

**Ruth Tonachael, Narrator**

**Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer**

**Wednesday, November 9, 2022**

**RT** = Ruth Tonachel

**AA** = Anneliese Abbott

**AA:** This is Wednesday, November 9, 2022, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing

**RT:** Ruth Tonachel.

**AA:** And we're doing this interview over the phone. So Ruth, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. I'm really looking forward to talking with you. So why don't we start, just tell a little about when and where you were born and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

**RT:** So I was born in Sayre, Pennsylvania, which is the nearest hospital to where I currently live in Towanda, Pennsylvania. My mom at the time was living in New York City, my parents were, but she came here to have me with her mom close by. And at that point my grandparents had retired and were living here on this farm, which goes back to the 1790s in my family. It was not, they weren't commercially farming it. They had the fields rented out, there's about 80-plus acres of fields that really should never be anything but pasture or hay, but they were putting corn and other crops on them at the time. And then they had a big garden. But it was, my family was not directly involved really in much of what was going on agriculturally here. I came here a lot as a child, and as I said we lived in New York City, that's where I grew up. But my parents left me here when I was three for a whole summer with my grandparents while they went to Europe. And I think that it was one of those traumatizing things at some level, because I thought they were never coming back. And from then on part of me was rooted here. And I started running the garden here, which was always very big, when I was about twelve or thirteen. Got a rototiller for my sixteenth birthday. So while, again, my background is not agricultural, I do have a long connection with gardening type stuff and interest in it that goes back to childhood. (2:31)

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

**RT:** So I left New York, and actually, I didn't go right away. I went initially, I went out to the West Coast where my aunt was living, and we, she was working with the United Farm Workers Union in California. Her husband was a lawyer for them. So I spent a little bit of time there that summer after high school. And then we drove a pickup truck across the country, taking about six weeks. So that was kind of a big adventure for me, to finally get off the East Coast.

And then after I got back I went and worked on a commercial green pepper farm in south Florida for three months, which was a pivotal experience. And at the farm there, Green Cay Farms, it was one of the biggest winter vegetable farms in that area, close to West Palm Beach. But Ted Winsberg, who's the farmer, was a Cornell educated guy who started with absolutely nothing and had built this really vibrant business and was constantly questioning commercial

agriculture. And he made a big impression on me. He has been interviewed, some of the alternative ag books later on talked about him as kind of a pioneer of looking for ways. He was doing organic peppers in small patches, not all of them, because he didn't want to go broke. But he was experimenting. And he was also, I think I went with him, he was supportive of labor in a way that most commercial farms in south Florida were not. I went with him to a meeting of the Immakolee Farm Workers Union in Belle Glade one night, and I just remember being, that was a whole other world to me, to see that. But he paid his workers very well, he provided housing, retirement. He kept on. In fact, he's in his mid-90s now, and his last worker just moved off the farm last year. The guy was also in his 80s I think by that time. But Ted had made sure that he had enough to buy a house elsewhere, closer to his kids. So he was really somebody that I credit with a lot of my thinking and my understanding, because also the world of commercial production was a crash course in that.

So then from there I went in January that following year to Wilmington College in southwest Ohio, which I found looking through those books of catalogs that they used to have in the library. And I was looking for an ag program within a liberal arts school. And that was the only one east of the Mississippi, a very small Quaker college. And I studied agriculture and ended up with a degree in agriculture and rural studies, which was in the era where you could make up your own major.

**AA:** So what years were that, that you were at Wilmington?

**RT:** I started there in 1975 and I graduated in 1979 from there. And they had, they did have what they called an organic farm at that time that had been started by a group of friends in the college, probably about five years before I arrived. But by the time I got there it was kind of just a house that was kind of rickety looking that a couple was living in, and there really wasn't anything going on out there. It was kind of weird, and they called it the organic farm, but they weren't doing anything. I did work all through college, I worked ten to twenty hours a week on the college farms, because they had a dairy, they had a horse farm, a hog farm, beef herd. That was all just essentially a commercially run farm that students could get work study jobs on. It's changed a lot now, it's designed more with an educational bent.

So that was, again, a different approach to ag going there. And then in my courses there, I think I mentioned the other day, it was the Earl Butz era, get big or get out, grow fencerow to fencerow. Pretty fast they convinced me that this farm here in Pennsylvania where I am was untenable as a commercial farm, that I could never make a living here. Which may or may not have been true, but I became convinced of it at that point. So that's my college. And then I went on later, I went to grad school at the University of Alabama in American studies, focused on country music and rock and roll. That was another era of my life. (8:23)

**AA:** So then, what got you really interested in organic or sustainable agriculture? Were there any people, I know you mentioned that farmer you worked with in Florida. Any other people, or publications, or books, or organizations that you consider especially influential?

