a key person. He had also, like I did, grown up in a small business family. And he had a lot more, better idea of how to keep it running as a business. Janna Barran [?], she was known as Rainbird after a while, was also living in California and recently passed away. There's another person. And Priscilla Gordon. And a couple other people who really put time into it. And then we were staffed mainly by volunteers, if I remember. I mean, a couple of us got minimal pay, something like \$30 or \$40 a week, and then food from the co-op. So it was really a group effort. And it worked. I mean, it worked out.

AA: So where did you source some of the bulk foods that you had?

SP: Well, we had a walk-in cooler there. We had muscled an old walk-in cooler out of an old butcher shop somewhere not too far from Milwaukee, one of the small towns, and set it up there.

We—I can't remember just what we had. We didn't have the sort of bulk bins that you see right now. We probably, I don't know, I can't remember that detail, I don't know.

AA: So how long did you stay involved there?

SP: Well, that store moved to a bigger place after, I think between two and three years. Just needed more room. It was really doing well, lots of people wanted it. So I was involved for about three years. And kind of left to work on natural foods restaurant that we opened—it was some of the Outpost people and a bunch of new people—that we opened on the edge of downtown Milwaukee. That was called The Fertile Dirt Restaurant. We made black bean burgers and whole grain bread, served lentil stews, you know, the sort of things you'd see in the Moosewood Cookbook at that time.

AA: And how long did you work at the restaurant?

SP: Well, I was there, kind of left the city in '74, '75. It wasn't all that long. I had an opportunity to move out to the Driftless area, Crawford County, onto a friend's farm with some other people. And I took it because I wanted to keep exploring what this meant, what this food thing meant. And also to get out of the city. I was looking for new experiences. And I'd always been a city person; I was totally urban. And Milwaukee was totally urban, still. So it was, I just jumped at the chance to move to the farm. It was really rural. It was a really big change. That was probably in '75. (11:11)

AA: So then how much did you know about farming when you made that move?

SP: About zero. I mean, I barely had—we had actually rented a place the year before. Me and a girlfriend who I later married. Anyway, we had rented a place maybe half an hour north of Milwaukee. So we had grown a garden there. And that was about it. I mean, I literally had hardly even grown a garden when we said, "Hey, let's see if we can do this on a commercial scale. Let's see if we can be farmers, not just gardeners." So I knew almost nothing.

AA: So where did you learn how to farm? What influenced you?

SP: Well, I was around people who knew something. There was community. And there were magazines. Rodale Press had a magazine called *Organic Gardening and Farming* at that time. And *Mother Earth News* was really helpful. They were probably the two biggest sources of written information. There were no conferences, no internet. It was just trial and error, and a lot of error. And trying to learn from other people who had somewhat more experience. I don't mean other farmers, but peers, my peers who probably knew something more, who at least had grown up growing gardens. One thing about Wisconsin, when I moved here from Pennsylvania and started to meet people, I found a really high percentage of people, the folks I met my age, in their twenties, had some connection to a farm. They'd either grown up on a farm themselves, or their grandparents, or their uncle. Somebody. They had a farm that they had spent the summer at regularly, or to visit. Grandpa's farm. So there was a lot of farming in the air in Wisconsin that I had never had contact with before.

AA: Did you interact much with your neighbors?

SP: Somewhat. Once we moved out to Crawford County, we did. I mean, it was a very conservative place. And one reason it became a good place to set up these homesteads was that land was cheap, really cheap compared to now. And there were a lot of very small farms that hadn't at all moved into big farming. And we're talking about the mid-'70s when I got there, so all types of farming were different. But it was like going back decades, it seemed. People were—I mean, there were tractors, people weren't farming with horses for the most part. But it was like taking a step back. I felt like I had to start from the beginning and pull myself up if I really wanted to be a farmer. (15:05)

AA: So what kind of farming methods did you use?

SP: Well, we had a couple tractors, small tractors, old machinery. And we were not organic at that time. We weren't clear even what that meant. But one thing we did which was definitely not organic was we did use commercial fertilizers. I mean, we cleaned barns and we hauled manure and we put it down, but we also supplemented that with some commercial fertilizer. We never really used, we never used an herbicide, we never really hardly—I mean, the only insecticides we ever used were what are considered organically acceptable now. But for fertility we went to commercial bagged fertilizers for a while. For quite a while, actually. The land that we were on at first was borrowed land. There was no chance to really build it up over the years. And I had no capital, I had no money. It's amazing how little money passed through our hands at that time. Even when we, after we left that—and when I say “we,” I mean my wife, my first wife, now named Starlight, but her name then was Carol. Anyway, we were working at this together. And we kind of borrowed or rented in exchange for produce an interesting piece of land for a couple years.

