

**Roger Blobaum
Organic Agriculture
Consultant and Advocate
Narrator**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

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**Roger Blobaum—RB
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: Today I have the good fortune of interviewing Roger Blobaum, who is a longtime organic agriculture consultant and advocate. I am delighted to talk to Roger, in particular because, more than anybody else I've had the privilege of interviewing, Roger has the longest history and can tell us, really, about actually five decades of work in that area of agriculture, sustainable agriculture, domestic, international, and all of these areas. A lot of this work that Roger's done, thanks to his own archive and website, is available to the public already, so I want to get some of that, but I really am looking forward to having you talk about how you got into this. I'd like you to take it all the way back to that farm in Iowa and up through your military service and your whole transition from journalist to advocate. I am thinking that people, in the future, when they look at these archives are really going to want to know—who are these people and why did they get into this subject, when it was much of the time facing a headwind, but sticking with it. Roger, why don't you just start at the beginning.

RB: I grew up on a crop and livestock farm in southern Iowa. My dad did not use synthetic fertilizers or any kind of farm chemicals, so I really believe that our farm could have been certified organic at that time, or certainly it was more of a biodynamic farm. My dad was ... his background was German, and he learned farming the German way from his farmer. I think one of the things that I often mention about growing up on the farm, we had dairy cattle; we milked 12-to-15 cows. At that time that was quite a few. We had a beef operation and we had hogs. I think one of the things that influenced me later was the fact that in all the time I was growing up we only had a vet out at the farm once. I mean, animal health was a given. As I later visited many, many organic farms, one of the things that was always brought up was animal health and the fact that they never had any vet bills. So that was an influence, kind of, where I came from. I went to Iowa State University and I minored in agronomy, which was good, because it helped me later as I got into organic and sustainable. I was trained, of course, as a journalist, an agricultural journalist. And in terms of how I became interested in policy, my first real job was as a statehouse reporter for the Associated Press in Madison, and so I covered the legislature and state government, and so I saw people who were making policy close-up, and I became interested. I wanted to go to Washington, of course, and the real break came when I won a congressional fellowship, which provided for a year's study of Congress in Washington. So I made it to Washington, I was an intern then in the office of the House majority whip, and then over to the Senate majority whip, who was Hubert Humphrey, and became very much involved in policy in both places. At the end of this period I joined the staff of Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin,

whom I had known as governor when I was a reporter. My area was ... first of all I was press secretary, but I also had legislative responsibilities, the farm area and the environmental area, so those two went together nicely. I think one of the things that really got me interested in organic and sustainable later on was I was given the job of doing the staff work on the bill to ban the manufacture of DDT. Senator Nelson gave me that assignment, and it's interesting that ... of course, all of the regulation of pesticides at that time was still in USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) had not yet been set up. So Senator Nelson said to me—Roger, when you get this bill ready, and through legislative counsel and so forth, who actually drafts it, I want you to take it to the parliamentarian of the Senate and make sure that that bill goes to my committee and not to the Agriculture Committee, because if it goes to the Agriculture Committee we can just forget about it. And that was really good advice, and I was able to go to the parliamentarian, and I was able to get this bill into Senator Nelson's committee.

RK: That was in the '60s, right?

RB: That was in the '60s.

RK: Because I remember *Silent Spring* and President Kennedy even being involved in it, becoming aware of the problem.

RB: Yes, and I had left, of course, before this finally became law in the early '70s, I think—I can't remember what year. Senator Nelson had a great influence on me in my whole career. You know, the founder of Earth Day and someone who truly believed in the environment. So I guess kind of carrying this a step further, I decided to go back to the area in southern Iowa where I had grown up and run for Congress. There are a number of people, I think, who are staff people who do that. I spent a whole year running for Congress, and I came very close to winning. If I could have switched five votes per precinct, I would have won. But I did not have the financial ability to run again, but I'd already decided that if I lose, I'm going to set myself up as a consultant in the place where I grew up, and I'm going to start working on—I hadn't been introduced yet to organic—but on environmental issues, and to set myself up. And actually, that's what I've done for more than 40 years. But my work in terms of what I did on the Hill—it was 50 years ago that I worked on the 1965 Farm Bill, and actually did the work on a title that was part of the farm bill, of course, with Senator Nelson, of course, being the person who did this. So one of the interesting things about how you make things happen—I was trained as a writer, which was very helpful, but in running for Congress I had to speak somewhere almost every day, and I learned to do public speaking and to be comfortable with public speaking, and that helped me enormously in the advocacy that I became involved in. So when it came to organic, this was kind of an accident. Several of us, after Earth Day, set up something called Iowans for Environmental Quality, a nonprofit organization, and I remember we had a board meeting on a September Saturday afternoon, and the chair of this organization, who was a young professor from Iowa State, said—I'm going to visit an organic farm this afternoon. Does anyone want to go with me? I had no idea what he was talking about, so of course I said—well, yes, I'd love to go with you. So we went out and visited Clarence Van Zant's organic farm, and we drove into the yard. The dog was barking and there were chickens running around, and Clarence came out and met us, and he had a shovel in his hand, and he said—come on, let me kind of show you around. So this

