Garth Youngberg
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

December 6, 2016

Garth Youngberg—GY
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: This is Ron Kroese. I'm in Denver, where today, December 6, 2016, I have the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Garth Youngberg, one of the true pathfinders, path-makers, in the development and advancement of sustainable and organic agriculture research and public policies. Garth, the work for which you're probably best known goes back to the '70s and '80s in Washington, DC, and even before in academia, your work in Missouri in the '70s. But I like to go back even further in these interviews, all the way back to your childhood and your upbringing. Really, what got you interested in agriculture and put you on a path, particularly on more sustainable and organic-type farming?

GY: It really started with the fact that I was born on a farm in west-central Illinois and lived there until we had to move to town, a little town nearby, because of my father's illness. But I was 10 or 11 at the time, so I had that first decade of living on a farm. Having been born and raised there—as a matter of fact, sitting here to my right—I don't know if the camera can pick it up—but there's a piece of furniture that comes out of that house where I was literally born, so I'm kind of a Lincolnesque person. I was born on the farm, in a house, in the middle of a snowstorm in January.

RK: In Missouri?

GY: In Illinois, west-central Illinois. So, you know, you sort of develop a feeling for how agriculture works, even though you're a kid, and after moving to town I still worked every summer on farms, the full three months, full-out, so much money, and found, which means you got fed as well. So I stayed with agriculture, really, until I was about 18.

RK: And those farms in those days probably set you in a certain direction?

GY: You became accustomed to the look and feel of a mixed crop, livestock farm. And it makes an impression, a lasting impression, because even though there are lots of things about that, as you know, that are not terribly tempting or inviting—a lot of hard work, a lot of difficulties—but it's also a very attractive and, looking back, sort of bucolic kind of setting, which is very attractive. So that's where it started, the background on a farm, obviously. And this is true of so many people that ended up doing something in agriculture—many of them were born on farms. It makes an impression. So that's it, that's where it started.

RK: And then when you graduated from high school, where did you go then?

GY: I'm not sure we should go through all of this—actually, for a short period of time, I went to a radio school out of high school, Midwest Broadcasting School, and worked at a radio station nearby after that for about a year, then I went to the army. When I got out of that I decided I should go to college, and I went to Western Illinois University, picked up a bachelor's degree in education, and stayed on for a master's degree as well, in education. And then I taught for three years at the high school level, in west-central Illinois. After that I began to think high school teaching looked like too much of a challenge for me for the next 40 years, so I went back to the University of Illinois, and got a Ph.D. in political science, with an emphasis on agricultural policy. At that time political science was changing dramatically to a discipline that really was beginning to concentrate more on quantification, more on understanding behavior, political behavior, not just the structures, but the behavior that was occurring within those structures. So it was a period of tremendous change in political science and methodology and how you go about knowing something, knowing if something is real, whether it's not, becoming quite scientific in its approach. So that was a bit of a shock to me, because I wasn't really anticipating that there would be requirements in statistics and mathematics and those things in which I had very little background in. But I made it through. And because of my background on the farm, and having watched what had happened in agriculture all those years with the switch to more chemicals, I decided to concentrate my public policy work in the field of agriculture. And the first explicit expression of that was in the writing of my Ph.D. dissertation, which dealt with the administration of farm programs. You remember back then—and they've changed a lot—but back then they were administered by something called the ASCS Committee System—the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service Committee System. That was a system set up by Henry A. Wallace back in the Depression, and it was done to give farmers an opportunity to participate in the actual decision making at the local level of how farm program benefits were to be decided and distributed. So this was obviously an example of what became known as participatory democracy. At the time I was in graduate school in Illinois in the late '60s, there was a tremendous amount of unrest in our country, and people were searching for answers to problems of governance and how to get through some of the problems we were having with the war and environmental changes, and students were ... that was one of the cries on the campus—participatory democracy, the local decision making. And so because of my interest in agriculture, and because we had this 30- or 40-year example of decision making, participatory decision making by farmers with farm programs, it seemed to me to be a good idea to take a look at that. So that was my dissertation. And I can talk about that more if you'd like, but it was a fascinating research project, to see how much actual decision making was really being left to farmers and how much of it was being made upstairs but really farmers sort of being symbolic decision makers, sort of symbolic paraphernalia to help sell the programs, as much as really having a great influence on the policy itself. So in a way I guess I came away somewhat disillusioned about how simple or how difficult it is to actually realize a participatory decision—it's not easy. That experience certainly proved that to me.

RK: Well, that explains our earlier conversation off-camera, where we were talking about the decline of agrarian democracy, and Grant McConnell's book on the subject.

GY: Exactly.

RK: ... that worked, because...

GY: In fact, I read that, those were some of the things I read at that time.

RK: I would think so, too.

GY: We could talk for a long time about that, but I don't think that's the main reason you're here.

RK: No, it isn't, but I wanted to, I'd really like to get it framed, where you came from, and then you went on to teach in Missouri.

GY: I started at Iowa State University, and taught political science; I mean, that was my field. And then from there I went to Missouri, and somewhere along the way—I guess I should mention that Don Hadwiger and Ross Talbot, who were full professors at Iowa State University when I was there, were both quite interested in agricultural policy, so I had some good buddies while I was at Iowa State. But it wasn't until I went to Missouri that I thought it would be useful to start looking at alternative agriculture, because for all this period of time, I had still been monitoring what was happening on farms. Many of my relatives and friends still farmed in my home area in western Illinois, and I could see what was happening, these tremendous changes that were beginning to be manifest. It felt to me like things were changing too rapidly, and that we weren't necessarily going in the right direction. We were kind of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

RK: It was the "get big, get out ..."