And then we went in with two other families and bought a much larger piece. The other families, one in particular had some money to make a down payment. And that was able to secure it. There was no house there; we just lived in a trailer for five years. A small trailer house. We built a house. And at that time we were trying to build up enough of a business by growing a pretty wide range of produce and taking it mainly into Madison. Mainly to the farmers market, Dane County Farmers Market at that time. And also selling some to Willy Street Co-op, too, as it got going. And we'd sell to other stores, sell to standard grocery stores a little bit, just wherever we could. But there wasn't much of a market for supposedly organic produce. Well, it wasn't organic. It wasn't certifiably organic. And we didn't try. They just wanted good, local, fresh, close to organic, kind of organic produce. And that's what we could provide. (18:24)

AA: So which crops did you grow? Were they all vegetables?

SP: Yeah, it was entirely annual vegetables, which is still 95 percent of what we grow. So it was a fresh start every year. The land we bought with the other families was a ridgetop farm. Most of the crop land was on the ridgetop. And if you know that area, some of those ridgetops are pretty nice, but ours was pretty steep. A very small amount of fairly level ground. It really was not a very good farm for growing vegetables. So that was a hindrance. Plus it was a hundred miles away from our main market in Madison. But that was what we had. It was a great community.

Just great, really terrific. Had a daughter and farmed away, built a house, and stayed there for ten, twelve years or so. Twelve years.

AA: And so then what made you decide to leave that farm, and what did you do then?

SP: Well, I just wasn't very successful there. The issues were, number one, the farm itself was really not well-suited to growing produce. I mean, a good farmer, today I could take that farm and make it productive. But I couldn't invest, I hardly had enough money to put up a deer fence. And it was too far from the markets. And I knew nothing. I was learning, I mean I was getting experience, but I didn't have a framework to fit that experience into. Trial and error, that wasn't good enough. So it just got to the point where I said, "I've reached a limit out here on this farm. I've got to do something different." So what I did was just enroll at UW. I had a whole lot of credits from my previous college time that they accepted, so I was able to join the horticulture program and get a degree in two years of study. And that was great. It was great! It opened up a whole world of botany and plants and what was going on, soils. It was just what I needed. It really started to give me a view of what could be done and how it would work. And when I was in college, I was in my early 40s, so my professors were about my age. Made connections and friends. It was just a great situation.

And when I moved out of Gays Mills—that's where our farm was, right outside of Gays Mills—when I moved out of there to Madison, I figured, "Well, I guess I don't know what I'm going to do with farming. How can I keep farming?" I was in Madison to go to school. But soon after I moved here and got started, I connected with an older guy who had a farm right on the edge of Madison, in Fitchburg. And he had been, he had set it up a few years, maybe ten years before, mainly to keep his grandchildren and family busy, to give them the experience. He had money, he had been a very successful businessman selling animal food products. Started a company called Vita Plus, which is a really big deal in the standard animal feed business around here. Anyway, this farmer, he needed somebody to work the farm. And so I said, "I will rent a few acres from you." And he had better equipment, he had irrigation, and he was fifteen minutes from the capitol square. And the soil was so much better. I mean, the quality of soil was like prairie silt loam, really, really, productive type soils.

So I just kept farming while I was going to school. On a relatively small scale because I didn't have much time. I had to put school up there, too. So it all worked out. And once I was done with the undergrad program, we ended up renting that entire farm. And I expanded the farming and kept expanding until that farm was full. That also was at the same time in the early '90s, I took some graduate studies in plant breeding and genetics. So I learned even more, made more contacts. And that's where I met Beth, my current wife. So that was a really fertile period. Kind of got me out of the doldrums and got things going for me again. (24:26)

AA: So what was the university's attitude toward organic farming at the time you were there?

SP: Oh, it was negative. There were a few professors who were bemusedly interested, and on a one-to-one basis we would talk, but when it came to what they were teaching, there was just nothing. I mean, I wasn't learning about organic farming at school. I was learning science, basic science. And some standard agronomy and horticulture techniques and attitudes. But organics really wasn't visible at UW in 1990, let's say.

AA: Were there other students who were also interested in organic farming?

SP: Yeah, of course. Because they were younger, and they were interested. And again, I think that you learn the principles of soil science, you can figure out how to use those principles on an organic farm. So that's where it was valuable. But it really wasn't until, I don't know, it seems to me that organics at UW didn't get rolling at all till about twenty years ago. I mean they were really lagging. Other places had programs, maybe not substantial through the '90s, but they had something going. You may know more the actual dates and details, people like Erin Silva can fill you in. But there wasn't much happening thirty years ago. (26:35)

AA: So after you graduated, you were on the farm in Fitchburg. And eventually you moved to Evansville. When was that?

