

Narrator: Anneliese Abbott

Interviewer: Anneliese Abbott

September 18, 2023

Note: Since I ask people a lot of personal questions in the oral history interviews I do with them, I decided that it's only fair to subject myself to the same scrutiny and interview myself with the same questions. This isn't an oral history, because I just typed up the answers directly.

Q: When and where were you born? Did you have any connection with agriculture when you were a child?

A: I was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1992, to a wonderful set of parents named Steve and Caroline Abbott. We lived in a semi-rural area in Alamo township and owned 2 ½ acres of land that had once been part of a larger farm. My mom had been gardening since she was a girl back in the 1970s, and every year she would have Dad plow up a big garden with his little Ingersoll rototiller. We had a friend who had beef cattle, and he would show up with a pickup load of manure for us to spread on the garden. I helped as soon as I was able to hold a little plastic pitchfork. I have pictures of myself spreading manure, hoeing, and picking tomatoes when I was 2 years old. Mom always canned tomatoes, and I helped with skinning them as soon as I was tall enough to reach the sink by standing on a stool. She also started her own tomato, pepper, and broccoli plants. At first she started them indoors under fluorescent lights in an upstairs bedroom, and then my dad built her a plastic-covered greenhouse near the garden.

Mom never used the word “organic,” but she was an organic gardener. She never used chemical fertilizers or pesticides on her garden. The soil was sandy and very low in organic matter, and the grass in the lawn did poorly and had lots of bare spots. I remember once when my dad dug a deep hole in the backyard to put in a teeter-totter. He dug it where Mom used to have an herb bed. She used to have two herb beds, but they both got completely taken over by oregano and she decided that she only needed one bed of oregano, so she could sacrifice the other one for the teeter-totter since it was right by the swingset. I remember staring down into the hole (my first soil pit!) and being intrigued by the different soil horizons. The topsoil was almost black, where the oregano had been growing, but then there was a sharp line and the sand below was as light and loose as sand on a beach. The soil profile of the garden probably looked similar after many years of manure application. Mom was able to grow very good crops of vegetables, especially tomatoes, in that soil once she built up the organic matter with manure.

Another important part of my childhood was attending summer camp at Michigan State University's Kellogg Biological Station each summer. That wasn't strictly agricultural, although we did visit the experimental dairy farm each year and watch the cows be milked and mix up a ration of feed from silage and concentrates. It was more of an environmental education program, and it got me incredibly interested in environmental science. We would go on a stream walk and collect little creatures from Kellogg Forest, then look at them back at Spruce Lodge under low-power microscopes. We learned about scientific forestry, wetlands, wildlife management, and composting. We spent most of our time going on in-depth tours of all the experimental areas at KBS, including areas that weren't open to the public. I realized later that, as a kid, I knew more

about the research going on there than any single graduate student or professor, because they only knew about their own research projects, not everyone else's.

Q: What got you interested in organic farming? Were there any people, publications, books, or organizations that you consider especially influential?

A: Like I said earlier, my mom always gardened organically, but she didn't use the word "organic." I didn't hear that word much when I was a kid, and if I did, it was in a negative connotation. I was raised in a conservative Christian community, and while I am still a strong Christian today, it was a long process for me to separate the timeless truth of Christianity from the conservative political rhetoric of the day. For reasons I am still trying to understand, there was a significant anti-environmental stance in the evangelical Christian community in the late 1990s and early 2000s when I was in my formative years. I thought that environmentalists were bad, although practically I pretty much was one all along. My family was very invested in wilderness preservation, opposed to turning farmland into housing developments, and lots of other environmental issues. I may have been opposed to words like "environmental" or "organic," but in spirit I was already an environmentalist and so were my parents.

When I was 11, in 2003, we went back to the land in the modern way. We bought 10 acres of rural farmland in Otsego township, which was about 6 acres of wetland mixed hardwood forest and 4 acres of farmable land. A few years later, we bought a second, non-contiguous 10-acre parcel which was also about half forest and half farmland. We built a big, modern house on the first piece of land with lots of room for all four of us kids. Since we were homeschoolers, an important part of the house was the big schoolroom in the basement. The Christian school at our church closed shortly after we moved, and we benefited by buying a lot of the furniture, books, and equipment at really low prices and furnishing our own schoolroom and library.

Of course one of Mom's first priorities after we moved was getting her garden going. Near the front of the property, there was a low-lying area with very black soil. None of us knew much about soil types at that time, so Mom and Dad assumed that it was black because it was fertile. They did notice that it often got flooded, but figured they could solve that problem with drainage. They hired the neighbor who owned a gravel pit to scrape off all that black muck soil, dump in several loads of sand and gravel, put in some black plastic drainage pipes, and then spread the topsoil back over everything. It worked well for about three or four years, and we had some great crops. But then we started having more trouble with flooding again, and the black plastic pipes started getting caught in the rototiller even though we had originally buried them two feet deep. Looking back now, I think what happened was that the muck soil oxidized once it got drained and aerated. Eventually we moved the garden slightly uphill to an area where we kept the chicken coop for three years. That was extremely fertile and better drained because it was on an actual mineral soil, not muck soil.