was September now, and we walked out along the edge of the corn field, and Clarence turned over some shovelfuls of black dirt, and the earthworms rolled out, and then we looked at his Charolais cattle, and his timothy and red clover fields and so forth. When I saw those earthworms roll out, I said to myself—I'm seeing something that I haven't seen before. So I asked Clarence—well, what is this organic farming thing? Who's doing this? He said—well, there are quite a few organic farmers here in Iowa and all across the Midwest. They're doing very well financially. We get no help from the government or anybody in the agricultural establishment. But, he said, the Rodale Press is providing information, and that's where we're getting a lot of the information that we're sharing with each other. So I said to myself—I've got to follow up on this; I'm just really fascinated by this. In those days if you wanted to go somewhere, you just jumped in the car, so I jumped in the car, and I drove out to Emmaus, Pennsylvania, to the Rodale Press, without any advance warning, and I said—I'd like to have a grant so I can visit 50 organic farms. And they said—well, we don't give grants, but I'll tell you what we'll do. If you want to go out and visit a lot of farms and write stories about them and photograph them, we will run those stories in *Organic Gardening & Farming* magazine, and so that's really how I got involved in organic itself. So for several years I visited organic farms, wrote articles, did recordings—not only for that magazine, but I also got these stories placed elsewhere. I think there are about 30 of these stories on my website. But anyway, I was so inspired by what I saw on these farms and the dedication and commitment of these farmers, that I decided that I want to make organic farming the emphasis of my work as a consultant and my life's work, really. And that, of course, is a decision that I've never regretted. And so it kind of went on from there, and I just became more and more involved in organic projects—and organic and sustainable projects—and then in organizations. I think over the years I've served on the board of more than 30 organizations. I became fascinated with nonprofits and the way they mobilize public support for things that I wanted to see. So that's kind of how it all unfolded. I was very happy with this work and very satisfied, personally and professionally.

(12 minutes: 50 seconds)

RK: So after you did this good, important journalism with the organic farms, where did you go then? You eventually ended up in Washington, DC, again, didn't you? What's the trail that comes from your work after the Rodale?

RB: Well, I became involved in projects, really—the Small Farm Energy Project, with the Center for Rural Affairs, where we worked with farmers in home-built solar systems and things of this kind, doing measurements so that we actually had scientific papers, and we also spread the word on solar applications on farms. This was a very big project. I think we had a 39-month grant, from the Federal Poverty Agency, as it turns out, because these were small, low-income farmers. I became associated with the Center for Biology Systems at Washington University, which was headed by Barry Commoner, who was a very famous environmentalist at that time. Because of my work in farm energy, I was on an advisory committee for the Center. And because, in my visits to organic farms, I discovered that almost all of them talked about how they were using less energy, and it seemed to me that this somehow needed to be documented, and it was not. It was not recognized or documented, and was certainly a benefit of organic farming. So I went to the center and I knew they had a big grant, not from USDA, but from National Science Foundation, and I said—I think you ought to do a project that looks at and documents how

energy is being saved by organic farmers. And so I would say six months later I got a call and said—Roger, why don't you go out and recruit about 30 organic farmers who will agree to become part of a study that we're going to do. And so I did that; I knew a lot of organic farmers, and they were happy to participate in a study.

RK: Throughout your career one of the things ... of course the world was changing and moving and what happened was growing awareness, not only about pesticides, but about how oil dependent our country was, and we had a gasoline problem, gas crisis, so I think part of the energy work was a response to that.

RB: Yes, there was the Arab oil boycott. There were gas lines. And I remember one night I was returning from my work with the Center for Rural Affairs, and I got as far as Omaha, and there was not a single gas station open, and I had to rent a room that night because I couldn't even get home. I was out of gas. And you couldn't find any. And I stayed at a motel that was near a gas station, so the next morning I could get up early and actually get enough gas to get home. It was that bad at that time. So the whole energy area was an area in which I became very active, involved in several projects. But the interesting thing about the Washington University study was that in the process of doing this research we also pulled soil samples. We had a workbook that was filled out by these farmers every six months about everything they did on the farm, and the result was that not only at the end did we show in this research that organic farmers were using one-third less energy, but we also showed that, because of all of the other documentation that we had, there was less soil erosion, and it showed that these organic farmers, even though their yields were a little less, they were making just as much profit as anybody else. This was a huge public finding. The result of our result research was on the front page of the Sunday *New York Times*. And these people in the land grant universities, who had been disrespecting, I guess, organic, said—how can this possibly be? And then we ended up with a peer-reviewed article in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. So this was a break-through piece of research, and then other graduate students at land grants went ahead and replicated this study and got the same results. So this study from Washington University was a real breakthrough.

RK: I think that takes us up to approximately the Carter years, and then we had a secretary of agriculture from Minnesota named Bob Bergland, former congressman from Minnesota, who also, then, was learning about these things and picked up on it. I'd like you to talk about the Bergland years and what he was able to get doing and that you worked with.