SP: Well, we moved here twenty years ago. It was about 2002 when we moved here. Yeah, the Fitchburg farm was good. Things were going well. I liked being really close to town. It was pretty enjoyable being there, farming in the suburbs. But the owners wanted to sell it, and we weren't going to buy it at development-type prices. So it was time to get off it. Plus, we had used up the whole farm. We wanted to keep expanding. And we really wanted a place where we could make investments that would stick, that would pay off in the long run. So after two, three years, we found this farm in Evansville which looked adequate. You have no idea what you're really getting into. But it worked out. And we just moved the operation here. It was a slow start in a sense. The first two or three years production wasn't great. We didn't have the infrastructure set up. It happened. But the soils weren't in condition yet. It was a pretty good farm. Half of the land we bought was Amish owned, or had been Amish owned. So it had been treated okay, it wasn't farmed organically, but they had a lot of animals, a lot of manure, rotations with alfalfa. So it was okay. And then the other half, a contiguous piece that we had bought from another owner, had been in corn for 19 straight years, at least 19 years. So there was some work to do to build it up.

AA: So how did your horticulture degree influence your methods? Did you change your farming methods much after learning more things about soil science?

SP: Yeah, I'm sure I did. It was a whole change of scene, it wasn't just what I learned at school. But I just became aware of things like, "Oh, plants get diseases." And I became aware of microbial life in the soil. So much stuff that I really hadn't actually known before. And so things changed a lot and rapidly. When we were in Fitchburg, we moved from almost organic to certified organic. And that was an important move, and that happened sometime in the mid-'90s. And because of that, then I really had to learn more, make sure that we were handling things properly. But what really made a difference in terms of farming was that materials, organic products, became much more available. Back in the '80s, back in Crawford County, what was organic was, "Oh, manure. Oh, it's manure. Great! We'll put a lot of manure on."

But by the mid-'90s there were commercial products, fertility products. Good compost that became available to us. For example, in Fitchburg, we weren't that close—UW has an experimental farm just west town, [west] of Madison and Middleton. Hundreds of acres. Had a lot of animals. And the manager there at that farm was collecting manure and actually composting it, trying to do a good job. Trying, we were all trying at that time to do things better.

And we could buy that compost. So suddenly I could get good quality compost for a reasonable price, where it wasn't really available before. There was a lot more information around. The organic farming conference had started by the '90s—in fact, I think it started in '88 or so—and the information was just becoming so much more available. I felt like I could understand it.

And even better, having Beth there, we got married, when was that? '98, '99. But she had, she was working on a master's in plant pathology. So she had a really good understanding of a lot of that stuff. She had a sophisticated view. We put our two heads together when we have problems and can figure things out. I became a lot—well, we had better equipment, better machinery, better tools, they were becoming more available to buy. I actually had money to spend because we had a market, we were earning enough. Being right near Madison there in Fitchburg, we had access to some interested people, employees. It wasn't hard finding good folks to work on the farm because we were so close. And at that time, organic was becoming a thing for young people. So that was a great place to be for a while. It really propelled us. (33:04)

AA: So tell me more about marketing your vegetables. How did you market those, first in Fitchburg and from then on?

SP: Marketing. Well, Willy Street Co-op has always been a major customer for us. And they've been great. I mean, the cooperative—yes, it's a cooperative thing. As we got better and more reliable at farming and producing, they could offer more to the customers, and the customers kept coming and built the store, and so on. So we were marketing for most of the '90s just in Madison. About 80 percent of our sales were wholesale direct to the stores. And once Whole Foods opened in Madison, we started selling to them. There were several other small stores. There was the Regent Street Co-op, Greenleaf Co-op, that were in Madison at that time that we sold to. Willy Street at that time, just one store, was our major wholesale customer. So 80 percent wholesale and 20 percent, roughly, at the Dane County Farmers Market. I'd been at the market since '77, very regularly, hardly ever missing one. And yet the market was not that important to our overall sales. It was important, but it was still only 20 percent at the time we left the market.

In the mid-'90s, actually, somewhere around '96 or maybe '97, we started sending a truck to Milwaukee, also. We were growing enough we needed more customers. We started selling to the Outpost Natural Food Co-op, the one that I helped start years before. An expensive trip, but it was worth it. At that time they also just had one store. They now have four. So there's been a lot of growth since the mid-'90s. (35:53)

AA: And so then, when did you start selling some of your produce as a CSA?

SP: Well, that was in, I think 2002 or '03. And again, that took over for the market. We left the market. So we were at this point where we left the farmers market and stopped selling and moved the retail sales to the CSA. And that was great. It was a great move.

AA: So then, what got you interested in the CSA model? Where did you hear about that?

SP: Oh, it was a hot thing in Madison already by that time, by the early 2000s. A group called MACSAC, Madison Area CSA Coalition, had started a few years before. And it had just garnered a lot of publicity. There was articles in the paper. And Madison was just ripe for CSAs.