In 2005 we got our first packages of bees and started beekeeping. Mom and I were the beekeepers and I read the *ABC and XYZ of Beekeeping* cover to cover to learn everything about bees. We were instrumental in helping form the Kalamazoo Bee Club sometime around 2009 or 2010. One controversial issue in beekeeping at the time was whether to treat for the *Varroa* mite. Most commercial beekeepers used chemical miticides like coumaphos and fluvalinate, both of which accumulated in the beeswax. We actually started with plastic foundation instead of wax foundation, even though it was less natural, to avoid introducing so many pesticides into our beehives from the get-go. When we first started, we tried a "natural" mite treatment

recommended by a friend, which was to soak paper towels with peppermint essential oil and put them on the bottom board of the beehive. When we saw how angry the bees got and how they all evacuated the hive to get away from the menthol fumes, we decided not to try to treat for mites anymore. After a few years, we discovered that our healthy hives didn't have mites anyways. The only hive that ever got mites was right next to a corn field, and they almost died when the farmer sprayed pesticides on his corn. So it was with the bees that I first learned that healthy organisms resist pests and diseases—something I now realize is a keystone of organic farming.

In December 2005 we got our first dairy goat—a LaMancha doe named Sue. We bred her right away and had our first kid in May, a single buck that we named Samson because he was big and strong and hairy. We couldn't bear to sell our first kid, so we wethered him and kept him as a pet. I trained him to pull a cart and he walked in several parades in town and even won the “Most Unusual” award for the pet parade contest one year. We learned a lot about goat care over the years, too. One of the biggest lessons we learned was the importance of nutrition. For our first few years, we had a lot of health problems and lost several goats. Eventually we realized that they needed to have high-quality hay, along with some mineral supplements. We finally worked out a nutritional program that kept the goats sleek and healthy, and once they were healthy, they had very little problems even with kidding and we rarely had to call out the vet. Again, we discovered that only sick animals had mange mites or mastitis—the healthy ones did not have pests or diseases. Even though we didn't pay the extra dollars to buy organic feed and were unable to pasture our animals due to space limitations, we were once again following many of the principles of organic farming.

I graduated from high school in 2009 and decided not to go to college right away, since I was only 17. Instead, I threw myself full-time into our homesteading venture. We were tangentially involved with the local food community in the Kalamazoo area, mostly related to our work with the bee club. At that time there was a lot of overlap between the beekeeping and local food communities. I didn't read any of the books or watch the videos that were popular at the time, but I read them later and now realize that I was influenced indirectly by ideas from Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*. Films that were discussed on the local food forum my mom subscribed to included *Food, Inc.* (2009) and *The Future of Food* (2004). Someone loaned us *The Future of Food* and I watched it by myself. I remember being a little skeptical of their claims that Monsanto was taking over the world, but I was never pro-GMO like the conventional farmers in my area.

The event that most strongly influenced my organic/environmental philosophy at that time was the economic downturn of 2007/2008. Our family wasn't financially affected because my dad's job as an IT manager was not impacted. But somehow—probably through that local food grapevine—I heard about the concept of peak oil. When gas prices skyrocketed to \$4.00 a gallon for the first time, I figured they would never go down again. Then I started thinking about how dependent our whole food system was on fossil fuels—and how unsustainable that was. How could we create a more localized food system? How could we use less energy on our farm? How much of our own food could we produce for ourselves? I was especially interested in learning how people lived and farmed before they started using so many fossil fuels. Surely it was possible—but how?

It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that I was obsessed with saving energy and trying to be self-sufficient between about 2009 and 2012. I had always helped my mom can tomatoes and freeze green beans, but now I started experimenting with every possible method of

food preservation for every type of vegetable we produced. I tried to avoid freezing because it used electricity to run the freezer. Instead, I canned and dried everything. I even dehydrated green beans and figured out why the pioneers called them “leather breeches.” We made all our own cheese from our goat milk, and we even built a passively cooled cheese cave in the basement to age it in. I learned how to spin wool from a local farm and knitted my own wool hats and mittens. I even grew fiber flax one year, but never got around to processing it. I experimented with cookie and dessert recipes and figured out how to make them with 100% honey so that we wouldn’t be dependent on commercially processed sugar. I started baking with whole wheat flour not initially because of the health benefits, but because it took less energy to process than white flour. I convinced the whole family to use real dishes instead of paper plates, sewed cloth napkins and handkerchiefs and got rid of the paper napkins and Kleenex, and managed to cut down our garbage production by at least 75 percent. During the height of my obsession with saving energy, I started using a manual typewriter instead of a computer and even tried to make my own ink from pokeweed berries and write it with a turkey feather for a quill pen. It faded within months and is completely illegible now.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my dad pushed back against my extreme efforts to save energy. He got a little upset when I suggested that maybe we should try to cook on a woodstove, pump all our water with a hand pump, or disconnect from the electric grid. None of that would have been very practical in our modern house, anyways. Eventually, to keep the peace, I decided that it was time for me to go off to college. So I headed off to Columbus, Ohio in the fall of 2013 to go to The Ohio State University. I still lived as sustainably as possible even in an urban apartment. For a year or so I even washed my clothes with a wringer washer. Eventually I decided that was too much work and that the washing machine was one modern invention that really did save labor and time, but to this day I still dry my clothes on a wooden rack or clothesline instead of using a dryer.

Q: What did you study in college? How did it relate to organic/sustainable agriculture?

A: Again, I still wasn’t sure about the word “organic,” but I was all about doing everything as sustainably as possible. The more I thought about it, the more I decided that food systems were the most important part of sustainability. After all, we could live without cars, we could live without computers, we could even live without running water, but nobody can live without food. I would have liked to major in general sustainable agriculture and study both plant and animal systems, but I couldn’t do that at the bachelor’s level. I decided that plants were more important than animals because animals have to eat plants to survive. Later I would realize that soil was just as important, because plants can’t grow without good soil.