GY: Get big or get out. As far as chemicals—don't put it off—put it on. Farmers were being told by their respective land grant universities—I was the most familiar with Illinois—that we can grow monocultural corn forever. It won't be a problem. Maybe put some soybeans in once in awhile, but we've got the technology to do this, and farmers were buying it. I mean, it was happening. This was the adoption that was occurring, and it just felt to me, without knowing a great deal about it, didn't feel right, and so I started reading about organic and alternative and looking into some of the ideas that were out there about how to do things differently, and it occurred to me—wow, this is sort of the way we did it when I was a kid back on the farm! At least in terms of the broad structures, the processes. Not necessarily the machinery or the inputs, but the overall notion of diversity, crop rotations, having a mixed crop-livestock system, recycling things on the farm. These were all things that we did when I was growing up, and it made that initial impression. So when I saw this change happening, and I had been at the University of Illinois and learned some of this there from interactions that I had with people in ag-economics, and even agronomy. You know, the University of Illinois has some of the longest research plots, the Morrow Plots, I think the longest in the United States. And I walked by them every day, and I could see what their treatments were, and this whole thing was, sort of—we're going to be able to do things differently and be more productive. It just didn't feel quite right to me. So at Missouri, where I was teaching at a smaller university and felt freer to do the kind of research that I really wanted to do, I decided to take a look at alternative agriculture. And I ended up writing an article—I wrote more than one—but one, in particular, called "The Alternative Agriculture Movement." And this was in 1976, I believe, it was published, maybe '77, in the

Policy Studies Journal. That's the article that someone in Washington got wind of or found out about, and when the department decided to take a look at organic farming in the late 1970s under Bergland—we can talk about that—they wanted a social scientist to be part of the study team. I guess they looked around and I was the only social scientist that had written about alternative agriculture, so I got a phone call asking if I would come in and be part of that study team.

RK: I would say, from what I've read, including some of what you wrote about, that Bob Bergland had sort of an epiphany with the troubles that were starting to show up with over-production and low prices in agriculture that were really starting to be a plague in the mid-to-late 70s. He looked back to farms that were neighbors of his up in northern Minnesota and thought—hmm, we ought to take a look at how these organic guys are doing this. And that kind of jibed with what you'd...

GY: That's exactly how it happened. Bergland gets the lion's share of the credit, all of the credit, really, for the fact that the USDA did this study, starting in 1979 with the publication in 1980. And it's for the reasons you say—this was a period of tremendous economic distress in American agriculture. Remember the late '70s, the tractorcades through Washington? This was an enormously difficult period, and farmers were searching for ... they began to search for alternatives. This more and more, and lower prices, just wasn't adding up, economically. It was a horrible period. I think this was when the American Agriculture Movement started.

RK: Right.

GY: And the protest movements, and it was pretty rough. So Bergland landed right in the middle of that, in the Carter administration. The National Inventory Resources Report came out shortly—well, about that time—and pointed out the tremendous problems we were beginning to experience with water quality and soil erosion, etc. He was asked to deal with all of that at a time of shrinking budgets, too. This was also the time of Gramm-Rudman and the emphasis on reducing budgets. So what to do? And obviously, if you're secretary of agriculture, you look around—well, what can we do, really? And one of the things that he fell upon was the idea of looking at organic agriculture to see if there was a way here for farmers, or at least some farmers, to begin to diversify, provide more of their own input costs, and reduce their use on purchased chemicals and other inputs, and still make out economically. And that fit right in, too, with the environmental constraints that were beginning to show up, so maybe it was a way to begin to address more than one problem at the same time. So in 1979 he commissioned the study on organic agriculture, asked Anson Bertrand, who was the head of the Science and Education Administration at that time, to put together a study team. And that's what happened, and that's why I got the phone call to come in for a year to be part of it.

RK: So did you more or less like take a sabbatical and go to Washington?

GY: I took a leave of absence, right.

RK: Took a leave of absence, and that, of course, ultimately led to this seminal report that I think you have a copy of.

GY: Yeah, this is what ultimately came out of it. I don't know if others that you've interviewed have held it up, but it's called the...

RK: I think you're the first one to hold it up. Many have referred to it; it was such an important report.

GY: Important recommendations on organic farming.

RK: Right.

GY: As you can see, it's not a fancy report. I don't know what you'd call this paper that it's packaged in, but it's not a slick report. It was typed up in Jim Parr's laboratory, using his own secretarial staff, and one of the reasons that we did it this way is we wanted to make sure that it wasn't an expensive report, because the resistance to it was incredible—immediate and incredible.

RK: I really want to talk about that. Before we go there I'd like to talk a little bit about the study itself, how scientific it was, the fact that you went out to something like 69 different case studies—right?

GY: You must have read the report, Ron. One of the few who did? [Chuckles]

RK: It was important in my life, actually.

GY: That's right—when we had our first meeting in April of 1979, I was flown in to meet the other members of the study team, and, frankly, at the time that I went in there to meet them, I wasn't convinced that I was going to take a leave of absence and do this, because from the writing that I had done I was pretty skeptical that USDA was serious about this, that they were going to do a bona fide, honest look at this. But as soon as I met Bob Papendick, who had chaired the report, a soil scientist from Pullman, Washington, Jim Parr, who had the biological research station at Beltsville, Maryland, which is the big, humungous ARS (Agricultural Research Service) research facility to this day, and several of the other members. And almost instantly I knew that they were going to do this honestly. It was going to be a scientific look and not a whitewash or not something quick and dirty. Actually, one of the administrators at that time suggested, off to the side—well, you guys just do a quick and dirty; it's OK. This can't be serious, you know. There was a lot of resistance at lower levels of bureaucracy to the people on top. Bergland was serious, but you know how this goes...

RK: This, too, shall pass.

GY: This, too, shall pass [Chuckles]. But I was convinced they were going to do a good job. They were leading scientists, they had tons of credibility, so that's when I signed on. That was in the spring of '79. We started in June of '79, and that summer and fall we did the 69 on-farm case studies all around the country, all 10 production regions, had a rather comprehensive interview schedule that we all followed with each site, and when possible we were accompanied by a county extension agent from that area—not always but when they would be willing to go we

went with them. Really, that's why the study came out the way it did, I think, reasonably positive report.

RK: And then you went to Europe and Japan.

GY: We also did that.