People were very much into it. And all organic food, again, you know these hotspots that we're talking about, and Madison just has been one. So it was already going. We had piggybacked on what other people had got going. And we knew that we had the ability and skills to grow the wide variety of crops that a good CSA farm could. I had years at the market, I knew what people liked, what they bought a lot of. Linda Halley [?], who had worked with Harmony Valley Farm, had this line that CSA farming is like graduate school-level farming. It really demands more than a beginner can do. That may not be so true now, because there's so much more information. But that was true 25 years ago. So we knew we could make a go of it.

Even by the second year of CSA, we were already bringing in more than double the maximum sales that we had ever sold at the farmers market. So that was a big plus. And it just kept going up from there as we added more and more shares, members. And it relieved me of the effort of going to market every Saturday morning for about half a year, which took a lot of energy and actually was really hindering expanding the farm. It took so much time at the market, because one of our market rules is that one of the farm owners has to be there. We can't just send employees. So I had to be there, or Beth. But we had two kids, so it was me. That wasn't what she wanted to do. Though it was great fun, I needed that energy on the farm. So once the CSA started, it put two of us into the business. Beth, who had not been much involved before the CSA, was able to really put her effort in and create a lot of income for us, a market. And the CSA was great, and I'm sure when you talk to her, she'll say this, because it was a great balance with wholesale. Wholesale you sell what your customers want. And CSA, our customers get what we want to give them. So it was a really nice balance in terms of using up what we had. So things worked out. It's been going great. (40:33)

AA: And that's now about half and half? You sell half CSA and half wholesale?

SP: Yeah, actually these days it's more like 60 percent CSA. We're cutting back on wholesale. We're just cutting back on the farm generally. I'll be 75 years old in three weeks, and I just don't want to and don't need to work with the intensity that I did even a few years ago. We're in good shape. Our kids are—well, our son is still in college, and our daughter's a few years older, out of college, and really on her own—and we have no debts. We paid off the farm pretty quickly, this Evansville farm. So I just can't work as hard. So something has to give. But the CSA is going well. Wholesale, well, whatever we grow we can sell. But we're just growing less than we did at our peak. It was roughly 50/50 for a long time, for many years, and now it's closer to 60 percent CSA and 40 wholesale.

AA: So how many CSA shares do you have now?

SP: We were packing about 480 or 485 boxes a week this past year. And that translates into 800 different households, because some households get a share every week, a box every week, some every other week, and some just six times a season. So there are a lot of households involved.

AA: And is that the highest number of shares you've had, or did it used to be higher?

SP: No, we actually cut it down. The year before was about 530 or so. There was a lot of demand, we were into this COVID situation. We figured we could handle it. And we did, but last year we cut back. Just part of the general cutback, and because of farmer energy. And also

because it seemed like it was just harder to find the employees to make it work. Finding good employees has become harder over the past few years. And we need a lot of people. We were hiring at our peak about 20,000 hours a year of help. That's gone down. (43:27)

AA: Now you mentioned that you were involved in starting the Homegrown Wisconsin farmer marketing cooperative. Could you tell me more about that?

SP: Sure. That started in the late '90s, I'm pretty sure it was '98 we had our first organizational meeting. And the concept was that there were restaurants, specifically restaurants that really liked to buy from local producers. But they of course don't want to be calling eight different farms in order to get what they need. And on the other hand, the farmers don't want to have to go to eight different restaurants, ten different restaurants, twelve, to sell these relatively small orders. So let's consolidate, let's set up a business cooperatively owned by the farmers involved to consolidate the orders, centralize them, and then get them delivered. And the co-op would take a markup, of course, to cover expenses. We hired a manager, driver, delivery person. So it started out pretty small, just in Madison for the first year. But that wasn't too great because, actually, Madison restaurants, many of them that were interested in this already had good connections with farmers. And Madison has been very well served with local produce and even local meats, local everything, for quite a while. And by the late '90s that wasn't really a problem for most of these restaurants. So there wasn't enough business there.

But then one of our members said, "I've got connections in Chicago." So we went to Chicago and talked with the restauranteurs, and they said, "Yeah, we don't have those connections. We want what you have." So we took a leap and started distributing in Chicago. We dropped Madison—we had a couple places in Milwaukee, too, that Tipi Produce has actually delivered to. But it was really a co-op to market Wisconsin organic produce in Chicago to basically high-end restaurants that could afford it. It's not that we were asking so much, the farmers weren't getting any more than they were anywhere else, but the overhead was pretty substantial. For the first couple years while we were still on the farm in Fitchburg, we used my cooler, one of my walk-in coolers, as a gathering point. And farmers would come there, get organized, and it would get shipped out from there. And that was pretty cheap. That was very low overhead for the group.