**RT:** Definitely Wendell Berry. I started reading Wendell Berry when I was in high school. I continue to read Wendell Berry. He was a big influence early on. The Rodale's *Organic Gardening* magazine, I started getting that when I was in probably tenth or eleventh grade. And another person that had a big influence, I went to hear when I was still in high school in New

York, hear Scott Nearing speak, who was the author of the book *Living the Good Life*. And that was profoundly influential in a lot of the back-to-the-land movement. But I just found Scott Nearing, he was an amazing intellectual and his arguments were really well-reasoned. So he definitely influenced me also. I was at the first Earth Day in 1970 in New York, and that too, just the excitement of it. It was definitely an extension of the hippie movement at that point. But it excited me, and it kind of introduced concepts like windmills and composting, things that I hadn't really heard that much about before that. (10:08)

**AA:** So then you mentioned after you finished college, you did some writing and editorial work in Pennsylvania. Do you want to talk a little more about that?

**RT:** Yeah. I came back here. That's sort of like my life over and over. I came back here and then I went off and did something else. But I got a job as the editor of a weekly newspaper called the *Farmer's Friend* that had not really had anybody editing it, it was more just an ad rag. And I ended up, that was 1981, writing, doing some editorials that actually did cause some, had some political ramifications. I got involved with a vote about checkoff fees for dairy farmers that the milk co-ops were taking to use for advertising. And they were giving farmers an option across the state to vote for or against that, with the assumption that farmers were just totally sold on it. And I kept putting out editorials saying, "Let farmers decide, why should you assume? And maybe this isn't worth it. Are there other ways of selling it?" Plus, there was no differentiation in how you farmed, all milk was treated the same in those advertising campaigns, and that didn't seem right to me. At that time I worked with the Pennsylvania Farmers Union against that checkoff fee. And we eventually, the farmers did vote it down, which kind of lost me my job at that point. The owners of the paper said, "We're here to sell advertising in here, and you're killing advertising." So that did not make them happy. And coincidentally I was thinking about going to grad school, so that was the end of that job. But I did love that job, and I did, while I had it, do a lot of articles on smaller farms and was learning constantly from farmers about different methods and began to think about grazing as something that was important for livestock, grazing. I didn't really know enough at that point to speak out much on it. (12:47)

**AA:** So then it was after that that you went to graduate school?

**RT:** Yes, I left there and went to graduate school in Alabama.

**AA:** And then after that—and you said that wasn't really related to agriculture, what you studied there?

**RT:** No, it was more cultural studies. American studies, and literature, and history. And then after that, again, I did one of those, "Oh, now I've got a degree." I did look at some jobs running ag newspapers similar to the one I had run—in the Carolinas. I was offered a job there, and I just decided it seemed too isolated, and I didn't know anyone there. And then I decided to join a cross-country walk for the environment. So I spent several months doing that. That following year I just completely had no address for a good year. I did the walk for about three or four months, from the coast of California down to Four Corners, New Mexico. And then I left that because the group was driving me crazy. It was called Walk for the Earth, so it was environmental and supposedly about Native American rights. And then I got a job traveling on a

bus with a traveling high school, going from Maine down, we went to the Florida Keys, and started out across the West. Did that for about six months. And that I did a lot with them, we were really charged with figuring out what the course work was, so I was always looking for things related to ag and sustainability. We went to the New Alchemy Institute on Cape Cod.

**AA:** What was that like, visiting there?

**RT:** That was really interesting. They were doing a lot of stuff with energy and growing fish in ponds that, I can't remember how it even worked now, but they were just self-contained, like they grew plants, and the fish grew in there, and then the waste was recycled through the system. We also went up and met Helen Nearing, Scott had died by then. We worked in Appalachia on some houses, with the garden projects. It's a long time ago, I don't remember all the details. I just know that I was constantly looking for ways to teach the kids about that sort of thing. And then I started thinking, "I have to find a real job," so I started working for the Center for Rural Affairs after that in Nebraska. I guess in between, that summer season in between I had a market vegetable operation here selling to restaurants and realized how incredibly labor-intensive that was. And then I didn't really make much money. I didn't have the skills, probably, I don't know. I didn't think that at the time. But I just worked really, really hard and made very little money. So it was at the end of that summer that I went to the Center for Rural Affairs, which would have been 1985 I think. (16:40)

**AA:** So tell me about your work at the Center for Rural Affairs.

**RT:** That was a really interesting job. I was the public affairs director for what they were calling the Small Farm Resources Project, which was about basically cutting costs, particularly for energy, for small farmers in northeast Nebraska. And that area had a lot of farmers. One of the big new technologies of the time was center pivot irrigation, in Nebraska. And the farmers in that area were too small to be able to afford that, by and large. So they were looking at ways to be competitive without making those kinds of investments in things that just didn't seem like it was going to be, they couldn't do it. It wasn't worthwhile for them. And it was a really traditional community. It was a little isolating for me, and I felt like I didn't ever really connect well, other than with people I worked with. Hartington, Nebraska is a tiny little town, that's where I was located, not too far from Yankton, South Dakota. But I did, we were doing a lot of on-farm research projects, and there were other people who were actually working with the science, and other people who went out and took measurements. And my job was to translate that into articles and reports that other people could understand. So I had to go out and see a lot of the work, but I wasn't actually doing the measuring parts.