I quickly found out that, despite the name, OSU’s Sustainable Plant Systems program was really just an agronomy or horticulture degree. My specialization was in agronomy, but the only class for the horticulture specialization I didn’t take was a vegetable production class. I figured I had enough practical experience in vegetable production that I didn’t need to study it in college. My core classes were things like plant pathology; grain, oilseed, and fiber crops; weed ecology and management; soil science; seed science; agricultural entomology; plant genetics; forages, grasslands, and prairies; fruit crop production; and plant physiology. I decided to minor in soil science and took fascinating classes in urban soil restoration, environmental fate and transport of pollutants in soil and water, soil fertility, and soil conservation.

I also had the opportunity to study abroad in Ecuador my freshman year, which was an amazing experience. It was enlightening to be able to talk to people in Ecuador about sustainable agriculture and hear how they were trying to preserve their traditional agriculture and keep out genetically engineered crops from the US. Unlike most of the other students in my group, I loved all of the fresh fruits and vegetables we got to try and didn't even experience much of a culture shock. My favorite memory of visiting Ecuador was when we stayed at the home of an indigenous Quechua family for one night. They were polite in the evening, but not very talkative. Then in the morning, the husband said that we could help him milk his cow. He handed me a container and I quickly milked out a quarter of the cow. He was flabbergasted that I knew how to milk by hand, and so I told him that we had goats at home. That opened the floodgates of conversation, and we talked for almost an hour at breakfast comparing agriculture in the US and in Ecuador. They were especially curious about what our animals did in the winter, since they have the same temperatures all year round because they are right on the Equator. I loved how I was able to connect with them by the simple act of knowing how to milk a cow.

I had some excellent teachers at OSU and I learned a lot, although there was a lot of overlap between the classes. My favorite parts were the labs and field trips. For one of my soil restoration classes, we took soil samples and wrote up reports on an actual vacant lot in Columbus and gave them to a city employee. We were excited to find that the soil wasn't too contaminated, so it would be suitable for a community garden if the community wanted it. That was taught by Nick Basta, who was one of my favorite teachers. Kent Harrison, David Barker, Peg McMahon, and my advisor Jim Metzger were also great agronomy teachers. I was especially grateful that Dr. Metzger let me do my undergraduate research project on the history of Malabar Farm, even though most plant science students would have worked for a lab instead. I was able to test out of most of my general education classes because I had such a good homeschool high school science education, so I was able to finish my bachelor's degree in just three years.

Q: Did you encounter any anti-organic attitudes at OSU?

A: Surprisingly, yes. I attribute part of my early skepticism about organic farming to the subtle anti-organic bias that still infiltrated large sections of the agricultural college as late as 2016, when I took my final semester of classes. When I first started in 2013, the big question was, "How are we going to feed 9 billion people by 2050?" And the answer was supposed to be, "With more science and technology, especially with biotechnology." They said that was the only way to double food production by 2050. And I was like, "Wait a minute, why do we have to double food production? There's 7 billion people in the world now, so 9 billion is only a 30 percent increase, and that's over more than 30 years, so that's only a 1% increase a year, which shouldn't be that hard to do with current technology and methods." But they used that kind of rhetoric to try to "prove" that organic methods couldn't feed the world.

Organic farming methods just weren't discussed in any of my classes, at least not under that name. To my professors' credit, we actually did cover all of the fundamental aspects of organic farming; it just wasn't called that. Two concepts that I learned in college that I've found especially helpful in explaining organic farming are the disease triangle and weed ecology. The disease triangle was the first thing we learned in plant pathology. We were taught that three things are required for disease to occur: a virulent pathogen, a susceptible host, and a conducive environment. Conventional agriculture just focuses on trying to eliminate the pathogen, which is pretty much impossible. But organic agriculture focuses on making the host less susceptible and

the environment less conducive to disease, so that even if the pathogen is present, it doesn't do anything. And in weed ecology, we learned that the weeds in any given crop will have the same life cycles as that crop. So when you grow annuals, you have annual weed problems; when you have a no-till perennial system, you have problems with perennial weeds. Understanding that makes it easier to control the weeds.

So I learned a lot that I later applied to organic farming. The best management practices we learned were mostly compatible with organic, except that there was this idea that herbicide-dependent no-till was the best way to grow crops and keep soil from eroding. That was their biggest argument against organic farming, because they assumed that organic farmers were constantly moldboard plowing and not using any type of conservation tillage and were eroding topsoil like crazy. They never had any data to support those claims, but they casually mentioned them like they were facts.

Some of my professors did perpetrate a little misinformation about organic farming. I had a food science professor say that she boycotted organic milk because she thought organic cows were malnourished because the farmers wouldn't give them any grain, only grass, and of course cows can't make milk on grass. She obviously didn't know that most organic cows do eat some grain, unless the milk is also sold as 100 grass fed, and that it is possible to raise healthy cows without grain if the pasture is carefully managed. At least I learned about management intensive grazing in my forages class, and the professor presented it positively because he was from New Zealand, which is where the system was perfected.