RK: Some of you did, at least, right? To also look at countries that had been having probably more established organic operations.

GY: Exactly. Three of us went to ... three or four of us did a tour of organic farms in Europe—Switzerland, Germany, and England. And then one member of the team went to Japan. But mostly it was U.S. based, and it's a report that we characterized as being cautiously optimistic. We didn't come back and say—wow this is the answer to all of our problems in agriculture; let's throw everything else out and just do this. That's not what the report's about at all. But it did conclude, after looking at these studies and seeing how successful these producers were, that this is something that deserved a look, some research dollars and some education dollars. So the report includes 10 pages of research and education recommendations. So with that finished and the report published in 1980, I was asked to stay on and follow up to the report, to coordinate a research and education follow-up to the report. So that's why I ended up staying, where initially I'd just planned to go there for one year and help write the report.

RK: Then the report, I think, was only out about four months before the administration changed and Ronald Reagan came in and brought in John Block.

GY: That's right.

RK: From Illinois.

GY: You're quite an historian, Ron—that's exactly how it was. This was published in July, I think, of 1980, and, of course, the election was in November, and the gentleman that Ronald Reagan appointed, John Block, a corn and soybean hog farmer from Illinois, had a totally different view of organic agriculture than had Bob Bergland. So, it wasn't long until signals began to come down that this report didn't have much of a future. I don't remember the dates, but John Block did make a speech at a major gathering of conventional agriculturalists that there would be no follow-up to this so-called dead-end organic farming report that Bergland had put out. So fairly early-on I felt that I sort of had a target on my back because I was the organic farming coordinator, and here's the secretary of agriculture saying this is a dead end. It turned out to be that, at least for awhile.

RK: I understand, when reading earlier, in preparation for this, they cut back your organic work by half, and then a year or so later they actually X-ed you out entirely, right?

GY: The position was eliminated in what the government calls a reduction in force. That result for me was I had two weeks to depart the Beltsville campus and find other activity.

RK: Before we go on to that activity, which I really want to go to, you know I've talked to other people—I'm thinking particularly of Roger Blobaum, who's been so involved, and continues to be involved, in organic agriculture. There's no more adamant ally for organics than Roger. And he talked about how important the report was and how important it was to make sure that they all didn't get destroyed or buried somewhere, and how some boxes managed to get out to him and other people to keep, and that those reports continued to be quietly disseminated for many years, even though that was not the approach that the administration of that time wanted.

GY: That's all true. I've forgotten the particulars, but there was an effort to make sure that the report made it outside of the Beltsville Research Station and various people had copies. But I think maybe I should mention that I didn't depart instantly. I was there for another two years, maybe even almost two-and-a-half, before I was asked to leave. And during that time, the reaction to this report was truly astounding. It was overwhelming, really, and we would get requests, 10 a day, for copies of the report, and eventually it was translated into seven foreign languages. It's hard now, sitting here in 2016, even though I experienced it, to remember just how much incredible interest there was. So instantly, since I had that label, organic farming coordinator, and I had been part of the study, I was being asked constantly to go out and speak to different groups, grass roots groups, the fledgling organic farming groups around the country that were getting up and running at that time, and also international audiences. We had delegations come from Japan and all over wanting to know what was this about, was the USDA serious, what did it mean for the larger research components within USDA, not only ARS, Agricultural Research Service, but the land grant university system. Was this something that they were going to take seriously, was it a flash in the pan, how much was there behind it, and what about the opposition that you could see was beginning to mount against it. So there was no end of work to do, just to try to respond to the interest. And that included groups that hadn't necessarily been involved in agriculture before, but who felt that from an environmental standpoint we were going the wrong way in agriculture, but really didn't know what to do to stop the trends that were underway.

RK: I think the Audubon Society would be one.

GY: The Audubon Society—all of those; there were scores of them, and still are to this day. But at that time, yes, they had an interest in it, but they weren't sure what it was about. They weren't sure if it really was credible, whether it was doable to farm this way. And so there was lots of work involved, working with those groups, speaking to those groups, and trying to reveal what this report said and what the research might suggest could come from it in the future, if adequate resources were put behind it.

RK: Right, right. And I think that ... I'm looking, also, at some notes here that in '81 this report called *A Time to Choose*, came out, too, which had an almost similar fate, and it talked about the need for more research in this area…

GY: *A Time to Choose* was the major study, again, that was published under the impetus of Bergland, Bob Bergland, and this one dealing with the structure of agriculture, because at the same—this is a little bit complicated; it's hard to knit this together, but at the same time it was becoming obvious that we were having problems with the environment, and water quality, and

soil erosion. There was also the problem of the loss of the family farm, and that connected with these economic issues that we talked about just a few minutes ago. So what to do about the structure of agriculture, how to make sure that we had some kind of a structure that included family farms and mid-sized farms, and not just switch entirely to humungous, large corporate-type enterprises. So that was another big issue, the sort of environmental side, which this report began to address to some degree, and then *A Time to Choose*, which was meant to address the structural problems in agriculture.

RK: And then, like you said, that you stayed on in USDA for as long as you could, but when that clearly was done you went on to start an institute, right?

GY: That's right.

RK: You picked it up with some support from philanthropy, I believe?

GY: Yes, absolutely.

RK: I'd like you to talk a little bit about that, if you will.

GY: Happy to. The moment that this happened was in September of 1982, I guess it was. I'd been an academic, but it's kind of hard to get an academic job in September, as you well know. So what was I going to do? I believed in this, I thought it was important to keep it going. It seemed to be there was some momentum, a lot of interest around the country, and so I was able to start a non-profit, a 501(c)(3), primarily with the help of a woman named Jean Douglas.

RK: Who happens to be the daughter of...