But then when we moved we were too far away, we were too far out of Madison and out of the way for other farmers. So we had to rent a space in Madison. And one of our farmers became the manager at that time. He was good, really good. But we had the trucking expenses, anyways. It lasted about ten years. And sales at its peak were close to a million dollars in a year. It pretty much covered expenses until things started to go down from that peak. Kind of slid down. We lost some of our big farmers, one farmer in particular just went out of business after flooding out in the Driftless area. He said, "That's it! I'm out."

And also what happened was that the restaurants found more local suppliers. Now, a lot of the produce that flows into Chicago comes from southern Illinois. So they would always beat us, in terms of seasonality. Maybe two, maybe three weeks ahead, they have longer seasons. We found out that the restaurants were not, being organic was not at the top of their list. What they wanted was high quality, maybe some unusual stuff, local, so that they could put the names of the farms on their menu. Being certified organic didn't mean that much to them. And we had taken the step of requiring all our farmers to be certified organic. So that right away put us into a somewhat higher price range. But it was mainly the overhead, running trucks. It worked. And it

helped build up demand. And it helped satisfy that demand for a while. And then somebody else took over. (49:01)

AA: Now you also mentioned about presenting at the Upper Midwest Farming Conference. Is there anything you want to say about that?

SP: Yeah, well, it's been a great conference. It's really been a highlight of the beginning of the season for me. Over the years—I told you, I didn't know anything when I was starting. But after a while it seemed like I probably knew a little more than some other farmers. So I got asked to present. That was pretty good. I enjoyed that. Pretty consistently got good grades on presentations. And Beth did, too, because she knew a lot. She had a perfect role there of interpreting scientific research for farmers. Looking at plant disease research and turning it into useful protocols and attitudes for farmers. So it was great. And Kim [?] talks about so many different topics, growing different crops, marketing, winter storage, equipment, all that. So it was important for a while. I was really glad to have that role, to be able to do that.

I think now—well, what's happened at the conference, actually, is that there has been enough university research going on that many of the presenters are not farmers anymore, but are university people, extension folks or professors, who are doing organic research and who have the practical bent. There are commercial operations, places like Midwest BioAg, that have vast experience in some of these things. So people from those operations, Albert Lee [?] Seed Company, they send people to talk, and those folks have a lot more experience. When I talked about what I did, all I could do was present my experience, one farmer's experience on one farm. Here's what works for me. Still valuable. But there's just a lot broader range of experience out there right now. And also, a young generation of farmers has arisen. And they're doing great. So they have new techniques, new outlooks. It's more of what new farmers or potential farmers need to hear, some folks who are younger and more contemporary. But absolutely great conference. (52:26)

AA: Now you also mentioned that you were involved on the Governor's Organic Advisory Council. What was that like?

SP: Well, that was, it's been a really good experience for me. I can't say that this council has ever done anything, and maybe that's not our role. We're advisory to the people who are in charge at the ag department. It's not directly the governor. It actually goes through the head of the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection here in Wisconsin. So we're under their purview. We've had about, we normally have about a dozen, maybe fifteen members representing different types of farms, representing organic certifiers, representing policymakers and so on. So you get a wide range of experience sitting there, talking. Every once in a while we'll come up with a statement about something that's going on with policy, and we'll send it off to the head of the ag department, and that's about it. We haven't done a whole lot more. But I've learned a lot, I've really learned a lot, and stayed in touch with some excellent people. I've never really emphasized policy in my work. I've just been in my organic life. We weren't looking to government to make this happen. But government has a place, and policy definitely has a place. I mean, organics now deserves a share of the billions of dollars that goes into farm research and subsidies. And it's part of changing the whole ecological scene of farming. So it's not my main interest, but as a farmer, I was there. And I had a chance to have my say among friends, people

who I totally agree with on many things, and then bring that information back to other farmers. We'd only meet four times a year. And I don't know what else to say about that. Right now, that council is kind of at a low ebb.

AA: How long have you been involved with that? When did you start?

SP: I started right before it even got started. I was involved in actually organizing it, setting up its parameters and potential and what it was about and who'd be on it. I also was involved there for a short while, two, three years, and when it first got started. And I think I've been on there now nine years in a row lately. I'm pretty sure it's three three-year terms. So I've put in maybe twelve years into it since it got started—it got started in maybe 2008, '07? I don't know. Shouldn't be hard to find out if you need to. So I've been there. But again, I've probably learned more than I've contributed, from listening to other people. I mean, we've had folks involved, my friends and folks on this council who've been part of the National Organic Standards Board, and they've been to Washington over and over and over again and talked to politicians. They know all the acronyms that I don't know. It's been good. And it gives me an idea of how big this is becoming and what role there is in larger society to push organics, to favor it the way it should be. Not much more about that. (57:31)

AA: So what is your perspective on the relationship between the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Wisconsin organic farming community?