But most of those farmers, I would say, they had never not been organic, pretty much. They just hadn't adopted, because of the costs, they hadn't seen the benefits of commercial fertilizer, for example. They were using compost. And they had been making their own windmills and solar panels and things like that for a number of years at that point. So that's what that project was about. My job mainly was promoting it and writing editorials to send out to all over the place and interpreting. But it definitely, we were arguing about what word it was. I remember regenerative and alternative and sustainable, there were some others I don't even remember. So we were not using the word organic, because nobody wanted to be restricted, and that seemed more restrictive, and I think also that there was a sense that it was related to the

hippie movement, and these folks were really very conservative in a lot of ways. But they were farming organically. (20:06)

**AA:** So then, how long did you stay there before you moved back to Pennsylvania?

**RT:** I was there for a little over a year. And then my grandmother died, and that's what precipitated my move back here.

**AA:** Talk about what you did when you went back to Pennsylvania.

**RT:** I was armed with the experience of the Center for Rural Affairs. Let me back up for a second. The director there, Marty Strange was the founder of the Center for Rural Affairs, was also one of the preeminent thinkers of the time on small farms and family farms. He was really big on staying away from industrialization and agriculture. And the center was doing a lot of work to craft policy or to pressure congressmen to craft policies that would less favor corporate involvement in agriculture, and the tax structure that made it more profitable for corporations to be in agriculture was something that they were fighting against all the time. So he was influential. And also while I was there, I mentioned the other day, we did a weekend retreat with Allan Savory, who was sort of the guru of management intensive grazing, or rotational grazing is what they were calling it at that point. And so that also was a huge influence, and when I came back I had that all in my head.

Shortly after I got back here, I went to a meeting near State College and met Tim Bowser, who had previously been an intern at the Center for Rural Affairs. And we had a conversation about, we should have something like that in Pennsylvania. And it took probably two years before he energized some other people, and I just kept prodding him. We had a conference, I just found the issues from this this morning. It was in 1992 in State College, the initial conference, which I think we just called "Farming for the Future: Sustainable Ag for Pennsylvania." That was the name of the conference. And I believe Marty Strange was one of the keynote speakers, but I could be wrong. He might have been the following year. And 500 people showed up, which we were just stunned. We thought we'd get a hundred. So that kind of let us know that there was interest in Pennsylvania for some more regular group or something. And then it took another nine months to a year before we actually formed the organization. But it came out at that conference. And I did a lot of work to organize people. I brought grazers down from this area to that conference to speak. At that point I was working at about eight different jobs, including the local conservation district, the Soil Conservation Service, all part-time, and really meeting a lot of all kinds of farmers, looking for smaller sustainable operations in this region and looking to make connections. (24:21)

**AA:** Is there anything you want to share about your editorial or writing work for PASA, and any other agricultural publications as well?

**RT:** It was a great experience. It was definitely one of the jobs I loved the most in my life. I did it for ten years. I was the editor of the newsletter there that went from the start; it was sixteen pages and then doubled the size. And eventually I actually took over the page design and I learned how to lay out pages and all that stuff on the computer, which I enjoyed, too. There was a question I think you had asked before about people involved in PASA. As I mentioned, Tim

Bowser. But there was a whole array of folks when we started. Carolyn Sachs from Penn State, Tim Crawford, who was at New Morning Farms in southern Pennsylvania. Ward Sinclair, who had been a columnist for the *New York Times*, I believe. He was one of my mentors with that newsletter. And George DeVault, who later became the editor of *New Farm* magazine at Rodale. I definitely met some of the premier ag writers in the country, ag outside of industrial ag, I guess I should say. The critics. And then somewhere in the early '90s I also took a trip down to Polyface Farm, Joel Salatin in Virginia. And that got me fired up even more about grazing. And I started raising chickens in mobile pens myself here, which I did for about 25 years. I still have been doing it. I did it for 25 years and then I stopped, and then when COVID came I started doing it again because I was stuck here. But so yeah, Joel Salatin was also a big influence.

Yeah, I feel like I've learned from every farm I've been on, and I've been on hundreds. The other person I mentioned who I met here was Roger Wentling, and he was a grazing proponent who was working for the Soil Conservation Service at the same time I was. He had been a proponent of grazing in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, and he had been railroaded out of there because the local feed mills didn't like the drop in feed purchases among farmers who were adopting intensive grazing. They pressured SCS to get him out of there. So they sent him up here, which he viewed as being sent to the gulag. But he also was an influence on me. (28:00)

**AA:** So is there anything you want to share about how PASA helped network farmers, and maybe what the most important parts of that organization were, how it helped people connect?