GY: Henry A. Wallace, that's right. This should be emphasized, since this is kind of for an archive. Without Jean Wallace Douglas I never would have been able to start the institute. That just was essential to have that seed money. It was still risky. It still was touch and go for a long time. In fact, it was touch and go the whole 17 or 18 years that we did it. Because, as you know, there isn't a ton of foundation support for agriculture, and at that time there was virtually none. If you looked at the foundation directory at that time and tried to find foundations that were supporting agriculture, even had the word agriculture in their purposes, it was pretty difficult to find any. So Jean's foundation, the Wallace Genetic Foundation, was critical in terms of getting us started, and then with that we were able to branch out a little bit and sort of piece together something, but for the first, I think, three years, this was a two-person institute.

RK: What were you trying to do with the institute, exactly? What was your mission, as it were?

GY: My experience of having been the coordinator for three years, I guess, traveling to scores of land grant universities, giving speeches all over the country, really, I had been fortunate to perceive or know that there were lots of scientists on these land grant university campuses who believed we were going overboard with chemicals and monocultural agriculture, and concentration in animal production, and so forth. They just felt it. Many of them grew up on farms like I grew up on, so it was easy for me to sort of find these people and relate to them, and

they could relate to what we were trying to do, so I knew that the base of the potential for scientific support was out there. But at that time, this whole issue of organic agriculture was so suspect in the conventional community that most of these scientists were still in the closet. They just didn't dare come out. So I would go someplace, and I've been to the University of Minnesota several times and where you're from now, and where this archive is being created, and many, many other places. And always after the talk ... there would usually be a pretty good audience for the talk, because there was a lot of people there—who is this weirdo coming out here talking about organic farming? But then after the talk most of them would leave, but there would always be a handful come up and they would want to say—we're interested in this, and if we could get some money we would start some trials, or we'd do something. So because of the USDA experience I was pretty confident that if we could get an institute started that looked at the science and concentrated on the science, that maybe we could make it. So that was the emphasis from the beginning and, really, throughout.

RK: Hold it up there.

GY: Well, yeah, I could, because some people's viewing this won't remember it, but we were able to start this journal. I think this is the first issue. It was published in the winter of 1986, and this was our main, really our main focus was to try to provide an outlet for peer reviewed research on alternative, low-energy, organic, sustainable-type systems. Call them what you will, but we chose to call this journal ... in fact our first institute was called The Institute for Alternative Agriculture, because we thought that was a good umbrella term to include organic, which we certainly supported, but other approaches that liked to march under different titles and different symbols and so on. So that was why we chose this. It's kind of interesting. I don't know if you have time for this, but in this first issue I actually wrote the initial article called, "Why another Journal?" I can't go into it here, but I tried to explain that we were sort of on the cusp of something here. This was kind of a turning point, and we needed this journal so that bona fide scientists, Ph.D. scientists—good agronomists, entomologists, the whole spectrum, would have a place to publish their work if they wanted to go in this direction. And also we make a big point out of the fact that this is an interdisciplinary journal, because this was stressed in our initial report from the USDA that in order to understand these organic systems you had to have interdisciplinary teams, interdisciplinary work. The very nature of the systems, the way the interactions, the biochemical interactions and the economics and all the rest, marketing and so on, required interdisciplinary research.

RK: Just to emphasize that, if I may, I was working with the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota at that time, which was one of the groups that popped up, and that's where we first connected. I remember that coming out very well, and how important it was, that it was this refereed journal. I mean, it could survive attacks because it was so clearly peer reviewed and refereed, and that was so important. And the idea of interdisciplinary was so important, too. And that was one of the difficulties that faced in this, so much of the research, as you know better than I, was done with this reductionist view, of focusing in on one crop or one part of one crop, and that's the way you grew and thrived in the land grant system, for the most part.

GY: Yeah, exactly.

RK: So finding some people who were willing to work in it interdisciplinarily was very significant.

GY: Even though they may have believed this and wanted to do it, it's not simple to do it, and it still isn't simple, even now, what, 35 years later, 36 years later, whatever it is—there are still difficulties in getting enough funding for truly interdisciplinary programs, even if they're not organic. Just anything interdisciplinary, because it changes the way research is planned and administered, and it's quite complicated. And you have scientists that have Ph.D.s in plant pathology, that's what they know; they know plant pathology, and they want to publish in plant pathology, and there are journals for that. So to get those kinds of folks to say—well, let's put a team together and look at plant pathology and agronomy and this plant breeding and everything. To look at things in a holistic way is very, very difficult. Part of it's bureaucratic, and it's not necessarily sinister, it's just difficult to make these things happen. That's why we started it, and I'm happy to say that it survived. It was very difficult, but it did survive, and today—I'm jumping ahead a little bit, but when I decided to retire in 1999, we were able to merge our institute with Winrock International, which was a much bigger non-profit, and I'm sure most people have heard about it. We were able to place the journal with Cambridge University Press, where it's published yet today. And so, the journal is still ongoing. I'm very happy about that.

RK: Right, and that has some international aspects to it, too.

GY: Yes, it gradually evolved to where the work was becoming more international in scope, more international scientists wanted to publish in the journal. It sort of evolved that way, although it started out initially to be primarily a U.S.-based operation, with emphasis on the land grant. And ARS scientists or scientists from the Economic Research Service, too.

RK: And I remember, brought to mind other important things that were going on on the landscape as well. I think about the work of Rodale, with what became called the Practical Farmers of Iowa, that still goes on doing wonderful work today. Back in the late '80s up through about Robert Rodale's death, I think, in 1990, they were doing some very important research and linking into some of what you've been doing.

GY: That's right. I'm glad you brought Robert Rodale up, because he deserves much credit for kind of putting this whole issue on the agenda. The problem with Bob Rodale, one of my good friends, the tragic death in an automobile accident in 1990—he was in Moscow, actually, trying to start the new farm magazine over there, in Russia. So he was a dogged proponent of this and had enormous influence. He was a great guy. I think if he were sitting here today he'd agree with this. Because of the work of his father, J. I. Rodale, there was this image that organic farming, Rodale style, was a little bit kooky and a little bit strange.[Chuckles] And so scientists were somewhat standoffish. Bob realized this, and about the time that Bob Bergland, who was deciding that we should do something in USDA to bring this forward and really take a look at it, an honest, objective look, Bob Rodale was saying pretty much the same thing, that organic gardening can only go so far. If we're going to get this to the farm level we've got to ... they started *The New Farm Magazine* about that time, which looked at larger operations, but that it also needed to become more scientific as well. So, one of his important decisions was to hire a scientist by the name of Dick Harwood, fully credentialed agronomist, horticulturalist, I think,

actually, more so than ... anyway, a fully credentialed scientist, to come to the Rodale Research Center and set up these farm trials. It was done properly, according to all the scientific requirements, and that really opened up the eyes of some folks at USDA, no question about it, at about this same time.