SP: Oh, it's really great right now, actually. When I was there as a student, that was thirty-plus years ago. And there were the professors for the most part that were older and had no interest in organic. And many of them were just downright negative about it. They said, basically, it would never work. No, that's not the way to go. But since then, there's been almost a complete turnover from the professors that I knew thirty years ago. And the new folks are generally very supportive and very interested and into it. There's still, most of their work and most of the agriculture in Wisconsin is just conventional, not organic. So they're not focusing on organic. But they're also seeing that it does work. And, we've got people like Erin Silva, who's really an organic specialist right now. There are extension people who know a lot about organics and grazing. One thing here in Wisconsin, organics and grazing have kind of come under the same umbrella, because so many organic dairy farmers are graziers for the most part. So they've often been conflated. So Erin's got a role there that's separate from grazing, she's working mainly with grain farmers. And there were groups like—now I can't think of the name. Anyways, there's been a fair amount of support over the past twenty years. Right now, UW has organic trial plots at their Arlington farm, maybe other research farms.

So it's caught up. It's done pretty well. They're not leaders. I would say, in general, UW is still not a leader in the organic field. One thing that's really made a difference is having Organic Valley headquartered here in Wisconsin, because you can't ignore them. They've done so well, they are so big, they're influential, and they've put money into UW research. They've helped, along with Clif Bar, they've financed a chair in organic agriculture that Bill Tracy has held for a while as an agronomy professor. So that's kind of business putting their resources into UW. It's not necessarily the other way around. UW's been, especially in the horticulture/agronomy segment, diminished over the past twenty, thirty years. There are fewer

students in those areas, fewer faculty. But they're useful, they're becoming useful to organic growers.

AA: So you would put the change at about twenty years ago, when they started being more favorable toward organic farming?

SP: Yeah, that's what I would say. I would have to look at some more information, but right now it feels to me like that's when it really got going.

AA: And when you mention that they weren't leaders, are there other land grant universities that you would consider leaders, or were you thinking outside the universities?

SP: No, like Penn State has definitely been ahead. Even Iowa State had more going. University of Minnesota had organic plots, research plots long before UW. Michigan State was doing a lot of work, maybe not purely organic, but small farm work, hoop house designs and hoop house nutrition, things like that. So UW just wasn't there for a while. But again, they don't have to duplicate everything in each state. But they just weren't really doing anything for a while. (1:02:50)

AA: So if you were to summarize your philosophy of organic farming, what would that be?

SP: That's a good question. I read that, and I thought about that. I realized, maybe I'm not that philosophic about it. Because I just came to it, I came to where I am now, by an evolution of doing things. And when I started out, I was just like this hippie guy with no resources and no knowledge, just planting, just doing it. And I didn't really have a view as to where it was going, because I had no backdrop. I just couldn't see. Some people who were involved within the movement had a grandfather or uncles who were farming, and who were like, "Oh, they never used chemicals. They just rejected them. And they told me from when I was a little kid, this was bad." I didn't have that. I had no influence at all. So I don't know. My philosophy more has to do with the fact that growing organically makes sense on this earth, that we can do it. And it produces higher quality food. I'm quite sure of that. And it's not just organic, I think a small farm that is selling locally, getting food out to people that's very fresh, carefully tended, even if it's not fully organic, can do a really good job. So sometimes I'm not really good with rules and regulations, although obviously we follow the organic regulations 100 percent. But as a small startup business years ago, we just did whatever was necessary to get going, not trying to be certified organic at the beginning. So I don't know, it's just a better way to go. If everybody would do it, there would be a lot of positives. A lot of good side effects for the entire country. I don't have this big philosophy. (1:05:44)

AA: So do you think there was a connection between organic farming and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s and '70s?

SP: Oh, definitely. Definitely, yes, for sure. As hippies, we could see what was wrong. Somehow we had some insight or feeling that things were really wrong in this country, back in the '60s. It was more than just wanting to have a great time, but it opened up your mind. But when you open up your mind, you start to see, "Oh, man, this isn't right. What's going on? What's up with food?"

We can do better than this.” So yes, I think they’re really tied in. You’re going to find a lot of farmers my age who started farming organically or close to it in the ’70s just came out of that, who were hippies, who were very close to it at that point in their lives. I think it has a lot to do with taking the right drugs and being around the right people and just realizing how much you can enjoy life and enjoy your work. You don’t have to be a beaten down farmer. You can be a joyful, like-the-farming farmer.

AA: Yeah, so a lot of the books I’ve been reading, I’m trying to do research on the hippies and the counterculture, and the books rarely mention organic farming at all, at least not before 1970. So that’s why I’m so curious to hear what you think the connection is, because it’s not really been documented well at all in the literature.