**RT:** I think it has done an amazing job, and I'm still proud of what they're doing. It's changed quite a bit, but I think this current director, Hannah Brubaker-Smith, has gone back to a lot of the original principles that we were founded on, which was networking and support for farmers and on-farm research projects to help farmers not have to all make the same mistakes over and over, to be able to learn from each other that way. And also to be a political voice in Harrisburg. But I think the conferences, PASA's ended up being the organization with one of the most successful annual conferences in the country, certainly in the East, east of the Mississippi, one of the biggest ones. I think the energy of the organization had continued to be really positive. And helpful, that it exists. To me it's sort of amazing, given the atmosphere of when we founded it. It was considered a fringe sort of way of thinking about things. And those farmers were not really counted by the state ag department, for example. And now it's definitely a voice at the table. PASA has a presence in the state and is pretty much known statewide in ag circles, where before that, that type of agriculture was just, I remember when I started working at SCS, I mentioned somebody, and they'd say, oh, this or that farmer, and they'd say, "Oh, that's just an Old MacDonald farm." It was that view, that it was not real, not credible. (30:24)

**AA:** Do you want to say anything about your work for SCS? I don't think I've interviewed anyone who's worked for the Soil Conservation Service before—or NRCS, I guess it is now, but it was SCS when you worked there.

**RT:** I didn't work for them very long. And as I mentioned, this guy Roger Wentling was sent up here as a punishment, because the director of the local SCS was a very by-the-books conventional guy. It wasn't a good fit for me. But I learned about soils. And that was useful. But I don't know what else to say about it. It was definitely very bureaucratic, it was a lot of paperwork. And I think more what I saw was the way Roger was treated here. He got in trouble,

for example, for helping a biracial couple on the weekend to figure out a conservation plan for the property they had bought recently in the area. And was told he shouldn't, he wasn't supposed to be doing that was what they told him. Part of it was on the weekend, and part of it was because they were biracial. It was ugly stuff, in my book. Basically at that point, I was taking any job that I could find, and I had enough background that they hired me, but it wasn't something I ever wanted to make a career out of. (32:24)

**AA:** So is there anything you want to share about your own farm and the farming methods you used there?

**RT:** I've continually experimented with, I have probably a quarter-acre garden. I've been experimenting with deep mulch methods, all sorts of different ways of growing vegetables. Also now I'm looking at perennial vegetables. But that's a really small piece of this place. I think a lot of the Northeast, like this farm, is too steep and shouldn't be farmed. The soils are not that good. The comparison, when I went to Ohio, I think the tenant farmers here were getting 80 bushels of corn to the acre, and I went out there and they're getting like 245, and I thought, "Why are we doing this, plowing up the soil and causing erosion for that lousy production?" And then when I learned about grazing, it just made sense to me that that's the only thing that this land—and the Northeast in general, I think. Originally a lot of it was sheep farms, which, well-managed, could have been a really good thing. But the demand for wool diminished, I guess, historically.

But I also see, I've come more to think that maybe this was supposed to be woods, and maybe that's what it needs to go back to, is just woods. I think there are places—and actually, my garden plot, which is behind the house and is fairly level, above the creek bank, is the only Class I soil on this entire 500-acre property. And at some point an archaeologist was here from Penn State and was picking through the pottery shards, and he found tons of arrowheads and indications of obviously people having been here long ago. And my grandfather was helping, and he said, "Oh, my family's been gardening this land, or farming this land for two hundred years," and the archaeologist said, "Well, I think it's been farmed for more like two thousand, at least." In that spot, which I think was an indicator that there's not that much land on this property that is suited for that, for growing food on an intensive level of any sort. I think tree crops and other things, my daughter has been looking at some of those ideas. Those weren't even on my radar, those agroforestry-type crops, until the last ten years or so. They weren't what Wilmington College was teaching about in the '70s. Anything of that nature. (35:53)

**AA:** So related to that, related to the land use, is there anything you want to share about the history of management intensive grazing in the United States? Because I feel like you've kind of watched that unfold during your work.

**RT:** I have. To me, that's been the most optimistic aspect of change in agriculture in my lifetime, is seeing the expansion of that. Unfortunately I feel like it's a little bit stalled right now, and I think there has been some pushback from people talking about methane from cows and the vegan slant that's anti-animal agriculture as a whole. You see statistics about not eating meat and why you shouldn't eat meat and how much energy it wastes. And they never differentiate between how the meat is raised. To me, intensive grazing is actually often a way of improving carbon sequestration on land. Initially, I know Joel Salatin was viewed as a kind of nut case when he started preaching about it. And the university view was it's just going backward. I remember

people in Nebraska at the universities saying, “That’s what we’re trying to get away from, is that kind of labor intensive.” And it is more labor intensive. That is part of it. There’s a philosophy in conventional agriculture about getting bigger and more and more hands-off. And I think sustainable agriculture, or organic agriculture, requires a different mindset. It can’t be as big. But that doesn’t mean it can’t be equally productive, it’s just on a smaller scale requiring more people and more farms, which to me is more democratic, better for the country as a whole. Does that make sense? (38:40)

**AA:** Yeah. So who were some of the key people involved in management intensive grazing? I know you mentioned Allan Savory. What was his contribution, and then who were some of the other early leaders in that?