RK: And the way it was extended, you might say, through the work of things like the Practical Farmers, and, to a certain extent, Land Stewardship Project, to where they would have these open field days, where farmers could come, and so it had influence on the way farmers were operating.

GY: That was another one of the threads that was so important, that it wasn't just science, just the land grant folks doing research, but getting farmers involved. One of the more effective groups—well there were a lot of them, and they all became very effective, but in the mid-80s the Practical Farmers of Iowa made quite an impression on folks. There's a story behind this that ... I don't know if we have time constraints, but the decision to call it the Practical Farmers of Iowa was an elaborate one that involved a lot of discussion, and I know they talked about different words, but at that time the word organic, especially, was persona non grata in the conventional community, but so were other words. There wasn't a word that they wanted to accept.

RK: I know Rodale tried regenerative—that's still a good word.

GY: Yes, that was Bob's contribution, that we needed a regenerative agriculture. Some people felt that sustainable was the best word, and I guess it sort of is the survivor, primarily, in the long run. Organic and sustainable are the two main surviving terms, I believe.

RK: Seems like it.

GY: Many people still talk about alternative agriculture, too, I think, though. No pride of ownership there, by any means, but that's the one that we felt was the least offensive to conventional agriculture, because we weren't saying it has to be this way, or that conventional can't be regenerative or it can't be this, but let's just look at alternatives—that was our pitch—alternative agriculture; what would work and what wouldn't. But the Practical Farmers of Iowa, to get back to that, was a difficult decision. Dick Thompson was a good friend of mine. He was on our board for awhile, and he was one of the movers there. They decided to just call it that, it's just practical agriculture. But they were really talking about organic technologies and those traditional methods of farming.

RK: Right, so, yes, so the work on the ground and in academia and the good research was happening. I know, looking back and reading one of the papers that you wrote that I want to make sure that people know about, that you were the lead author, along with Suzanne DeMuth, in 2013. It's called "Organic Agriculture in the United States—a Thirty-Year Retrospective," and it's still available, and it's a wonderful article. But one of the things it mentions, during that Reagan era, those eight years, say, from '81 through the end of the '80s, from a policy, for the most part, from a policy standpoint and what's going on in Capitol Hill, not too much was happening. But then around '89 and '90, things started picking up, with things like the Organic Foods Production Act. I'm sure you remember that era that, ultimately, then kind of brought

organic back into the dialog around a particular thing of—this is food we're talking about when we talk about organics. I just wanted to bring that up with you.

GY: Yeah, we do cover that in that article, which I co-authored with Suzanne DeMuth, who is a tremendous researcher and a colleague...

RK: It's a great article.

GY: She lives in New York now, but we collaborated. You can do that these days with modern technology. So, yeah, I think you could say that the policy front—we've been talking a lot about agronomy and farm research and so on, but policy was another battle. So when the organic farming report was published in 1980, as I've already mentioned, there was a tremendous amount of interest. Much positive interest, but also much negative interest. Part of the positive interest came from Capitol Hill, and the person there that jumped on this first was a congressman from Oregon named Jim Weaver. He, right away, was one of the moving forces, perhaps the principal one, in getting one sentence inserted into the 1989 Farm Bill—am I getting off here?

RK: I think it was the '85 Farm Bill.

GY: Nineteen eighty-one Farm Bill, right after the report came out. One sentence in the 1981 Farm Bill saying that there should be research on organic farming in line with the 1980 USDA report on it. That's about what it amounted to—one sentence. So that was in 1981, and then in 1982 he came back with another legislative proposal. It was called the Organic Farming Act. Difficult to recall these things after 30-some years—it was called the Organic Farming Act, and that same year Senator Leahy from Vermont put in a bill called the Innovative Farming Act. Already we were seeing indications that they didn't want to use the word organic, not because they didn't like the word, but because they knew how it would affect the conventional side of agriculture. So he called his the Innovative Farming Act, but they were identical bills, and they were based almost entirely on the 1980 report. Well, those two bills went nowhere. So then Weaver and Leahy together about, I think, the next year, maybe '83 or '84—they put in something called the Agricultural Productivity Act, which included, again, almost entirely this same reasoning, the same language, but that's what it was called. It went nowhere. Well, by 1985, the 1985 Farm Bill, they were able to get some language in that, which then later on ... I don't want to go into too much of this; I realize I'm overdoing it here a little, I think.

RK: You're not.

GY: That later became the so-called Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture Program, or the LISA Program, which was included in the 1985 Farm Bill. No funding, though, for that, until 1988.

RK: Eighty-eight, I think, yeah.

GY: I believe it was, yeah. And then the funding was just miniscule. Well, there's a whole history there that we could talk about a long time, but the word low-input, sustainable agriculture kind of illustrates how this terminology evolved. We started with organic, then we got to innovative, then we got to productivity, and eventually we got to low-input sustainable

agriculture. And, of course, the low-input part was meant to reflect the sort of organic-type technologies. But this was frowned upon, shall we say, by the conventional agricultural community. One of the most common phrases was low-input means low output, and they would have nothing to do with it. So there was a real tug-of-war there, a real fight. Then by the time the 1990 Farm Bill came along, though, because the LISA did get some funding, and it did get started, and it got started under the leadership of Patrick Madden, who was one of the pioneers of all this, an agricultural economist from Penn State, who came in to be part of this. He's a good example of what I was saying earlier of these conventional, credentialed land grant scientists who wanted to go in a different direction but there just wasn't any way for them really to do it. So Patrick, an economist, stepped out, and wrote about this and spoke about it. He became the first administrator of that. It was pretty successful, and once there was some money—it's a funny thing about money, if you get some money out there scientists begin to say—this makes some sense. [Chuckles] Then we were able to move that forward into the 1990 Farm Bill and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, the SARE Program, which is still ongoing today. I don't know how much money it's getting now, but much, much more. Several millions. You may know the figure; I don't know, but it's quite a bit. Still a fraction of the total research budget, but a lot more. It's a respectable program, well-thought of.