RB: Yes, there was discrimination against organic farmers, as well as disrespect. And they were laughed at—let's just get right down to it—by people in the establishment. I'm talking about USDA, the ag committees in Congress, and the big farm organizations.

RK: People are going to starve if we ...

(19:13)

RB: Secretary Earl Butz saying—we have to decide which 50 million people are going to starve if we move to organic farming. We had an assistant secretary of agriculture who said—we're going to have to have manure piles as high as the Empire State Building if we're going to make

organic farming work. Well, it turns out that Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland, whom I knew well, had a neighbor who was an organic farmer, and Bob was aware of all of this disrespect and so forth for organic farmers, and he decided to have USDA do a study of what was actually going on here. And he had the study headed by the head of an agency in USDA, so this was an official USDA study that involved some scientists from other land grant universities and so forth, and turned out this incredible 1980 report on organic farming (*Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming*), which not only said it was legitimate, described what organic farmers did and why they did it, but also laid out a whole program of what needs to be done in terms of research, extension, and all of the programs that USDA offers. This was a huge breakthrough. The people at the land grant system, first of all they had been through the Washington University study that, you know, kind of busted things open, and here you had USDA coming out with this. It was a huge, huge development, and made it so much easier for people like me and the people I worked with to advocate organic. Well, actually, this didn't turn out well in the end. Right afterwards a new administration came in. Secretary John Block, who was a very conventional farmer ...

RK: Under Reagan.

RB: ... under Reagan, yes. Well, also, Bob Bergland had appointed Garth Youngberg as organic coordinator in the department. I mean, this was a real breakthrough. Well, as soon as this change took place, the organic coordinator was fired, they ordered all of the copies of this document destroyed. As it turned out, none of them were destroyed, because the people who had put this study together hid all these extra copies in a building out at Beltsville, at the experiment station, and then they started sending them out to people. And one day I came home, and the postman had left me a box with 500 copies of this report, which I then distributed as I went around and did speaking and so forth. But this, really, destroyed, in many ways, the effect of this. There were then attempts to have some kind of legislation as a follow-up, and so there was the Weaver Bill, Senator Leahy had a bill, and they did not get anywhere. So this whole thing just kind of died down and fell flat.

RK: For the best part of the '80s, really.

RB: Yes, exactly.

RK: It didn't start picking up again till late in the '80s.

RB: Yes. And I think it was significant, and this is true today as it was then—you couldn't pass organic or sustainable agriculture bills on their own, and you still can't today. They ride through with farm bills, and that's, in fact, how the Organic Foods Production Act made it through Congress, because it was hooked onto the farm bill and rode it through, and that was true, also, of the SARE program, which was one of the things that developed in the '80s as a follow-up to the 1980 report.

RK: And the SARE stands for ...

RB: Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. The thing that was not so good about the SARE program was that all of the language dealing with organic was stripped out before it was finally adopted. And it started out as the LISA program—Low Income Sustainable Agriculture—they didn't like the term LISA so they changed it to the SARE program.

RK: People were making fun of it because it was a feminine name. I remember that.

RB: And what we've had, then and still do, is only about 15 percent—and this program is still in existence—only about 15 percent of the projects were organic, and that has pretty much continued throughout. And it also continued in terms of the grants to graduate students that were part of this. Only 15 percent were for organic projects. So organic still was not really getting very far. But I think one of the things that was happening during this period, I think a lot of us were focusing on federal policy and what Congress does or what a president does. Meanwhile, in the '80s, the state governments were moving forward with organic, and I think this was because the organic farmers knew some legislators, and the state legislators were not so hung up on this disrespect for organic farmers, and by the end of the '80s, 26 states had statutes or organic programs of some kind and that, I think, set the stage, then, for the national legislation that followed. The other thing that happened in the '80s that was very significant was that a lot of other organizations became very much involved in organic as earth-friendly farming, environmentally friendly farming. So we began to see involvement of environmental organizations like the Sierra Club, of the consumer organizations like the Center for Science in the Public Interest; faith-based organizations—National Catholic Rural Life Conference and others. Then the other development that kind of went with this was that the small organic farming organizations that cropped up in many of the states, plus small organic certifiers, got together at a meeting in Kansas in 1989 and organized Organic Farmers Associations Council. So here we had the organic farmers and the certifiers, who also were organized as an advocacy group. And I worked very closely with them because I was in Washington at the time, and they had no Hill experience, and so I had a very nice relationship then, because, also, I knew organic, and so they felt comfortable with me. Getting back to my return to Washington, which you asked about before, I wrote to Mike Jacobson, the executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and I knew that Mike had had some interest in organic early-on, and I said—I'm sort of interested in getting more involved in this. So Mike got back to me. I had actually written a chapter in a book that he had published, so he knew what I was doing, and I became a consultant to the Center, and actually organized three national conferences. And the conferences were put forward as organic/sustainable. We made the whole package. And those three conferences, for the first time, brought all elements of organic together—the trade, the farmers, we had speakers from the government, and I think this also helped lay the groundwork for the organic legislation that followed.