The majority of my fellow agronomy students were anti-organic. They were almost all farm boys (and a few girls) from big corn/soybean farms in Ohio. They were planning on taking over the family farm from their dad eventually, but wanted to get a college degree first. They were nice kids, but I didn't talk to them much about my concerns with conventional agriculture. One girl told me that she boycotted Chipotle just because they served organic food! I think they thought that organic food was somehow hurting their business. They certainly didn't realize that they could have made their farms much more profitable if they transitioned to organic.

I went on a very enlightening field trip while I was at OSU. It was sponsored by the Ohio Corn and Wheat Growers Association, in partnership with the Collegiate Young Farmers student organization, which was part of the Farm Bureau. They advertised an all-expenses-paid Ohio Corn Tour, including a visit to an ethanol plant. I joined the club and paid the \$10 dues just to go on the trip because it sounded so interesting. We went to the OCWGA headquarters first, where they took us into a plushy office, gave us lots of literature, and told us what a great job Ohio farmers were doing feeding the world and solving our energy crisis by making ethanol. We drove to the ethanol plant in a "corn car" powered by E-85, toured the facility, stopped by a big co-op elevator, and even got to ride in a combine helping a farmer harvest soybeans. But the most important lesson I learned that day was how powerful the agribusiness lobbyists are. They aren't partisan; they use the same type of smooth, persuasive rhetoric on both Democrat and Republican congresspeople to make sure that the Farm Bill and other agricultural legislation maintains the agribusiness status quo. That's why it makes no difference who you vote for—the lobbyists will befriend anyone to get their agenda through.

Q: What did you do after you graduated from OSU?

A: I graduated in May 2016 *summa cum laude*. Because they saw that I was a bright student, my advisors encouraged me to go to graduate school. I did apply to a graduate horticulture program

at a Midwestern land grant university that seemed to have more emphasis on organics than OSU. But most of their research was focused on molecular biology, which wasn't what I wanted to do. I finally found one professor who had done some organic research in the past who was willing to take me on as a grad student. Unfortunately, he turned out to be one of those advisors who ran a lab with a toxic work environment. I don't want to say who or where it was because he's still there, but to make a long story short, I only lasted 6 weeks in that lab and then moved back home to my family's farm in Michigan. It was such a traumatic experience that I never wanted to pursue a graduate degree in the hard sciences again. At the time I thought my experience was an anomaly, but since then I have heard a lot of other stories about graduate students and even postdocs who have suffered verbal and emotional abuse from their advisors and lab members. Of course there aren't any statistics about it, but I suspect that up to half of graduate students in the hard sciences experience some level of academic bullying or a toxic work environment during their grad school experience. It's one of those things that is really hard to raise awareness of because nobody will talk about it for fear of retaliation, but it's real and it's common.

Q: What did you do after that?

A: Well, for a few months I was too traumatized to do anything. I thought my career as a researcher was over. But by the end of the summer, I decided that it was time to start a CSA on our farm. I had worked at the Kalamazoo Nature Center as a farm educator during the summers of 2014 and 2015, and I learned a lot about good and bad ways to run a CSA while I was there. We started halfway through the season and only had three people our first year. The next year we had a few more, and eventually we expanded the CSA to ten shares. We've kept it at that level ever since, and we now always have a waitlist for the next season because there is so much interest in our CSA.

Q: How do you run your CSA? What farming methods do you use? What crops do you grow?

A: Like I said, I first learned about the CSA model while I was working at the Kalamazoo Nature Center. They were trying to run a very large CSA—200 shares—with only a handful of workers, and it was pretty stressful. Some of the fields were so weedy that it was hard to find the crops. They ran that CSA “market style,” where the veggies were laid out in bins in the market barn and the shareholders would fill their bags based on the sign. What I didn't like about that system was that the people who came first got the best stuff and the people who came last were stuck with whatever was left. For example, one week they could either get a bunch of carrots or turnips. Of course everyone preferred carrots to turnips, so the first people took all the carrots and the people who came later because they had to work were disappointed that there weren't any carrots left for them. There was also a lot of waste because they had to have exactly 200 of everything, so if there were only, say 150 kohlrabis or heads of broccoli, nobody could have them because there wasn't enough for everyone.

When we started our CSA at Abbott Farms, I decided that we were going to make up baskets for each shareholder in the morning and then have them pick them up in the afternoon. That made a little more work for us, but then everyone got exactly the same stuff and the people who came late had just as nice of a basket as the people who came early. It also completely eliminated waste, because I pick exactly the right amount of each vegetable to put in the baskets.

I count the kale and Swiss chard leaves out as I'm picking them, so there is exactly the right number to fill all the baskets. I realize that would be impractical for a larger CSA, but it works nice for our small one. I find it fun and relaxing to make up baskets on that scale, but I wouldn't want to try to make it a full-time business.

We aren't certified organic because our farm is too small, but I feel good about calling our garden organic. It's not perfect and I can always think of ways that we could do things better, but since it's a joint operation between me and my mom and my siblings, we all work together on planning methods. We spread almost all of our goat manure on the garden each spring, rototill it in, and then plant our crops. We mulch heavily with hay between the plants to help keep weeds down and conserve moisture. If it's dry, we irrigate with sprinklers. We still sometimes have trouble with drainage or with things being too wet. We don't use any kind of pest or disease control. Yeah, some bugs move in at the end of the season—like bean beetles, squash bugs, and potato beetles—but not until the plants start to die back. The bugs are just the cleanup crew and don't impact our yields any. We've sometimes been a little lax about the weeding and have a problem with too much foxtail right now, which I'm working on eradicating, but overall we stay on top of the weeds pretty well. My mom and I have a debate over whether it's good to leave the smartweed in the rows or pull it up. She points out that it's completely eaten by Japanese beetles, so she thinks it's serving as a trap plant and keeping the beetles from eating our crops. But I point out that the beetles move to the crops after they defoliate the smartweed, so maybe it's attracting them and they wouldn't eat the plants otherwise. I think we've reached a compromise where I pull out some, but not all of the smartweed.