SP: Yeah, well, sure, it wouldn’t be before 1970, because us hippies, we were basically urban and suburban kids. And very few—some may have had some connection with farming, but mostly not. And it took a while to get “back to the land,” although for many of us it wasn’t “back to,” we’d never been there. So it took a while to get the farming going. It was tricky. We had to figure out just how to grow lettuce for yourself, first. And there were probably, by the time we got rolling with the farm, that would be sometime in the ’80s, by the time I got fairly serious about it. We were not hippies anymore. It was just a period of time where we were. And then we outgrew that.

AA: Would you say there was a connection between the environmental movement and the back-to-the-land movement?

SP: Yeah, there definitely was. We felt that. One reason to get out of the cities was because they were going to collapse. They couldn’t sustain themselves. That was totally wrong. But we just, things didn’t look good in the early ’70s environmentally. Even Richard Nixon helped set up the EPA! Richard Nixon realized that we needed to change things. So it was definitely in at least the back of our minds that this was good for the planet. There was some big picture that way. But honestly, from my point of view, it was like, “Hey, this looks fun. It’s something we can do. Let’s try it out.” I had certain advantages. I told you, I had no farm background, but when I started there were a couple things that worked in my favor. One was, I was a good mechanic. I grew up, my father was a mechanic, ran a small business, family business, he and my mom, and then he came home with dirty hands every day. So I didn’t mind getting my hands dirty. That was great. I kind of liked it. I liked being outdoors. I didn’t want to go work in a laboratory or office. And also, I did grow up in a small business family. So that when I started the farm, I had a sense of what it took for it to be a successful business. And I was comfortable because my parents had hired employees, and I heard plenty about that growing up. I had a sense of what it was like to be an employer, and what it meant. Those were two things that a lot of young people don’t have experience with, especially these days. Machinery and small business. So that may have had more to do with why farming appealed to me than the ecological point of view. I just wanted something independent. And there was, I was living in the country. Oh, look at all these farmers around. Here’s some land. Let’s farm! And it just developed little by little.

AA: So were you involved in any social or political movements that overlapped with the organic farming?

SP: Well, I mean, I was involved with, when I was back in college there, with antiwar movement, with SDS. I was in Milwaukee, I was involved with the Yippies. Not terribly, because I was much more involved with the Outpost, with that business, as a positive, less political offshoot. So no, I'm not really a big joiner. I don't get up on the bandwagon with other people in these movements. But when it comes to working together for something positive, I've done it. (1:12:33)

AA: So what connections were there between food co-ops and organic farmers in the 1970s?

SP: Well, the co-ops were a place that were putting up a showplace for organic farming. I mean, there was no other place to go for organic food. You weren't going to find it in the supermarkets at that point. The food co-ops, they were the right size for the then-small market. And it was a gathering place for people who were interested. Even if they didn't know much, it was a place for them to find out about what organics meant. I remember Mike Stevens and I would go, when we started up the Outpost, we would go on the radio show every couple weeks and talk about organics. In Milwaukee, on a local radio station, and talk about organics and recipes. He was more of a cook than I was. And try to get the word out. A big part of what we were doing was educating, was trying to figure out what this all meant, and then get those ideas across to other people. You would call them these days consumers. But they were just interested in something different, in something better.

There have always been people, and not just hippies, but there have always been people who realized that something isn't right about the American food system that was developed through the '50s and '60s and became agribusiness. And, in fact, one of the groups that taught me a lot, where I met people, was a group that was active around Milwaukee that was called the Natural Foods Associates. And they would come in, members would come in and say, "Hey, have you ever thought about this? Did you know about this? Have you seen this? These connections between what they're putting on our food and cancer?" Things like that. And I had a chance to go visit their gardens, basically, they weren't really farmers. But these were older people, probably I suspect that they were politically conservative. I don't know. But there was a wide range; it was incredible how wide a range of ages of people would come into the Outpost and be interested in what we were doing.

It may have been us young folks who had the energy to start it, to take the chance, who had nothing to lose. But there's always been this group of people, and they're also politically conservative, who are interested in organics and natural foods. There's a business in Milwaukee called Linglois. They still have, they were a natural food store, "health food" they actually called it back then. Linglois Health Foods. And those were folks who had been into this. They were older, and they had been into this for decades, just promoting healthful eating, living, natural foods, no chemicals, chemical-free foods. So it wasn't a brand-new idea. But we were able to take it a little further, and because we were able to start farms and provide something for people to eat that was chemical-free. The co-ops and the small farms just helped each other grow.

AA: Oh, that's really interesting.

SP: Education was a lot of it, on both sides.