RK: Very much.

GY: So that was sort of the policy battle, and one thing that's interesting to me about it is how it shows the difficulty of this word organic, and how people just couldn't take it. Even by 1990 they couldn't take organic, so it was Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education. But meanwhile, back at the ranch, the folks who wanted to begin growing food, or had wanted to for a long time, under an organic-type label and get it into an organic foods marketplace, had also made a lot of progress through the '80s. So by 1990, under the leadership, again, of Senator Leahy and his staffer on agriculture, Kathleen Merrigan, another pioneer, they introduced a bill, the Organic Foods Production Act, and it was made part of that farm bill. And then later, with a lot of work, eventually was funded and implemented, I guess not until 2002. It took 12 years to get it...

RK: ... battles were fought.

GY: ... from there to where we actually had an organic label in the marketplace.

RK: It took so long to get people to some sort of an agreement on what materials could be allowed and what really was organic that could be called organic. That just was fought out for a long time. It still continues to be a huge issue, the constant struggle to maintain some purity, you might say, in what's allowed in organics.

GY: That's exactly right—the materials list, I think, took up a lot of the time of the group that stayed with it and eventually came up with these definitions, the list, so that we could have a program. This was a major problem.

RK: And I think [Unclear] initial version of the list, and I think they put it out for public review, and I think it got the biggest response they'd ever gotten at USDA at the time, and they had to go back and revisit it again.

GY: Because some conventional folks had inserted some things that the organic people could not accept, and I think it was like 200,000 letters or something.

RK: Yeah, it was huge, it was...

GY: It was an enormous response. So that program did emerge out of the 1990 Farm Bill. Eventually, as we all know, was successful, and all these problems were resolved, and we have an organic label now on the market, which is a major accomplishment. It's certainly an amazing thing when you think back to when we were doing this report in 1979 and had trouble finding legitimate organic farmers even, let alone retail outlets that would be selling this food. I remember one of the stops I made in California at a little store, not much bigger than this room, and that was an organic foods outlet then, 1979. And now, of course, we can all stroll around these huge Whole Foods markets and these other places, and it's just a remarkable change.

RK: Right. And what was also happening at the same time that was linked in in different ways was an increase in real commitment to conservation and conservation funding—the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program—so while organics were there to raise a lot of these issues concerned about organic and sustainable ag, sometimes it also led to not all the way to the organics, but it did lead to increases, I think, I know it did, into conservation practices, research and better conservation methods and things like that.

GY: You're bringing up an important point. I'm not sure how to thread this into this conversation, but let's go back to the report again—forgive me—but, at the time we wrote the report, we were not thinking about certified organic agriculture. That wasn't in our minds at all. We were looking at this as a production system or systems that could be incorporated into conventional farming systems. I think this is really an important point. Our definition, if you remember, was that organic farming is a production system that avoids or largely excludes chemical fertilizers and pesticides, etc.—largely excludes, but not exclusively. So our idea, and this was going along with what Bergland was thinking—how do we incorporate these ideas into conventional agriculture? That's been an important and continuing story down through the years. The same time that's happening—and I hope I can stay on this thread, that we can come back to it—but then the pure organic side, the food side, the farmers that wanted to be certified and sell their products as organically grown, for a premium price, to an ever-larger market of consumers who wanted to buy that food—that's one stream. This other stream didn't go away; it's still out there, and that's the stream that by and large goes under the label of sustainable agriculture now. So you've sort of got two roads here—we talk about this in the article—that around 1990 this two-road thing seemed to emerge, at least in my mind. Organic was doing better; it was certified now. The USDA had the program—can you imagine that? More and more farmers knew how to farm this way. More and more consumers were buying the food, so that's all to the good. At the same time, what are these farmers supposed to do that wanted to lower their input costs, reduce their use of chemicals, etc.? Well, that's where the SARE Program came in, and that's what it's still addressing today, the Sustainable Ag Research and Education Program. But it seems to me

that kind of what we have now in this country as we look out to the future, I think the organic side is going to do very well. By that I have to say certified organic. But the other road, I think, is running into serious obstacles, because there are still these over-arching trends of mechanization, concentration, ever-larger farms. That's going on. I don't know that that's slowing up. So these farmers somewhere in between that are benefitting from the SARE Program, and are farming more environmentally sound and doing things that way, I wonder how they are doing these days. I mean, I don't know because I'm retired now; I haven't followed it. But I think that's an area that needs to be looked at, because is the impetus there to really go to that next level with those farmers? And those folks that are just concerned about the environment, because organic per se is a very tiny part of the overall food system, especially if you look at the land involved. So even though organic practices may be the ideal way to go in terms of conservation, soil erosion, and all the rest, if it's only being applied to one or two percent of the crop and pasture land in the United States, that's not a very big chunk of the overall picture. So I worry a lot about that, and I think there are real obstacles to moving that other track forward.

RK: Right, and you know it's also in this somewhere is the criticism that is there in the organic side of it is that now you can have maybe a farm that is 3,000 acres they manage to fit under the umbrella of organic, but they aren't necessarily meeting those other societal things around family farm concerns and their effect on the communities and things like that...

GY: That's right.

RK: ... which has been more on the sustainable side, so they both have to keep working those things through, I think. So that's why the locavore movement has come along and Know Your Farmer Know Your Food have arisen from that side of it, which is also important part of the...