(28:55)

RK: In 1990.

RB: In 1990. And was also helpful in the follow-up. So I think this is the first time that we really had this larger organic/sustainable movement with all of these organizations, with the farmers involved, very active leadership provided by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, for

example. We had put out petitions in health food stores across the country, and we had gathered 176,000 signatures from consumers, saying we want organic standards. So when Senator Leahy proposed the Organic Foods Production Act, we were ready to get right behind this, and also to help influence the legislation itself. For example, I pushed really hard for a provision that would allow lawsuits against USDA if they didn't shape up on organic, because we had this incredible distrust between the organic community and USDA. We didn't trust them at all. The Organic Foods Production Act also included the National Organic Standards Board, which was a way for people in the community to influence USDA's administration of this. We had peer review, because we didn't trust USDA's, how they would do accreditation. And so we had things built into this legislation that we thought would help protect organic integrity. Well, anyway, the Organic Foods Production Act was hooked up to the farm bill, so it floated right through the Senate. USDA was fighting it all the way, and they succeeded in getting a title for organic research thrown out, and some other things that weakened it. All references to health and environment were taken out of the bill. And it ended up, really, as more of a marketing bill than anything else. It went over to the House, to the House Agriculture Committee, the graveyard for things like this, and the House Agriculture Committee refused to report it out. So I was the lead-off witness on the Senate side, and we had just a wonderful hearing, and I presented these 178,000 signature petitions, which was a big deal. Then I also testified on the House side, but the House just sat on this, influenced by USDA, and would not report it out for the farm bill. Well, Congressman Peter DeFazio of Oregon decided that he would take the Organic Foods Production Act from the Senate and propose it as an amendment on the House floor. And we had to decide, all of us who had been involved in this, should we go for this or not? And we finally decided—we're going to take these people on. And so we called organic farmers and others all over the country, had them get in touch with their members of Congress, and when DeFazio's amendment came up on the House floor, believe it or not, it won, and beat all of these bad people—USDA, the House Agriculture Committee, had never had this done to them before. But the key votes—and this is really important, going back to Rodale and the magazine and all of this—it was the votes of urban members of Congress who made the difference. So anyway, this was the first time that organic really had been recognized, respected in the policy sense. I think, in my own case, having been involved in organic for many years, I wanted validation for what organic farmers were doing, I wanted them shown respect in the policy arena, and so this looked like it was really a big deal. I was the co-chair of the Organic Working Group, which was 27 national organizations that helped shape the bill and push it through Congress. So there was all of this build-up of support for organic through the '80s all came down to when it was really needed, and it made it possible to get the bill through. Then, of course, there was the challenge of getting appropriations and so forth.

RK: I was just going to ask you to move there. As I understand it, and I remember this myself, like about 11- or 12-year effort before these standards were ...

RB: That's right.

RK: Talk a little bit ...

RB: So, this thing seemed to be going very well. The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) was set up. It was a very good board. It went out and did hearings and meetings all over the

country and came up with a wonderful proposed rule that we all were behind—the trade, the farmers, the nonprofit groups, and everybody. And then USDA put out the proposed rule, and it was an absolute disaster. They just ... they didn't follow the NOSB recommendations at all. It was just an awful moment for organic. So we decided to hold a big meeting in Washington. I think there were probably 40 of us from all elements that had worked on this bill. We went through the proposed rule, which was 500 pages long, and we came up with the 68 points of darkness, we called it—68 problems with this thing. And we decided at that meeting we're going to try and shove this back down USDA's throat and make them do it over. And we backed this up by getting comments on the proposed rule—278,000 comments, one of the largest number of comments ever in the federal government, and it was enough that USDA actually did take it back and do it over. So I guess my point is that policy-wise, at the national level, organic had really arrived. Now there's been problems since, because the power that was given to the NOSB, USDA has never wanted to go along with that. They want to treat it like any other committee, and it's not, it has statutory authority. We have a continuing battle with the National Organic Program about organic integrity and the influence of others behind the scenes, big companies, and so forth, who are trying to water down organic. So that's a continuing struggle. So that kind of brings us up to date on this whole thing.

RK: It does, it does. You know, I was wanting you to talk about that, while we're on that area—the fact on one level there's great excitement, the fact that organics is really appearing in the mainstream, and there's whole grocery stores, Whole Foods, I think, dedicated to it and committed to it. At the same time some of the big companies are either buying up or starting up their own organic lines, but there's issues around that, about what they now call the Big O vs. the Little O for organics. I'd like your view on that whole trend and how that looks to you after your life of working on this.