AA: That's really interesting that you mentioned the Natural Foods Associates, because they were one of the bigger—not just organic, but like you're saying, health foods, natural foods—in the 1940s and '50s that I've been doing research on. So that's interesting that they were still around and that you had contact with them.

SP: Yes, yes. I told you, I think, when we talked that the Malabar Farm books really had an impression on me. I think I just came across them in a library in Milwaukee and read them in the farming section when I was involved with Outpost. They were very powerful. Bromfield was, I don't remember if he was a good writer, but whatever he was writing about really affected me. The fact that you could take something that was spoiled, like an old farm, an eroded farm, and bring it back to life. It really had an effect. (1:17:57)

AA: So is there anything you want to say about any of the debates about the current USDA organic certification standards?

SP: Well, I think it would be a good idea if they'd enforce it, actually what the standards are. If they could not certify hydroponic or soilless-grown foods. I think it's a big mistake. On the other hand, you don't want to, it's better than—having organic foods that are grown right on the very edges of the regulations are better than non-organic foods. I'm pretty sure. I mean, in terms of what people are eating. And if you make this rule too strict, you're going to keep the price up too high for many people. And I think it's better, it's a better step to allow some flexibility in some areas so that you can get these foods out to more people. It's a real puzzle to me. I could go both ways on it.

AA: What is your opinion about the Real Organic and regenerative certifications that they're proposing in addition to the USDA certification?

SP: Well, we're going to be a Real Organic farm. We haven't gotten our official stamp yet. And I'm behind it. Because I think that people who are interested in the heart of the movement should be able to know which farms are following the philosophy, the true ideals of organics. It's the difference between maybe Horizon milk and Organic Valley milk. So I think it's a good thing. I don't think that for the most part it's going to make that much difference. The number of Real Organic farms is fairly small. But it's always important to be out there pushing the edge, pushing the real ideals that you stand for. You don't want to forget that in the rush of being a commercial industry. Organics has become a pretty substantial, many-billion-dollar-a-year industry. So you've got to make sure that it stays true to its ideals. But you can't always expect everybody to do that. You set up regulations, and some people are going to adhere to them and the philosophy and the ideals 100 percent. Some are just going to adhere to the regulations and be as loose as they can get away with. But it's still better than conventional food and farming. (1:21:45)

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

SP: I think being able to make a living. Being able to make at least a middle class living off the farm is essential. A while back it was, we had adopted this idea that we would like to learn as much from our farm as our customers earn at their work. I know we take a lot of risk, work huge

long hours, we don't get financial support, nobody pays our health insurance bills, things like that. So I think that if young people see that it's possible to actually make a living, raise a family, own the land, from doing this, that you can make a go of it as a business, that it's going to continue, because it's a great way of life for some people. That means a lot. Right now, it's become easier to be a farmer. There's much more information, there's much more support in terms of getting that information to a young prospective farmer. There are products, there are so many more products out there. You don't have to do everything yourself on your farm. You can make it work financially, you can buy this, you can buy that, put it to use. It all really helps. You can grow food. So the whole support system has developed. And it seems to me that anybody who is serious about it should be able to make it happen and sustain good health.

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

SP: I don't know. We've covered a lot here. I kind of fell into this. I mean, I was looking for something back fifty years ago, fifty-five years ago almost. And it kind of developed into this. I never, growing up, would have imagined being a long-time farmer, that I would spend my adult life farming and doing what I'm doing. I'm really glad it has worked out this way. I'm so glad that I'm not even willing to stop. I don't know what I'm going to do, how this is going to end up. I mean, there is a future. We've been talking a lot about the past, some about the present. And there is a future here, somewhat, for me on this farm. But I don't know what it is. It's really a puzzle. So many farms, and even small businesses, kind of depend on the next generation to carry them on. It's hard to imagine someone coming in and buying this as a business. That's not generally what happens with farms. You have an auction, you sell the land, or you hang onto it and rent it, something like that. So I don't know. I don't know what the future holds, personally.

I think I know what the future holds for organics, and it's pretty positive. Because we had a big influence on conventional farming. I think as conventional ag has seen that organics, pure organics, actually works, it's started to adopt some of our practices. I can see it in the vegetable magazines that I read, how much emphasis now there is on biological pesticides and natural fertilizers and soil health. We've had a huge influence that way. So that might be, even though organics, pure, certified organics may be only ever a small percentage of the food grown and eaten here, the influence of modifying conventional agriculture is big. It's a really big deal. So we'll see how that goes. Cover crops—I mean all these things, which just weren't in the air thirty years ago—are now like mainstream for conventional ag. And I think that by being on the edge, by being the “extreme” organics, that we've shown that it can be done. So conventional farmers are adopting some of those practices. So there. How's that?

AA: Very good. Yeah, that's great. All right, well thank you so much!

SP: Okay. (1:28:02)