**RT:** I think Voisin was a Frenchman who outlined some of those concepts. I can’t remember his first name.

**AA:** André.

**RT:** Yes. André. Certainly everybody I’ve known who has practiced it has read his book and talks about him. For me, Allan Savory was the conversion factor. Just because I think he had observed the impacts of animals in Africa and how it could actually improve land that was really desolate, and he did the same thing in places in the Southwest with cattle, that the herd impact was actually improving dry or desert-like soils. As long as they were moved off it fast enough. He was definitely the person I felt was the most convincing. I’m trying to think who else. Allan Nation and *Stockman Grass Farmer* also was big, that magazine was a big influence. I did some articles for them on and off over the years. I can’t think of anybody else offhand. Joel Salatin. (40:28)

**AA:** And so you touched on this a little, but is there anything else you want to add about the initial reaction of mainstream agriculture to the concept of management intensive grazing?

**RT:** There was just a lot of resistance. And I think there were certain things like technology. The technology of electric fencing has improved exponentially over the last twenty-five, thirty years. So that’s helped make it more attainable. But I just think, the universities, there was nothing, there was no industry that stood to benefit by supporting research into it. So the universities just were paying no attention to it initially. I think the USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Ag were similar. There was nothing to sell, so they didn’t have money coming from anybody who wanted to invest in learning about it or teaching about it or promoting it. It’s totally changed now. I think there’s quite a bit of research being done now by the universities and within NRCS has grazing projects all over the place now. But it was very negative initially. (42:01)

**AA:** So is there anything else you want to add about your own experience, the historical aspect, before we go on to talking about philosophies?

**RT:** I do think it’s interesting how it’s been a cultural shift, that things like research on organic vegetables, Rodale was sort of the place that started doing those studies. But slowly a lot of land



grant colleges had moved—not that slowly. They have projects related to that stuff now, which is a positive in my mind.

**AA:** So what is your perspective on the connection between the agricultural universities, especially the land grants, and organic and sustainable agriculture? How has that changed?

**RT:** Well, when I was looking to go to college, it just didn't exist in land grant universities. And that was close to fifty years ago now. But it just wasn't there. They were studying this chemical versus that chemical. But now, I'm not in one, and I haven't been near one for quite a while. So I can't speak to it. If you asked a grad student in entomology what the studies as far as insect pest control are, I may be wrong, but I do hear a lot about integrated pest management and methods that don't require so many chemicals or any chemicals at times. That seems to be pretty mainstream now, from what I've observed, where that just didn't exist fifty years ago. (44:15)

**AA:** When you were at Wilmington, did you run into any specifically anti-organic anything there, or it just wasn't mentioned at all?

**RT:** Oh, it was a big divide. Because like I said, they had this “organic” farm. And the people that had been involved with that, it was a fight constantly. And eventually the college actually tore down that farm and bulldozed the whole area. It was definitely a volatile topic in the ag department. We had one professor, a guy named Jerry Carr from Kansas, who was a lot more, he was just a milder personality. And he was willing to, if kids wanted to try something, experiment with something, students were interested, he was more willing to go along with that, even though he'd come from a traditional farm in Kansas. But then there was an ag economy professor who was just blatantly, just, “That's stupid! We don't want that.” He was very negative. So yeah, it was definitely a point of contention. And then there were kids that were coming in from the Midwest to Wilmington who were from conventional farms, and they just thought, “What are these crazy hippie kids about?” Just weren't interested in even hearing about it or seeing it. Or learning anything about it. But there were no courses at that point that even addressed it in coursework. I took animal science, and it was all about how to put hormones in their ears to make the cows get bigger, and what gets added to the feed. Stuff that's not even legal, a lot of it, now. (46:29)

**AA:** So if you were to summarize your philosophies about organic, sustainable, alternative agriculture, whatever you want to call it, what would that be?

**RT:** I think basically working with nature instead of against it. I think nature is forgiving, generally, and is supportive. And I also think local. I just think our whole food system being so corporately run and dependent on transport over huge areas just doesn't make sense. I know that obviously New York City or Philadelphia is not going to feed itself, but I think places could be largely, urban areas could be largely fed within even less than five hundred miles. It doesn't all have to be coming from South America, Mexico. So I think part of my philosophy is also about eating, and how people eat, and what we eat when. And I don't like to be a food police type person at all, and I'm an omnivore, I'm not interested in ruling out this or that type of food. But I also, I only eat asparagus in the spring when it's ripe. I don't buy asparagus. And I've forever tried to buy only local meat as much as possible. I would say I'm not a purist, but I have

consistently tried to maintain that orientation towards as little added chemicals in food and as close to home as possible. Does that make sense? (48:46)

**AA:** Yeah. So would you say that your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about farming and food, or not?