We grow pretty much every kind of vegetable that can be grown in southwest Michigan. My mom still starts all her plants in her greenhouse. We grow dozens of varieties of heirloom tomatoes, hot and sweet peppers, tomatillos, and groundcherries. The brassica section includes five or six varieties of kale, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts. We grow Swiss chard, mustard greens, spinach, bok choy, kohlrabi, and celery. There are beets, carrots, turnips, and rutabagas. Tons of summer squash—several varieties—and a huge assortment of winter squash. We're even trying to grow a giant pumpkin this year. Sweet corn, yellow dent corn for cornmeal, and both mini and full-sized rainbow popcorn for popping. Potatoes, onions, leeks, and sugar snap peas. Basil, dill, parsley, cilantro, lemon balm, mint, lavender, thyme, sage, borage, and a couple rhubarb plants. And our yard is turning into a food forest now that our apple, peach, and cherry trees are old enough to bear fruit. We still buy blueberries and some other fruit from local farms for eating and canning, but we pretty much grow all the vegetables that we eat. And, for the summer, we feed 10 other families as well. We produce all our own milk, cheese, yogurt, eggs, honey, chicken, and turkey. It's so satisfying to sit down to a meal that comes almost completely from our farm.

Q: What about your Malabar Farm book? What inspired you to write that? How long did that take?

A: I first got interested in Malabar Farm when I was an undergrad at OSU. I went to an event sponsored by the Undergraduate Research Office highlighting the library's special collections. The Rare Books curator, Geoff Smith, told me that they had Louis Bromfield's papers. In 2015, I started looking at those, and I made my first trip to Malabar in the summer of 2015. I wrote a really long Honors thesis (it was over 100 pages, and the average was more like 12) before I graduated. Then I shelved it because I thought I was going off to graduate school.

One of my dreams was always to write books, though over the years exactly what the books would be about changed a lot. After my traumatic failed grad school experience, I didn't do any research for about six months. Then, in January of 2017, I pulled my thesis back out and looked at it. I had found lots of information that hadn't been previously published. To me at the time, it looked like it was pretty much in book form already. So I started writing out book proposals and sending them to academic presses in Ohio. I figured that was my best shot because it would have the greatest appeal to an Ohio-based publisher. The most responsive was Kent State University Press, which sent my proposal out for review. The reviewer told me that I needed to do more background research to put Malabar Farm in its historical context.

So I started doing more research. I discovered that I could get a community card at the Michigan State University library and check out 25 books at a time, plus use online resources at an in-library computer. Every couple months, I would make the 90-mile drive to East Lansing, spend several hours in the library, and then drive back with a load of books on a new topic. I started with soil conservation and then started researching the history of grass farming, pesticides, the environmental movement, nutrition, and organic farming. I would spend two to three months researching each topic and reading dozens of books and journal articles. Then I would write up a really long "working paper" synthesizing everything I read.

For the first year, I just put all those working papers in a drawer, planning to combine them all into the book. But as they started to pile up, I realized that I wouldn't be able to include more than a brief summary of each topic in the final book. It was at that time that I contacted the editor of *Acre's U.S.A.* and asked if she would be interested in publishing a series of articles about the history of organic agriculture in the United States. To my elation, she agreed, and I had my first ever article published in the December 2018 issue of *Acre's*. I started with my working paper on organic farming but ended up turning almost all of my working papers into articles.

It wasn't until April 2020 that I finally finished all that background research and was ready to start writing the actual book. Of course that was during all the COVID lockdowns, which meant that I couldn't go to the library and get more books anyways. MSU's entire collection of Friends of the Land periodicals spent the pandemic in my bedroom because I had fortunately checked them out at the end of February, just before everything locked down. I wrote steadily over the summer and emailed my chapters to some people who had agreed to review them for me, and I was able to submit the manuscript to the publisher for peer review at the end of August, just before I started my first year of grad school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I got the reviews back in December, made my revisions in January, did the proofreading and indexing over the summer of 2021, and the book was finally published in December 2021.

Q: What made you decide to try going to graduate school again? Why did you pick UW-Madison?

A: In September 2018, my dad was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. He went to the hospital for a round of intensive chemotherapy treatments, and I helped keep the farm going so that Mom could take care of Dad. By the spring of 2019 he was in remission, but he relapsed in September 2019, about a year after he was first diagnosed, and the second time he didn't respond to treatment. He passed away at home on January 6, 2020, just a few days after his 59th birthday.

It was Dad being sick that made me first think about going to grad school again. While I was having great fun writing my book and articles for *Acre*s, I wasn't making much money doing it. I knew that Dad hadn't wanted me to live at home forever, and thought that if he died I really needed to get a real job and make enough money to support myself. Since I loved doing research so much, I thought that my best option would be to become a professor so that I could keep doing research and get paid for it, plus have direct access to a university library. I still didn't want to be a plant science professor, and I found running laboratory analyses to be monotonous. But while I was doing research for the *Malabar Farm* book, I learned about an area of study I'd never heard of before—environmental history.