RB: Well, I think that we're all concerned about the organic guarantee, and whether USDA can be trusted to provide the guarantee. We're very suspicious of companies, large conventional food companies, that wanted to get into organic, and rather than developing their organic programs, their organic line, for example, they bought up the pioneer organic companies that were very important in developing the market and so forth. The other thing is that the appointments to the NOSB, we have had a number of instances where the farmer slots in the NOSB have been filled by people from corporations or non-farmer entities. So there's been a continuing attempt to undermine the NOSB. The NOSB no longer controls its budget; it no longer controls its agenda. We even had the situation where a USDA bureaucrat tried to take over as chair of the NOSB. That was so bad that everybody just said—this is totally unacceptable. There's a continuing problem, and one of the difficulties of dealing with this is a lot of this stuff is in the back door. We don't know, always, who does this. USDA has its own constituencies, and some of them are very powerful. Monsanto and others are able to, and through campaign contributions and whatever, to influence policy. I think one of the things that's made it difficult for us in organic and sustainable both, is we don't have any PACs (Political Action Committee), we don't have any money to distribute to members of Congress, and so I think that's been an handicap, but we don't want to go in that direction. We want the people to be making these contacts on their own.

RK: I know another issue, a tension that I think will be there, and is continuing to be worked on in this sort of broader sustainable community, is you can be organic and not necessarily doing a

lot of the healthy things that were on some of the farms you described in your youth, that provide places for wildlife, that sort of thing. That when we want to look at a healthy landscape, organic isn't necessarily sufficient under the rules, as I understand it, at least in these bigger operations.

RB: Well, it's been very difficult to take the values and principles of the early organic farmers, who were responsible for organic, and translate that into rules and regulations. And that's been a terrible challenge. And so you know the way organic farmers in the beginning would set aside land for wildlife, as you mentioned, and were very conscious of soil erosion and soil fertility and inputs and so forth—a lot of that's been lost in trying to make the transition from the early values and principles to the regulations and rules that we have now. That's a continuing problem, and it's a difficult problem to solve. And a lot of the characteristics of organic, such as, in the early days at least, tending to be small is beautiful sort of thing. Being very concerned about the ability of organic farmers to be financially able. A lot of those early things have not become part of the rule at all, so they've sort of been lost. Old Timers are saying—well, yes, it's organic, but it's not really organic, because it's not like organic was in the beginning. So there's that kind of thing. And then, of course, USDA does the accrediting of the certifiers, and I think many of us feel that the accreditation is not adequately carried out. You know, they accredit a certifier for five years, don't make annual visits, and this is even more worrisome, because they've accredited a lot of foreign certifiers, and so how do we know what's going on when the regulations for accreditation are, we feel, inadequate. If you have a certifier certifying organic farms in China, for example—and in most cases this is a European certifier, is accredited by USDA, and USDA is not over there with an auditor every year looking at what's going on—how do we know? And the fact is we don't know. I was involved in organic accreditation through a nonprofit. In the early days we accredited certifiers operating in 75 countries, actually, with very strict accreditation rules and regulations. We pulled the accreditation in two or three instances, because you had to be able to do that. Well, my own feeling from that experience is that the accreditation of certifiers, particularly those operating outside the USDA, is worrisome.

(44:34)

RK: You've touched on this a little bit, and I do want to go back—one of the things I'm trying to get through this archiving process is, well, when we look back over the long term, things can go quite smooth, and things went along well, and kind of just happened in a good way, but actually even within the allies in the movement, there were tensions along the way. And I know one of them was in this area of organic and sustainability, and it caused some rifts and things that had to be dealt with, and I would like to at least get it on the record, your view of that, and what that was about.

RB: I was involved in the Midwest SAWG—Sustainable Agriculture Working Group—which became connected to Sustainable Agriculture Coalition—and other SAWGS around the country. We set up the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture also. In most cases those of us who were organic advocates felt that they were very leery of organic. They didn't want to be on the record on the Hill with organic, although maybe indirectly they were OK with organic, but they felt they just couldn't be out in front on organic. This was a continuing problem. I think that's pretty much gone now, but in the '80s in particular, I was certainly very unhappy with some of the sustainable agriculture groups because they would not stand up for organic or even admit that

it needed to be supported. And so I think what happened in the '90s with the Organic Foods Production Act and the fight over the rule and so forth, now I think that these organizations are very happy to be OK with organic. But in terms of the National Campaign, it was in 1992 that a number of us decided that we wanted to work together to support both organic and sustainable. And so we met at a ranch out in Colorado for a weekend, and we founded the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. And we founded it as the national dialog. We wanted to have a better way for all of our organizations to work together on farm bills in particular, but we didn't want to have it become a structure with the need to raise a lot of money and have a big staff and all that. Well, as it turns out, this all started off well, and most of the work was done in committees, and one of the committees, and the biggest and best, was the Organic Committee, and I was one of the people who was very much involved in setting up and running the Organic Committee. And we had regular conference calls and we had a meeting at the end of every year during that period, where we came together and we looked at how organic had done policy-wise in the last year, and then we made commitments about what we needed to do in the coming year. So this was a very interesting and effective committee, I would say. And a lot of other organizations became involved and we actually had Liana Hoodes as a staff member, who was very good. But we had trouble with the board. The National Campaign had, in the meantime, decided to become a nonprofit, to hire a staff, to raise money, and then we found out that the board was getting people who were not like us, I guess you would say. And finally, in disgust, because we felt that the board was interfering with the Organic Committee, we just packed up and moved off, and we took the whole Organic Committee and set up the National Organic Coalition, and we said—goodbye campaign. If you don't want to support organic, that's fine with us; we're going to set up our own organization. So now the National Organic Coalition is the fully organic-committed organization that is doing very good work on the Hill. I'm continuing to serve as an advisor, and a lot of the organizations that I've been involved in are members. And then there are also affiliates. This is a really going concern at the present time.