**RT:** Well, I was raised by atheists. So I don't have a faith-based background. But I did go to Quaker schools for high school and college, which emphasized simplicity generally. I think that's woven into my thinking about agriculture, is you simplify in whatever way you can. Like grazing to me just seems like the most natural kind of a system. It's not necessarily totally simple, because you do have to move the animals. You can't just let them all loose and be done. But it's simple in the sense that animals eat grass, and if you have them on grass, they eat it, and they fertilize it, and then you move them. I think it's also a basic respect for natural systems and animals. I think Joel Salatin talks about the "pigness of a pig," letting it live as a pig instead of as a cog in an industrial system. And to me that is a spiritual kind of outlook. Working with nature rather than against it. (50:30)

**AA:** Is there any specific person or publication that strongly influenced your philosophies?

**RT:** Again, Wendell Berry. I think early on I was reading the *Whole Earth Catalog* and Ken Kesey. In more recent years I've read Ed Abbey, I'm not sure I would say he was a huge influence on me, but I think he's interesting. So yeah, sort of the more extreme environmental folks have had an influence on my thinking.

**AA:** So I know you maybe weren't specifically involved in it, but do you have any thoughts you want to share about the back-to-the-land movement about the 1960s and 1970s?

**RT:** I think an awful lot of what the organic agriculture movement, a lot of it did come out of that, and I certainly saw that, particularly in the Northeast. I think if you scratch the surface of most of the folks that are still out there that are in their 70s that most of them started there in the back-to-the-land movement. And I did spend time in high school, it sounds really bizarre, but when I was 13, 14, I used to take the bus up and spend weekends on a commune near Ithaca, New York. It was experimenting with versions of organic farming. The couple that was the main base of that particular commune ended up, they run an organic vineyard in California now on the Russian River Valley. And it's so long ago I don't remember conversations, I was 13 or 14. But they were thinking about those topics, and I was hearing about it from their perspective.

**AA:** So looking back now, I don't know if you really knew whether you could tell if it was well-farmed or not when you were that age, but was it? Do you know if they were doing good organic farming, or not so much, at that commune?

**RT:** No, I don't think they knew what they were doing at that point. I think they eventually developed a successful business doing—actually it's biodynamic on the West Coast, and their kid has taken it over now, but no, I don't think they had any idea what they were doing. They were back-to-the-land hippies with no background in it at the time. They learned. No, it was a new concept. I think somebody like Scott Nearing, he had grown up before industrial agriculture,

so he was in some ways a throwback. And that's kind of what I found with the farmers in Nebraska, too, is that even though they were still there doing things the same way, they hadn't "adapted" to industrial agriculture. They talk about the early adopters and the late adopters, but the folks in Nebraska were the non-adopters. They just kept doing what they were doing. And it turned out, oh, that's organic agriculture! But they were doing it with a curiosity and an interest in finding new ways all the time to do it. So they were really inspiring from that perspective. (54:32)

**AA:** So do you feel like there was a close connection between the organic farming and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s?

**RT:** Yes. I would say that. Because I did, I think even before we started PASA, I went to a number of NOFA-New York, which was the Natural Organic Farming Association of New York State. Their conferences were up around Ithaca. And they were totally hippies. And I remember feeling a little bit, I guess out of place at some level. Even though I was interested in a lot of the topics, and they were doing stuff, like they were bringing in people to teach about farming with horses. The workshops were interesting. But I felt like they were kind of more cult-like almost. Because that's one of the things I feel like PASA *didn't* do. I think PASA was much more of an open tent for everyone in Pennsylvania, or wherever—they had members, people coming to conferences from all over the country. But PASA, and part of that was me pushing Tim Bowser behind the scenes and saying, "No, we don't want to be strictly organic, we want to broaden the appeal, get as many people involved as we can." And NOFA-New York didn't feel that way to me when I went to those conferences. It felt more like revival meetings. (56:28)

**AA:** So then you would say, PASA is more like—because I've talked to people in both Ohio and Wisconsin that were talking about people from very different political and religious backgrounds, but all coming together because they were all interested in sustainable agriculture. And so you would say PASA is also more like that, the more diverse backgrounds of people that are involved in that.

**RT:** Yes, absolutely. We definitely had, like Jim Crawford from New Morning Farm was one of the back-to-the-land hippie types. Ann and Eric Nordell to some degree were that. But then we also had Amish farmers and Mennonite farmers. The PASA conference has always had a large contingent of Amish farmers showing up. And I just loved seeing that, particularly young ones coming, who were interested. Yeah, I think PASA is definitely more inclusive, or it has been.