GY: That's all extremely positive. I really want to emphasize that. I believe that, and I know you do. But I do worry about what I see across the country generally in agriculture. When I drive back to my home state of Illinois in the summer, from the highway at least, all I can see is corn and soybeans.

RK: I'd say of the people I've interviewed so far, that's about 20 now, almost everybody expresses something like that when we get towards, maybe, the end of our discussion. You know, well here's our ... we've made real gains, but looking critically at where we're at, the structure of agriculture and where the big money is and where a lot of the research and everything continues to go is still driving what might be called an unsustainable or, if you're kind about it, an industrial vision for it. And the question is how long really can those two exist almost side-by-side, or can they really? It's really pretty questionable if they can, but that's a real challenge for going forward.

GY: It is, and as much progress as organic, per se, has made, conventional agriculture I think still, kind of, is not excited about it. They still see it as a niche, a little, tiny, funny thing off to the side here. They don't see it as a way to produce a sustainable agriculture. And one of the ideas that sort of slipped past us here, I think, is that this word sustainable, what does it mean? You may know what it means, but I still don't, and it bothers me greatly. So you see situations—are you familiar with the Leonardo Academy and their efforts?

RK: Yes.

GY: And I'm not sure where they are today, but I know a couple years ago most of the conventional ag people that they had attracted to that dialog withdrew from the process, and afterward explained why, that as far as they were concerned, the folks involved on the organic side were not qualified to talk about a sustainable agriculture. That this set of technologies, there's still that old idea that it's backward looking, can't produce sustainable agriculture, can't feed the world, can't feed the eight billion people that we're going to have on this planet by 2050, and I'm sure you know about the efforts that are being made by *Farm Journal* and their new foundation to promote approaches to agriculture that can, indeed, feed the world by 2050, eight billion people. And it's very clear in their literature that they're not talking about alternative agriculture or organic agriculture—none of those words appear. Theirs is the approach, according to them, of a sustainable agriculture, meaning one that can do that. The sort of the definition is feed the world by 2050. In all of their literature, and, believe me, I've looked, especially when we were writing this last article, for any kind of words or indications that they want to incorporate these alternative ideas into that model that would really allow us to feed the world by 2050, and I don't see it. It's all vague, it's all commercial, it's all chemicals, it's all these new inputs, it's biotechnology. Those, in their view, are how we're going to feed the world. And it distresses me, because maybe that is the main way to feed the world—I'm not going to argue that here—but to dismiss all of the potential contributions of small-scale farmers, if they had modern technologies and the modern science and the modern marketing, etc., that goes along with, could make a big contribution. And it's sad to me that we don't include all of it. Why does it have to be one or the other? And this has been a battle that I experienced the whole time that I was involved in this full-time. Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't we try to look for the best set of technologies, over-all, to feed the world, if that's what our goal is, and it obviously has to be one of the goals. I'm sad about that. I think that's a missed opportunity. We still don't have that dialog. Despite all of the hundreds of conferences and workshops and seminars over the years to try to bring people together, to look holistically, it still isn't happening, as far as I can tell.

RK: Yeah, I think you're largely right. I think about going back to another man I have so much respect for, Marty Strange, who was a co-founder for the Center for Rural Affairs, back in the times we were talking about, in the '70s and '80s, and wrote a book called *Family Farming*. He talked about how really the way one should think is not that we must feed the world, but the world must be fed, and you're thinking of it more from that way, you're not thinking of some sort of top-down approach, but as much as possible integrating it—a kind of different value set into that discussion. And Marty was talking about that 20 years ago.

GY: I remember that very well. I think we still have a battle on our hands.

RK: Yes, I think we do, too. This has all been very, very interesting, and I think we really covered a lot of very important territory, and I really appreciated this last part, the discussion where you talked about, really, the challenges that still are there for us. Thanks to all the progress that's been made, but some of the big challenges that still need to be taken on going forward. So thank you for that.

GY: Could I just hop in for you?

RK: Sure.

GY: I think the main obstacles, as far as I am concerned, have to do with this word sustainable and how do we really define it and make it real, because it's just a political football now, as far as I'm concerned. No one knows what it means, and you can look through the literature, you can look through this report that was put out in 2010 by the National Research Council Board on Agriculture, and you see the definition of sustainable—and these are the best scientists in the country—and it doesn't get us very far down the road to knowing what is really sustainable, what are the technologies that are going to give us a sustainable agriculture. We're still grappling with that. And as long as we don't know, that means the conventional side can put forth its definition with just as much legitimacy as the organic side can, because we don't have an agreement. The other obstacle that has to be fought through here is the one of farm structure, which we've mentioned, and the incentives that continue to propel us in this ever-larger, more concentrated kind of agriculture. And the third one is research. I mean, we started on research, and trying to get the research dollars out of a Congress that's tied, often, to commodity interests and specialized research programs is extremely difficult. You're going in there even as a wheat researcher, and I saw this firsthand when I was at Beltsville, a wheat researcher trying to get wheat research dollars away from a soybean guy—that alone is hard enough—with constrained budgets. And then you come in from some other place and asking for interdisciplinary research, with all that's involved and the complications of making it work—very difficult. I think those three things are serious problems that we have to deal with.

RK: I know that the National Sustainable Ag Coalition, which is really important part of why I'm doing these interviews about how it evolved and the work it's done—and it was ... I think your institute was a member, and has definitely been an ally over the years—research continues to be something that's just at the heart of its agenda...

GY: Absolutely essential.

RK: ... trying to get those research dollars there, and it will lead to all sorts of wonderful achievements.

GY: And it comes at a time when so much of our society seems to be skeptical of researchers. Look at global warming. I mean, it's not real, the scientists are just doing it to gin up research dollars, right? I mean, I don't believe that, but that's a problem that, for some reason, society seems to have slipped into a time when science isn't respected and accepted the way it used to be, and I think that's extremely unfortunate.