RK: I think that some of that rift has pretty much been healed over the years, and that that campaign now works quite closely with NSAC on a legislative agenda, once again, as far as I know.

RB: Actually, that campaign collapsed.

RK: But I mean the Organic Coalition, I meant, is now ...

RB: Yes. And I know that NSAC, when it puts out its program for the year, there is an organic component that's a very good one. So, yes, that's all been healed over, I think. And so I think we feel fine about that, and I know that at NOC meetings—National Organic Coalition—we have Ferd come in and share his views, and we try very much to work very closely. The problems that we have now, to the extent that there are these kinds of problems, is with the Organic Trade Association, which is very much the business side, and many of the companies that are involved in the Organic Trade Association are big food companies that happen to have an organic line. And so there still is tension, but it's a different kind of tension.

(51:10)

RK: I think one of the things that brings it together, too—I've been reading up on NSAC's agenda over the years—is the Beginning Farmer Initiative. And so many of the farmers that are getting started naturally look to—well, where can I have a market for what I'm doing—and it brings organics very much into that program.

RB: That is right. A new beginning farmer—and in many cases these are women as well—can get 10 acres, do organic vegetables, and do very, very well, and develop regular markets, get certified and get the premium, and this has really helped, as you suggest, a lot of young people to get started in farming. And we also see people who leave Wall Street and other kinds of jobs and go back to the land and start out in the same way. So there are older—I always say young and beginning, because the beginning is people who at a later stage in their life, who decide to get a piece of land and start raising organic vegetables and fruits.

RK: Yes, right. One of the things that reminded me, and I've heard you talk about this in other venues, is the ... over your career, the role of women in this movement, in agriculture, and I notice that even on the staffs of so many of the groups that are promoting sustainable ag and organics are women. I know you've observed that over your years.

RB: Yes, and I've been watching this closely. I think that many of the conventional farm organizations have never been friendly to women. Women rarely are on boards or have important positions. Organic has been totally welcoming to women, and, as you say, you look at OTA is headed by a woman. OFRF, Organic Farming Research Foundation, is headed by a woman. MOSES (Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service) is headed by a woman. And you can just go down the line of the strong role that women are playing, not only as organic farmers and involved in certifiers and inspectors—whatever—but in these nonprofit organizations that are advocating both organic and sustainable. So women have really found a home where they're welcomed and appreciated. And I think that this has made a huge difference in the strength of these organizations.

RK: Now, I personally see that as an area for optimism, too, in the fact that women are landowners in so many cases.

RB: That is correct.

RK: And there are organizations springing up just to work with women on how to learn to manage and have the courage and backing to really manage their land in a sustainable way.

RB: And widows who have farms now are finding ways to get them farmed organically because of their own views about the environment and earth-friendly farming. So this is a huge thing, really.

RK: I think it is, too.

RB: One of the things that I've tried to do over the years is I've been very much involved in mentoring. In many cases I've been mentoring young women who are working their way up

through nonprofit organizations, and I think that's a role that has been necessary in many ways, and I continue to do that.

RK: Another area I wanted to be sure and cover is that your career also included a lot of work in other countries, the whole international work, and the way that the organic movement checked in with other countries and learned from what was going on in other countries, and you've played a role in that, and I'd like you to talk about that.