**AA:** Do you have any idea—and I know it's really hard to tell—but what percentage of organic or sustainable farmers in Pennsylvania are Amish or Mennonite?

**RT:** I don't know. I really don't know. Because my dealings with Amish farmers recently have been in the farmers market arena, because I ran a farmers market here in the early 2000s for about five years. And I had trouble with them, actually, because they lied. They would be selling produce and saying it was their own. It wasn't. They were buying it at auction. It definitely wasn't organic. And none of them claimed to be organic that we had at the markets. And again, I think that's also, the kind of Amish that's willing to go to farmers markets may not be reflective of the sect as a whole, either. But yeah, I have no idea percentagewise how many. About seven

years ago I was involved with a farmer in southwest Ohio, and we would go to the Amish country to buy supplies sometimes. They had a vegetable operation. And they were a total mix, too, the folks out there that I encountered through him. They were definitely selling chemicals and plastic, things like that. Not organic. (59:16)

**AA:** And so, what would you say was the connection between organic and sustainable agriculture and the environmental movement?

**RT:** I think it's definitely an outgrowth. I think there are people in the sustainable ag movement that would not necessarily support the Sierra Club. I think part of that is cultural divides and political divides. But I definitely think they've grown up together at the same time, I guess. I mean, at some level, I see both, the organic ag movement and the environmental movement, as going right back to that 1970 Earth Day. That was sort of a birth for both of them at some level. But there are different, Scott Nearing was I think a guru of the early organic farm folks, and Ed Abbey maybe more of the environmental movement, and those are pretty different characters.

**AA:** Do you know if there's a connection between organic and sustainable agriculture in general and other social and political movements?

**RT:** I would say in general, yes. I think certainly the Center for Rural Affairs at this point is heavily involved in helping immigrants in Nebraska to establish businesses, whether they're agricultural or food-related. And I think PASA is now working much more with issues around inclusivity of ethnic diversity, women farmers. So I think there is a, within the organizations I think yes. There's a commitment to issues beyond just agriculture. On the other hand, I think probably PASA has lost some membership because of that. I think there are people who were part of the original PASA makeup who probably don't like having a gay director of the organization, even though I think she's doing a wonderful job. But I suspect that some of those original folks, because despite whatever they think about how liberal they are, there always was a bias against women in the early years. And I think it's changing. It's run by women now, so that's altered the perspective of the organization. I'm not sure, I feel muddy on what I'm saying here. (1:02:51)

**AA:** And would you say for yourself personally, were you involved in any social or political movements that you felt like really overlapped with your organic and sustainable agriculture interests?

**RT:** It's always been a mix. I come from a leftwing family, and I'm probably more middle-of-the-road than I was growing up, or than my family expected me to be. Native American issues, though I was always interested in that, in Native American history. And I think that view of land use continues to influence my thinking and change it in ways. But I think, it's weird, because I think agriculture, it has a lot of conservatism in it overall. I'm not sure. Now I'm losing track of what your question was.

**AA:** It was just if you were personally involved in any political or social movements that you felt like were really strong connected to organic or sustainable agriculture.

**RT:** I guess mostly I would say no. The policy-type stuff I've been involved with around agriculture has been just that. About tax policies that affect agriculture, or organic certification standard discussions or arguments. But those don't really involve some other movement. (1:04:58)

**AA:** So do you have any thoughts you'd like to share about any current trends or controversies in organic or sustainable agriculture?

**RT:** I think that there's a real need to get the organic standards straightened out and enforced, if they're going to continue to mean anything. I feel like for quite a few years they've just become very muddy. For that reason, something like Horizon Dairy, I see that it's certified organic milk, but I'd much rather buy local milk that is not necessarily certified, because I don't think Horizon Dairy, I can tell just from looking at Google Earth, just what kind of farms they run, and those cows are never outside, and it's huge industrial operations. So yeah, I think the standards right now are, they've got a problem. And I think part of that, I haven't followed it closely. I was paying a little more attention a couple years ago, I think there are issues with the NOSB. And I've heard people argue both directions. I know Christine Bedard, their daughter, they ran Lady Moon Farms, which is one of the biggest organic operations in Pennsylvania. And they have farms in Florida, vegetables. She was pretty adamant that the standards were just a mess, not effective. I think any time that, something that I think was designed or should help support the continued existence of smaller farms ends up pushing them out in favor of industrial-type farms, that something's not working right, because that's just not what organic agriculture, in my mind, or sustainable agriculture is. Does that make sense? (1:07:37)

**AA:** Yeah. So what's your opinion on the Real Organic and regenerative certifications that they're proposing in addition to the USDA seal? Or do you think that the push should be towards making the USDA regulations stricter?