Environmental history intrigued me because it was the field most similar to the research I was doing on Malabar. I realized that some of the most interesting books I had run across in the course of my research were written by environmental historians. They wrote about things like soil and plants and land use, not just the sacred trio of race, class, and gender that seemed to be the only things social historians ever wrote about. I had been getting lots of responses to my *Acre*s articles asking if I was going to write a book on the history of organic farming. I felt like I had done just as much work to write *Malabar Farm* as it would have taken to write a doctoral dissertation, and I had just as many references as any of the dissertations I read off ProQuest for source material. The thought occurred to me—if I was going to do all that work again to write a really good, well-researched history of organic farming, why not see if I could earn a PhD along the way? And then maybe I could get a job as a professor of environmental history somewhere.

After I did some searching to see which universities offered environmental history programs, I discovered that the famous environmental historian William Cronon was still teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I never heard back from him, but the more I learned about UW-Madison, the more it seemed like a perfect fit for my proposed research. The Wisconsin Historical Society, located right on campus, had one of the largest sustainable agriculture archival collections in the country. The Horticulture and Agronomy departments employed several professors who focused exclusively on organic plant breeding. The Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies had a super flexible master's and PhD program that I could make work with my organic history project. And best of all, the university-owned grad student apartment complex, Eagle Heights, was located right next to one of the largest organic community gardens in the United States! I applied and visited the campus in October 2019, organic plant breeder Julie Dawson agreed to be my advisor, and I received a university fellowship and was admitted into the program in April 2020. I packed everything up and moved to Eagle Heights in August 2020.

I really liked living in Madison. It was an organic and local food paradise. I was able to get a plot right away in the Eagle Heights community garden that someone else had started earlier in the season, and it was full of tomatoes and peppers and other veggies. The student organic farm was right next to the community garden, and they would leave large quantities of free produce for anyone to take—like butternut squash, carrots, and beets. I got lots of free organic winter squash, potatoes, and tomatoes from the Dawson lab, which was focused on organic plant breeding. Then I went to the Dane County Farmers' Market and bought mushrooms and fruit, and I got local creamline milk and organic grains at the Willy Street Co-op. I also loved the fact that Madison was a bike-friendly city. I didn't have a car and I biked everywhere, sometimes 60 miles a week. I also loved hiking in the Lakeshore Preserve along the shores of Lake Mendota, out to Picnic Point and over to the Eagle Heights Woods. It was much nicer than living in Columbus and barely felt like a city over in Eagle Heights.

Q: What was it like being a grad student at UW-Madison? What were some of your favorite classes?

A: My experience at UW-Madison is inextricably intertwined with the COVID-19 pandemic, because many restrictions were still in force when I moved to Madison in August 2020. My entire first year of classes were all on Zoom, and I barely met the other grad students in my cohort that first year. I only saw my advisor in-person a handful of times during my grad career because we had most of our meetings on Zoom. I was enrolled as a joint master's student in both the Nelson Institute's Environment and Resources program and the Agroecology program. They had similar requirements and I thought they both sounded good, so I figured why not get my degree in both?

I was able to take William Cronon's last American Environmental History Class in Fall 2020. That was one of the high points of my grad school experience. Best of all, he let me into his Honors/grad student discussion section, so I was able to have discussions with him facilitating and have him personally grade my papers. The only downside was that it was all on Zoom, so I never met him in-person. But I am extremely grateful for the honor of being able to have a class with Bill Cronon. What I appreciated the most about him was that he was very thoughtful and always tried to understand other people's perspectives, even if he didn't agree with them. He said that his goal was to present what people believed so fairly that they would say, "I couldn't have said it better myself," even if he personally disagreed with them. He was the only professor I had at UW-Madison who tried to take a politically moderate perspective and give fair consideration to both liberal and conservative viewpoints. His theory as to why the country was so politically divided was because after the Cold War ended in 1989, Americans had no common enemy to fight against, so they started fighting against each other.

Another highlight of my UW experience was being able to take Soil Biology and Soil Microbiology. I knew that soil biology was a critical part of organic farming, so I took my required hard science classes for the Environment and Resources MS in soil science. I had great teachers for both classes, and they kept us up-to-date on the latest soil biology research. The only downside was that, because of the pandemic, we couldn't have labs. I found that a little disappointing because the labs were my favorite part of science classes as an undergrad. Thea Whitman, who taught Soil Microbiology, did come up with a way for us to do one semester-long experiment at home. We filled little Petri dishes with soil and kept track of how long it took the soil fungi to break down a piece of filter paper. My group did our experiment on the effect of peanut butter on the rate of decomposition. I wanted to do something organic-related, and I figured that lowering the C:N ratio by adding some high-nitrogen organic amendment would make the paper break down faster. Peanut butter was easily available, cheap, and not stinky, so I suggested using that for the N amendment. After my group stopped laughing, they agreed it was a good idea, and it actually worked. We had some of the most significant results of the whole class.

Q: Did you run into any anti-organic attitudes at UW-Madison?

A: Surprisingly, I did find a few faculty and students (especially in Agronomy and Dairy Science) who were still anti-organic. My own advisor and several other faculty were organic plant breeders and of course were supportive of organic farming. I was surprised to discover,

however, that my fellow Agroecology students were not necessarily in favor of organic farming. One guy who ran a certified organic CSA said that he wished that it was legal to use biotech methods like CRISPR in organic plant breeding. His dream was to use CRISPR in his garage to engineer a blue tomato and sell it at the farmer's market. I asked, "Do you think anyone would buy it?" and he thought they would. I wasn't so sure.