RB: Yes. I was in the first farm group that was invited to China after the opening at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Some American groups were invited to come. I was in the first group, the group of Kansas farmers, and I joined them, and we traveled all over China looking at Chinese agriculture, and when we came back—Father John Stitz, of the Archdiocese of Kansas City had set this up—John and I decided to have a second tour. We went back the second year, and the second year we took some land grant scientists with us, a physician, a couple rural sociologists, because we found in our first trip that there were a lot of questions that we really needed to have asked, but we didn't have the expertise to do it. And so on the second trip we actually had experts, so we visited research stations and so forth, and it was a little different kind of trip. But anyway, I spent five weeks traveling around China, looking at Chinese agriculture. I was familiar with the book, *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, F. H. King's book, and I actually walked across the fields that had been farmed for 4,000 years and still were raising two or three crops a year, and this was all due to the law of return, which is a very important principle of organic, so that everything that was taken from the land was returned. And I've never seen so many compost piles as I saw in my visits to China. But also, the whole system of taking human waste and safely composting it and putting it into and mixing it with food wastes and other things, so that it could be safely returned to the land. That is something that has still not been done anywhere else. And so I was greatly influenced by my travels in China, and I think it was in 1992 or '93, I can't remember, I was invited to speak at an international conference in Beijing and to make a presentation at a workshop. Because of my earlier travels I assumed that organic was still the big deal in China, and so I did a really good paper on what's happening around the world on organic and the values and principles and so forth. I took 50 copies with me. When I got there, I discovered in looking at the agenda that my paper was the only one of 90 presentations that was about organic. I have to say that the managers of this conference found out about this, and they said—Roger, you're not going to do your presentation at a workshop, you're going to do it to the whole conference. So I had an opportunity, then, to make a full presentation on organic to an international conference in China. It was really a breakthrough, and what that did was then I was approached by the Ministry of Agriculture to come, and I made several trips as a consultant on organic to the Green Food Development Center, which is an agency of the Ministry of Agriculture. They had a program called foreign experts program that provided the funding for this. And I also developed a relationship with China Agricultural University, and I was invited to do the first workshop on organic ever in China, a week-long workshop that not only involved graduate students and faculty, but they also invited in people from the ministry and elsewhere. So I still have a continuing relationship with the development of organic in China, and, actually, I've been to China 12 times, and I am very, very familiar with the organic movement in China, both its good things and its things that are not so good. It's been very difficult to develop organic as an alternative, but I have to say about the Ministry of Agriculture, they have said—we're not for or against organic. If it works, OK, and if it doesn't, OK. And

that's kind of been it. And then there's been tension in China between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency of China. The only USDA accredited certifier in China is the one set up by the Environmental Protection Agency. We also accredited that when I was involved in the accreditation program. It's a very fine program in China. Many of them are not. But anyway, I got involved in organic in this, really, NGO organic accreditation body, and we did accreditation when no one else was doing it. I served on the board for twelve years and traveled all over the world visiting organic operations and going to organic meetings. And what I discovered was there is an organic movement everywhere. The question is what can we do to share information, to share research results. There's the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, an international organization. There are research stations in Germany and elsewhere, and so organic truly is an international movement. And one of the reasons that accreditation is so important is in trade, and so once you accredit a certifier—I always use Bolivia as an example—there's a little certifier in Bolivia that you'd think wouldn't have any idea what they were doing. We accredited them almost instantly, because they were so good, and what the accreditation did was open up the European market for the products of Bolivia. What our accreditation did was to ease the restrictions and make it possible for organic food to move internationally. This has been a big challenge, and it still is to some extent. So that's why USDA accreditation of certifiers, and the fact that they need to do a good job with this is so important. Consumers need to have confidence that the system is what it says it is. So we import a lot of organic food. A lot of consumers are a little leery about organic food that comes from Mexico, China, and so forth, and so this whole accreditation scheme is truly vital to making this work and to assuring consumers that there's a guarantee of integrity.

(1:03:41)

RK: I've been thinking about now, looked at quite a bit of your life, really just touched on it, but I'd like to move to your thinking about the future. I'd like to start by noting the recognition that you've received a lot of your life but, very recently, a really nice recognition in Wisconsin, did you not?

RB: Yes, I was honored by the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin for contributions and unselfish service to organic farming, which is a kind of ... they give away this award every year, but I was really the first one that was honored as someone involved in organic. I have to say that the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin has made great strides in responding to the needs of organic farmers, and I was very proud to have this award from the College of Agriculture there, because I've followed what they are doing, and there are some wonderful faculty members there who are leaders in organic research, and, of course, some wonderful graduate students there, as well.

RK: I think this was happening before this, but you've also chosen to use the university, the history society in Wisconsin, as an archive for your considerable amount of papers and records of your service, right?

RB: Yes. I'm a saver. Over 45 years I've ended up in my attic with 60 or 70 boxes of material—I've never thrown anything away—and I needed a place to go with these papers. Through some assistance, connection was made with the Wisconsin Historical Society, and as it turned out, the

Wisconsin Historical Society had just done a survey of its members—this is a very strong organization—saying what new areas should we be looking at? The results came back—you should be doing something on organic and sustainable agriculture. At that very time, I showed up and said—I have all of these papers that I want to contribute. What developed from this is a partnership between me and people within the historical society in setting up the National Organic and Sustainable Agriculture History Collection, which is a going concern. We now have papers from a number of leaders in organic. I've donated 40 boxes so far, and I probably have 15 more, so all of my papers from 45 years of work in organic and sustainable are being archived, and the first half, the first 25 boxes are now open and available to researchers and others. So this is the place for people who have been involved in the movement to have their papers preserved and archived and made available to researchers and others. I'm very proud of this, and I'm very much involved, still, in the development of this center, and in finding people who have papers to donate. So this is a very important part of my life right now, in addition to sorting and organizing my own papers and donating them.

RK: That's kind of where I wanted to go with this forward idea. That's forward thinking—those papers are going to be increasingly important to people in the future. I'd like to have you talk a little bit about what you think the future ... what are the needs now coming up to advance organic and sustainable agriculture, and where do you think it could end up?