**RT:** Honestly, I think they should be pushing the USDA, because it becomes confusing. There's so many labels that they all start to lose their meaning. I think there are a lot of good people involved in all those efforts, but I do feel like it diffuses energy too much. It's not focused well. And I think if we have this standard and we have this seal, it should mean something, the USDA organic seal. And right now I don't think it really does, very much. I guess as a consumer I look for local, I look for, can I find out what kind of farm this came from, and what that farm is doing. Because the USDA seal is not going to tell me anything as far as that, anymore. (1:09:09)

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

**RT:** I do think there's been tremendous progress in a relatively short time. The idea of organic food just didn't exist fifty years ago, other than a really, really miniscule number of people had a concept of that. Scott Nearing, maybe. Scott and Helen. I remember as a kid my mother used to take us to a little café place in Greenwich Village that was organic smoothies. But we're talking like the most liberal bastion in the whole country, probably, that had one place like that. Now, every café has organic this and organic that. So just the awareness of what that might be, I think, is a huge sea change. And that's positive. It's easy to lose sight that it takes time to change

things. I sort of feel like at this point that I'm old enough that I can see that we did have an impact and continue to have an impact in ways that were, didn't seem possible to me when we started PASA in the '90s. The fact that universities have taken on a lot more projects dealing with sustainability. But I think it has a ways to go. And I do think the standards issue is critical. I'm hopeful that in the next farm bill hopefully something will be rectified to improve that situation. But they have to mean something for it to exist. Otherwise they should just get rid of it, is kind of my opinion. (1:11:39)

**AA:** So is there anything else you'd like to share before we end the interview?

**RT:** I can't really think of anything specific. I feel like I've been really rambling. The two sort of strains that I continue to follow are thinking with regard to Native American ways of growing, and people like Winona LaDuke and what she's doing with wild rice. I think it is important to learn more, understand more about what kind of agriculture was here before white people were here, and how that worked, because I think that holds a lot of keys to what makes sense in North America. And I also do keep thinking like Wendell Berry is a good spokesperson for a lot of issues as well. Those are the two voices that continue to resonate for me.

**AA:** Thank you so much for sharing all that and for taking the time to do this interview.

**RT:** Sure. Well, I hope it's some use to you.

**Additional comments by Ruth in a follow-up email, November 13, 2022:**

One of my growing concerns regarding organic agriculture has been on the labor end. I guess it's been a disappointment to me to learn how many of the large organic farms are utilizing and often abusing undocumented workers - just like the rest of American agriculture.... There is a growing recognition of this as an ethical problem and concern about it is something that got baked into me on that green pepper farm in Florida 50 years ago. I was stunned to read about it happening on organic "family" farms in the Hudson River Valley of NY in Margaret Gray's book "Labor and the Locavore - the Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic." Obviously Covid made it more obvious in the meat packing industry as well as on dairy farms in upstate NY who were/are hiding workers for fear of deportation at a time when it was/is impossible to find replacements.

Two other related books that I found interesting are:

"Village of immigrants - Latinos in an emerging America" by Diana R Gordon which focuses on Greenport, NY, a town on the far end of Long Island which is surrounded by old potato farms and now vineyards. I had visited a friend near there and been surprised to wake up hearing the Spanish of Guatemala in the fields next to her house....

"Beyond the Borderlands - Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico" by Debra Lattanzi Shutika which focuses on immigrants working in the mushroom cellar farms of Kennett Square, PA. She actually went and lived for a period of time in the town in Mexico where the majority of those workers came from as well as studying the ways they all end up in the same area in PA working on the mushroom farms.

This topic, especially in relation to Mexican and Central Americans, got my attention primarily because of the influx of workers here when the gas industry invaded us around 2009. As I met more and more immigrants here, the issues of undocumented people became visible to me and I began to realize that they were everywhere - especially in agriculture. That has also led me to travels in Mexico, Spanish language studies and gradually to an entirely new view of the history of the Americas.

One other project that I realized I had not mentioned at all to you that might be of interest is a "History of the Barns and Agriculture of Northeast Pennsylvania" that I worked on here from around 2008-11. I had NEH and other funding through the nonprofit I was working for and we produced an hour long DVD on the subject. I have a few copies left and if you would like one, I can mail it. We completed it just as the first gas wells were drilled so it ends on a more optimistic note than it should have. The Seeley family (address below) is featured in it as well as my family (Hale) barn.

I was also producing local food guides and involved with the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign for a number of years circa 2005-12 to promote local farms and food. What I see now, in hindsight, is that about 75% of the operations I was promoting at that time were newbies who didn't survive. People with loads of enthusiasm, ability to self-promote and cash to invest - often recent retirees - who didn't have the farm skills or energy to continue. A surprising (to me) number of the vendors at the Farmers Market I ran from 2005-9 have died.

Sadly, the model of family farms that I encountered in NE Nebraska in 1986 was sustainable agriculturally and economically BUT it made enough money to send kids to college and most of them didn't come back....