It was a great disappointment to me to discover that most of the other Agroecology students were not really passionate about organic farming, local food, healthy food, soil health, or even about many environmental issues beyond a nebulous concept of climate change—which to them was just something to vote about, not something that their personal lifestyle had anything to do with. Their great passion was social activism, especially protesting structural racism. I started in Fall 2020, right at the peak of heightened racial tensions after the murder of George Floyd earlier in the year, so racism was the main topic we discussed.

With all that focus on race and injustice, I couldn't wait to see what kind of local, just, equitable food they would serve at the first Agroecology picnic I attended. To my disappointment, they just ordered box lunches from Panera—better than Jimmy John's, I guess, but still a big chain restaurant owned by the capitalists that they were always deriding. And for snacks they served conventional fruit from California—probably picked by exploited migrant workers. It was a very revealing moment for me. It had always bothered me when people denounced Christianity because some Christians are hypocrites. That day I learned that environmentalists and social activists can be hypocrites, too.

Q: You left Madison after you finished your master's degree in 2022. Why didn't you stay to get a PhD? Do you still want to be an environmental history professor?

A: I can't give all the details about what happened in Madison right now because I don't want it to reflect badly on any of the individuals involved, many of whom I still highly respect. We were all caught in a bad time, and everyone made the decisions they felt were necessary to ensure the security of their own careers and try to stay on the correct side politically. In Madison, I discovered, the "correct side" means the radical Left, and moderate views were attacked almost as harshly as full-out conservative ones. It was an extremely traumatic two-year period for everyone, between the pandemic, racial riots, and the contentious 2020 presidential elections. I don't blame anyone in particular for what happened; we were all just caught in the middle of something bigger than any of us, and bigger even than the university.

The problem was that my desire to find out the truth about the past and write about it fairly collided with the radical Left's historical counternarratives. My goal in writing my thesis was to find and tell the truth about the history of organic farming, whatever that might be. I was strongly pressured to cite a popular antiracist counternarrative about the origins of organic farming, but in the process of my research I discovered that the author had included some counterfactual information, and I couldn't in good conscience cite that as fact. They say that truth is the first casualty of war. I discovered that, even though we weren't literally at war in 2020, truth was also the first casualty of politics. Basically, because I wanted to stay moderate and be equally fair to both liberal and conservative points of view, and because I wanted to focus on worldviews and ideologies instead of race, no one at UW-Madison was willing to advise me at the PhD level. That being said, I am very grateful to my advisor and committee for letting me finish the master's degree without putting any major roadblocks in my way. I was able to graduate with my joint MS in Environment and Resources and Agroecology in May 2022. I spent

the next few weeks looking at sustainable agriculture archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and then I moved back to Michigan on Memorial Day.

That whole experience made me rethink my desire to be a professor. I did look into environmental history doctoral programs at other universities, but realized when I looked at their program information and faculty profiles that I would run into similar political issues everywhere. I couldn't handle that kind of peer pressure to agree with beliefs that I didn't personally hold, or to write things that I felt were not supported by evidence. I learned the hard way that academic research and publication is controlled by consensus and politics. It's not an unbiased, objective quest for truth. I also realized that, given the historic animosity between academia and organic farming, it really was impossible to write an honest, factual history of organic farming from inside academia. Like the organic leaders of the past, I would have to work outside the system. That's the great thing about the United States—we still have freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I also realized that there wasn't much of a job market for environmental history professors, so that wouldn't have been a viable career option anyways.

Q: What are you doing now? Are you still continuing your research on the history of organic farming?

A: Currently, I have reached a nice equilibrium where I am able to do all the things I love. I'm back to helping run the Abbott Farms CSA, and we had a bumper year in the garden despite a dry spell in the early summer. I am working part-time at the public library to make a little money, which means that I've broken out of that endless cycle of writing grant proposals and begging for money that I would have been trapped in if I had pursued a career as a professor. Because my job is completely unrelated to my research topic, it frees me from any concern about possible conflicts of interest. It also means I'm not counting on making any income from writing, so I can take my time to finish the organic history book. When I'm not at work or in the garden, I'm in my home office writing and reading about the history of organic farming. I've launched a website, historyoforganic.com, to get some of my writing available to the public and to temporarily house the transcripts of the oral histories I've collected until the Wisconsin Historical Society makes them available.

Q: Tell me about your philosophy of organic farming. Do your religious/spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about farming or food? How have your philosophies changed over time? Is there any person or publication that has strongly influenced your philosophies?

A: Organic farming is about working with natural processes to create and maintain healthy soil, plants, animals, and people. It is a holistic system that rejects reductionist scientific claims that we can somehow "improve" on natural processes by taking things to bits and only using the parts that we think are important. It questions the idea that technology is always good and that we must always make things more complicated.

For me, my farming philosophies are intricately intertwined with my Christian worldview. I am a creationist Christian and believe that God created the world in six days, not through a lengthy process of evolution and random chance. That means that everything in creation was designed with a purpose, whether or not we've figured it out "scientifically" yet. Furthermore, humans have had a special place in creation since the very beginning. We have

been given dominion over other creatures on the earth. But that doesn't mean that we should abuse and destroy the rest of creation. We are called to be good stewards, wisely taking care of something that we did not make, that doesn't belong to us, and that we will be held accountable for to God.

When Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their connection both with God and with the rest of creation was messed up. Ever since then, humans have abused their stewardship mandate, exploiting and destroying other parts of creation for selfish ends. Some environmentalists in the twentieth century blamed that abuse on Christianity. But the reverse is actually true--it was when Western civilization abandoned Christianity and started believing that humans could improve on nature and do things better than God that all the worst environmental degradation took place.

Christianity offers the only long-term solution to both our environmental and social problems. Any other solution is doomed to failure because it does not address the root cause of original sin—which is trying to do things by human knowledge without God. Jesus Christ came in the flesh and paid the price for all of humanity's sins—past, present, and future--through His death on the cross. His resurrection gives us hope for a restored relationship with God, not only in heaven in the future but at some point even on earth during the Millennial reign. As a Christian, I have the responsibility to act with love toward my fellow humans and to be a good steward of the creation that God has entrusted us with.

My philosophies about the connection between organic farming, environmentalism, and creation stewardship have certainly changed over time. In the 1990s, unfortunately, there was an idea in the evangelical church that environmentalism was somehow anti-Christian and that Christians shouldn't care about the earth because it was going to get destroyed pretty soon anyways. It had its origins in similar doomsday rhetoric to what inspired the environmental movement in the 1970s, ironically. As I grew up, I started questioning some of those ideas and looking solely to the Bible as my source of spiritual guidance. I am still a Christian, and a stronger one than ever before, but I don't identify with any specific denomination and I do not link my faith with politics. The only book that has influenced these philosophies is the Bible. It's only recently that I've run across books written by other Christians who feel similarly.

Q: What is your perspective on the connection between organic farming and other social and political movements? Were you involved in any social or political movements that overlapped with your organic farming interests?

A: As I've learned more about the history of organic farming, I have been impressed with how well it has managed to stay out of partisan politics in the past. Of course it has been involved with agricultural *policy*, but that is usually not a partisan issue, nor is it even mentioned as a platform plank by most political candidates. With that history in mind, I have been disappointed by the efforts of some left-wing activists in the recent past to try to link organic farming with social issues. I agree that there are social issues in modern agriculture that need to be addressed, but they should be separated from the soil and health issues that are the cornerstone of organic farming. Social activism focuses only on *who* is farming, not on *how* they are farming. There's no guarantee that people of exploited minority groups will automatically farm well if they get access to land. Organic farming should focus on helping everyone, regardless of their demographics, farm better, even as those demographics change over time. Also, I think efforts to link organic farming too strongly with the political left are short-sighted, because the majority of

organic farmers in the Midwest are politically conservative. Politically polarizing organic farming could alienate those conservative organic farmers and slow the spread of organic farming.

As far as my personal politics are concerned, I consider myself a political moderate. I was raised in a very conservative Christian homeschooling community, where the naughtiest name my friends could think to call each other was “Democrat.” When I was in my early twenties, I disassociated my Christianity from politics and decided that there was nothing inherently Christian about the Republican party. I was leaning more toward the left until I went to UW-Madison. Then the events of 2020 made me equally disgusted at the radical far leftists and the radical far rightists, and I don’t want to identify with either. I currently am trying to stay out of partisan politics completely and would vote for a more moderate candidate from either party over either extreme.

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

A: My first response is—as much as possible! That’s why I am working so hard to collect oral history interviews from as diverse a range of people as possible. I want people to be able to tell their stories in their own words. One of the most important things I want to preserve is an awareness of the ideological diversity of organic farming. I want to tell the stories of communists like Scott Nearing, anarchist back-to-the-land hippies, Catholic social activists, conservative family farmers, and Amish and Mennonite farmers—all of whom played a part in organic history. The majority of existing histories are written strictly from a liberal perspective, and so I also want to include the perspectives of conservative farmers because they make up a sizeable portion of the organic farming community. I think that ideological diversity is something that should be preserved and celebrated.

Another aspect of this history that hasn’t been documented well is the origins of anti-organic rhetoric and the contentious relationship between land grant universities and organic farmers. I want to look deeper at how social and political factors within the academic research community helped perpetuate an anti-organic attitude among scientists, even though those attitudes were not based on scientific research. The typical view among organic farmers has been that the scientists were just sold out to chemical companies. But I’ve never yet met a university researcher who was in it for the money—those kind of people who are solely motivated by money find more lucrative professions in the private sector. So there was something deeper going on, something about organic farming that threatened the reductionist scientific paradigm. That’s something I think needs to be documented, because it also holds the key to understanding ongoing criticisms of organic farming.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share before we end this interview?

A: I’ve been honest and up-front in this interview about my personal beliefs and philosophies. I felt like, if I’m asking people to do oral histories, I should subject myself to the same scrutiny. I hope that this honesty will not turn away people who identify with liberal politics or who are opposed to Christianity. I’ve interviewed many people whose worldviews differ widely from my own, and we have still been able to get along well on a personal level and agree about a lot of things related to organic farming. I want to reassure everyone that I would never humiliate or

ridicule someone whose beliefs differ from my own. My goal is to present all of this ideological diversity fairly, without disparaging other viewpoints. I hold out hope that our country will eventually move forward out of this time of intense political division and be able to focus more on what we agree on, which actually is a lot. And I especially hope that organic farmers will be able to celebrate their interesting and ideologically diverse history, even if it doesn't fit neatly into any political boxes. We can all learn a lot from people who have different beliefs, if we are willing to listen thoughtfully. And that's what I try to do in each and every oral history interview.