RB: Well, of course, my view is that eventually all agriculture will have to be organic. I think because of the adverse impacts of more conventional agriculture, I think that maybe the environment cannot survive conventional farming, whereas I think that earth-friendly farming is absolutely essential into the future, and I think we know how to do that. I think, in terms of challenges for the future, one of the things that we need to really work on is to show that organic agriculture is one of the answers to the climate change issue. Organic farmers are able to ... I'm trying to think of the word ...

RK: Sequester?

RB: Sequester carbon in the soil. This is part of what they do, and this is one of the issues, of course. There are many other reasons why organic can contribute to dealing with the whole climate change issue. So that's one thing. Another thing is we need to confront and deal with this whole question of—can organic feed the world? I mean, we have increasing research now that shows—yes, organic can feed the world. The question is not can it, the question is what can we do to help it do a better job of this. There's a brand-new study out from Washington State University, John Reganold, who reviewed hundreds and hundreds of research studies over the years, and John's new study comes to the conclusion that organic, plus some other sustainable-type things, all together, can certainly deal with the issue of feeding the world. You don't need GMOs, you don't need chemicals, you don't need any of these kinds of things, and that an earth-friendly approach to food production is realistic and will satisfy our needs as far as we can see into the future. I think a third challenge for us is to get, I think, fairness in terms of government support for organic. Organic is now five percent of the market. Organic, at the very least, should get five percent of the research money, the extension money, the credit money—all of the things that USDA provides. I think it should be more than a fair share, because of the fact that we haven't been able to get this in the past. We need more organic research. We need more research

on things like varieties that do well in organic systems—this is certainly an area. As you may know, I was coordinator for organic research for the Ceres Trust, and I made 62 grants to land grant scientists, and one of the things that we insisted on in the proposals that we received was that organic farmers had to be involved in designing the research. I think we're seeing more of that in the government research grants as well. The farmers know what the needs are. The scientists know how to do the research, and as I speak to graduate students, I always say—you've got to get to know some farmers, and, if possible, even spend some time on an organic farm so you understand the principles and the values and what's really involved here. It's not just ...

RK: The whole system of a farm.

RB: That's right, exactly. It's not just something that you can get on top of by just reading reports and so forth. I've actually set up a fund myself to pay for travel of graduate students (I don't have that much money), at the University of Wisconsin, to organic farming conferences. So now I go to conferences and I have young people come up to me and say—Roger, thank you so much for making it possible for me to come to this organic farming conference. So that's a commitment that I make into the future. I just think that getting graduate students who do organic research to understand what organic is all about and learn it from the farmers themselves is really, really important. And have the research projects designed, to the extent possible, by the farmers. And we wouldn't fund anything unless it was demonstrated that the researchers had reached out and got farmers involved in designing the project.

(1:14:08)

RK: I know you're going to be speaking, once again this year, to the Midwest Organic Conference, which last year, I think, 3,500 people attended. We have seen that grow over the years, and you have spoken at how many? Twenty-four in a row, something like that?

RB: This will be my 24th year that I've been a speaker at this conference. I was present when MOSES started. I was present when the conference started, and this whole MOSES organization, as an organic farming organization and advocate, has been a very important part of my professional life. I want to double back to something that we touched on before, and that is my own approach to what's happening in agriculture generally. I didn't just do organic and sustainable. I got very much involved in solar energy applications on the farm, farmland preservation—I did a national study of loss of agricultural land. Anti-corporate farming—I'm very much involved in helping set up congressional hearings, for example, looking at corporate farming. I was involved, of course, with the National Farmers Organization in collective bargaining, and the whole idea that farmers needed to have a profit, and make that a part of what we accept as the right thing to do. We talked about parity at one time. That was very popular; I think that's kind of gone away, but I think the idea of farmers being able to make a profit. Some of my work has been around small farms and the impact of organic and sustainable on communities. Different kinds of marketing alternatives, such as CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), for example. So that I have tried in my career—and as a consultant you can do this—of being involved in many aspects of this, and what I like to do is design projects so that you can get people focused on a particular problem. One was, of course, the Small Farm Energy

Project, of farmers building their own solar systems. Another was the Soul of Agriculture Project, getting the faith-based organizations involved in addressing the issues of what's happening to the land. I developed, for MOSES, the Organic University, which is a series of courses; 500 people, at least, at every conference take these courses. I also developed a system where older farmers adopt younger farmers.

RK: Passing on the farm ... transition?

RB: Yeah. That's not the word for it. But anyway, I developed this program at MOSES, which is a continuing program as well. So I have always been interested in developing projects, and projects that would mobilize people around an issue, and also formalizing a project so that you can get the funding for it.

RK: I'm glad you brought that up, because as we were talking about farms, organic farms. Good, healthy organic sustainable farms are a whole system. I think those different areas you have worked are actually not disparate at all; they're actually part of a whole system, what needs to happen, all the way from scale issues, treatment of the land, markets—if we're really going to achieve this vision that you hold of a truly organic agriculture, we need all of that.

RB: Yes.

RK: Thank you very much.

RB: My pleasure.

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