RK: Yeah, I do, too. Well, as I started to say, I would like to go backtrack just a little bit, since so much of what I'm trying to accomplish with these interviews is around who are these people who were involved in this, were the pioneers and had the nerve and the wherewithal to take on these challenges? I'm thinking about one of the rewards you got along the way and came along, I

understand, at just the right time, was the MacArthur Fellowship, back around—what?—1990, ’89, ’90?

GY: Nineteen eighty-eight. I remember it well.

RK: And how important it was to the Institute—I’d like you to talk a little bit about that.

GY: Yeah, well, the MacArthur program is one that most people are familiar with it. Each year a certain number of fellowships are awarded.

RK: Those are commonly known as the genius grants. I’ll say it. [Chuckles]

GY: Present company excepted, for certain. But you don’t know you’re being considered, and suddenly the telephone rings, and you’re being told that you’re going to have this little pot of money. It comes over a five-year period, not all at once. So it was a wonderful thing. It gave me a boost, personally, because at that point we’d been, I guess struggling would be the right word, to keep the institute going, and it came at a time when we were somewhat at a psychologically low point, I think you could say. It was extremely important to kind of not only give me a boost, but, I think, the institute, the employees that we had at that time. Allowed us to kind of take the next step, because we were still quite small in 1988. We were only five years old, I guess, at that time. Roger Blobaum had worked there for awhile, and we had several consultants, but full-time employees were only three, I think, if you can imagine that. It allowed us, it gave the employees, it gave me, it gave our board a boost. And it wasn’t too long after that that we sort of took the giant leap and decided to create a real, bona fide policy studies program. You know, we put out a number of publications, and we were able to ramp up our seminar series. We were able to establish a visiting scholar program. We had several professors and researchers come in from land grant universities and spend some time in Washington to do things that they couldn’t do at their home station. So I think it was critical. It gave everybody a sense that there’s somebody out there recognizing agriculture. A big foundation recognizing agriculture, because this was the first MacArthur award in the field of agriculture.

RK: Oh, it was?

GY: Yes. And people said—mm, oh, agriculture. And I think some of the environmental groups around Washington were aware of this, and it lent a certain legitimacy, I think, to what we were trying to do.

RK: Very good. And then, again, kind of on this personal track, then you stayed with the Institute until when?

GY: Oh, I guess I left there in about 1999, I think. Moved to where we’re sitting now, in Colorado, that year. But I continued to work half-time until I retired, another three or four years later. But before I left we were able to merge the institute with this Winrock International organization, so the staff went over there and continued the work. The journal continued, with it being located at Cambridge University, but still it was being handled through there. And I continued to work here on the journal after I moved out here.

RK: That's what I thought. So even though you moved to Denver, you set up an office in your home or whatever…

GY: I continued to work on the journal and our monthly newsletter and some fundraising for another three or four years.

RK: And you did a lot of public speaking, too.

GY: A lot of public speaking, yes. Also, one of the things that drew me to this area was the fact that right up the mountain here we have the Keystone Center. And at that time—and I'm not sure what they do now so much; I think they're still doing some of the same things—but one of their big programs was bringing people together, conveying large meetings of 40, 50, 60 people—maybe even more at times. They would bring disparate groups together, disparate spokespersons, to try to come together, look at a problem, and find some kind of consensus and issue a report. So I worked for them part-time for awhile after I got here, and that was going to be something that I planned to do for quite awhile, but they ran into some difficulty around that time, and I don't recall the specifics, but it just wasn't able to continue very long, not nearly as long as I'd wanted it to.

RK: Oh, I see. Well, I'm glad you've been finding time now to enjoy your retirement and doing whatever else you wanted to do, but also appreciated that you stayed in it enough to, for sure, to come up with that excellent paper that I referred to. It's called, "Organic Agriculture in the United States—a Thirty-Year Retrospective." It's easily found on the web. Where was it originally published?

GY: It was published in this journal, which is the current iteration of our original journal, the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*. This is what it's called now: *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*.

RK: OK, and that's put out through Winrock?

GY: It's put out by Cambridge University Press.

RK: OK. I wanted to make sure that people could find it if they went looking for it.

GY: The editor now is Rick Welsh, who is at Syracuse University, and was an employee of ours at the institute for several years.

RK: Great. The other thing that I wanted to mention before we wrap things up is that one of the things you did not long after you got your MacArthur Fellowship, is that you were interviewed at that time in the USDA by they had an office called Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, and they had a woman named Jane Gates, who knew of your work, and she and another woman came together and asked you to be interviewed, and you were interviewed, and it's an excellent interview, and I'm going to have a link put on as I'm speaking here so that people can

go back and check it out. You're covering a lot of the territory we're covering today, but speaking from 1991.

GY: Jayne MacLean was other co-conspirator in that group. They had quite an impact, starting that center, and I think it's still there.

RK: I haven't heard much about it lately, but that just may be something...

GY: In fact, Suzanne DeMuth, my co-author on this article that you've mentioned, worked there before she came and worked at our institute.

RK: Oh, is that right? Yeah, there's many very interesting interviews of other pioneers, like I think of Willie Lockeretz is on there, for example, so I urge people to check that out as well.

GY: I should have mentioned Willie Lockeretz when I was talking about our journal, because he was our first technical editor, and he's another one of those essential persons in all of this. Going back to his work at Washington University with Barry Commoner and really putting out some of the very first scientific research on productivity and organic systems.

RK: Well, I think we've covered about everything, at least touched on what I really wanted to cover.

GY: I felt like I've rambled a lot. I don't know whether people can sort these themes out or not.

RK: I don't really think so. I think it was covered in a more story-like fashion, which is what we're trying to do here, and I think it was an excellent interview, and I'm very appreciative.

GY: I enjoyed it tremendously. It's not every day that someone asks me what I did, in fact. [Both chuckle] When you retire you'll find that out—well, what did you do? Oh, that's interesting; now let's go to the next topic.

RK: And I'm impressed that you actually could remember, that I don't think you made a lot of it up right here—I think you actually did most of this stuff. [Chuckles] So thank you very much.

GY: Thanks, Ron.

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