

Bob Bergland
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

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Bob Bergland—BB
Ron Kroese—RK

This is Ron Kroese. Today videographer Kyle Grindberg and I are in the meeting room at the Eden Prairie, Minnesota, public library, where I have the honor of interviewing Bob Bergland, who served as secretary of agriculture under President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1981. Of course, there is much more to Mr. Bergland's long and distinguished career—family farmer from northwestern Minnesota, three complete terms as representative of the Seventh District of Minnesota in Washington, DC, general manager of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and a regent at the University of Minnesota, just to name some of the highlights. In this interview I hope to touch on all aspects of your several decades of public service, but because it was your vision and leadership that led to the federal government's first initiatives in organic and sustainable agriculture, this will be the primary focus of what we're going to talk about this morning. That said, Bob, I've interviewed several people who played vital roles in developing and advancing sustainable policies over the last few decades, several of whom you know, and I always like to start with all of them at the beginning, going all the way back to the childhood, the boyhood, what formed their interests in agriculture and, ultimately, in farm policy. So let's start at the beginning with your background.

BB: Well, my grandparents were farming people. They were immigrants from Norway, came to America in the early 1900s. My dad and mother were of Norwegian descent, but were born here. They were born into ... mother's family was farming, and dad's family was the automobile business—mechanics; they fixed things. Dad had a mechanical inclination, and he taught me many of the mechanical skills he had. Mother was a school teacher, taught in a local country 8th grade school district, which were common in those years—one-room school—and she was a taskmaster. When I was home she was my tutor; she took on that job. She had flash cards, little cards made with numbers and letters on it, and would flash the numbers, and I was supposed to add them up, and I did. Spelling was important—not only how to spell a word, but how to use it. Grammar was important, and she drilled it into me and kept on until I got it right, and I never forgot it.

RK: So you were helping on the farm, but eventually, because you were a good student, you decided to go to college, right? And you went to Minneapolis...

BB: Yes, I did.

RK: ... I read, for the first time you went to Minneapolis when you went to school.

BB: That's right, I went to Minneapolis. I was in high school when World War II ended in 1944. I graduated from high school in 1946, but I wanted to go to the University of Minnesota, and I applied and was told I couldn't get in because the GI Bill gave returning veterans preference, which was fine. I had no quarrel with that. They directed me to the School of Agriculture, which was a diploma school—it was not a degree-granting program—the two-year intensive course in practical agriculture matters. So I enrolled in that, School of Agriculture, University of Minnesota. Since then it's been merged into the college.

RK: I interviewed ... I mean I read an interview you did, and I want to draw attention to it for purposes of the archive. It's at the University of Minnesota, easily found, by the associate dean, Ann Pflaum, that did an interview with you in 1999 that covers a lot of the details in a colorful way of your upbringing and your early years. But one of the things, too, you noted in there that I thought was very interesting, that your dad was a Farm Laborite.

BB: Yes.

RK: You got some of your early thinking in politics and your Democratic leanings from your father.

BB: Yeah, I was born that way. I came by it honestly. Both Mother and Dad's family—they weren't hard left-wing Farm Laborites, they weren't out in the socialist ranks, but they were to the left of center—progressive in their views. They supported FDR in all of the New Deal. They thought it was the Second Coming, so a kind of a mainstream Democratic upbringing, and I've stayed that way.

RK: I don't know if they were able to still be around and physically alive at the time, but when I think about your years with the Rural Electrification Coop, I remember my own parents and grandparents, how important that was, in my case in northwestern Iowa—a very strong New Deal program.

BB: That's right.

RK: And then you got to direct that for 10 years. We'll get at that later, but it's interesting that this all kind of set very early-on in your life.

BB: Early-on, that's right. It's all part of the same generation of activity.

RK: Right. And the other thing that Pflaum interview pointed out, too, was that even back in ... even though you were kind of a greenhorn coming into the city, back then you were even interested in Hubert Humphrey and his '48 campaign.

BB: I was. And that came about usually through my mother and dad. They maintained their activity in the Democratic Party up home, in the local county organization, and Mother, especially, was active. So she kept my nose to the grindstone, politically, and I took an interest in the Humphrey campaign when it was getting organized.

RK: That's really interesting. And then he went on and became ... and, I think, in '48 or soon after he gave that very famous civil rights speech. He was one of the very first to speak out on that. It must have been in his first term, maybe.

BB: I think so. He went against the grain at the time, created a great disturbance, because Minnesota people weren't accustomed to hearing that kind of talk.

RK: Yeah, and the Dixiecrats were still in power, and that was sort of the beginning of the break [in] the Democratic Party, and it turned away from the Democrats and the Southern Dixiecrats, as I understand it.

BB: That's right, yup.

RK: Well then, you went back to the farm in the '50s and were farming, but to make ends meet a little later on you went to work with the ASCS, right, the Ag Stabilization and Conservation Service?

BB: I did—I had a job with them for awhile.

RK: Right. Was it part-time—you were farming and doing that, weren't you?

BB: Yeah, part-time, yup. I went home in 1946, I graduated from the university, went home, and I had a soil science professor was talking to me about a new thing in farming—it was called fertilizer—brand-new—and excited my interest in it, and so when I got home I talked to Dad and I said—I'd like to try a thing called test plots. He didn't know what that meant—I didn't either, for that matter. But this professor, I got in touch with him, I said—we want to do a test plot on our farm. It was just one mile south of our town, right on the highway. And I said—I don't know how to go about this. He said—well, I'll help you. So he came up with some equipment and we went out to the place and laid it out, laid out the plots, and then he told me what kind of fertilizers to buy and put it and how to arrange the thing. So I did it exactly as he said. I planted the whole thing to wheat, because that farm was going to go into spring wheat that year, so I just planted all of it in the wheat crop and then put in the stakes for the fertilizer. It was nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash in various blends and combinations. And I'd staked it and marked it. It was parallel to the highway, and when the crop ... I had a cranky uncle, bachelor brother of my father, who came over, was watching what I was doing. He said—what are you doing? I said—putting down fertilizer. So he dipped his finger in the fertilizer and tasted it and he said—it's salt; you're killing this land. He talked to my dad and he said—you got to stop this kid; he's going to ruin everything. So Dad said—oh, no, he's ... He said—where do you get these nutty ideas? Well, he's at the university. So Dad held to it, and so crops started growing, sprouting, and you could see those fertilizer test plots responding, just like night and day. You could see it from a long ways away, as people got closer, and they'd talk to Dad—what's this all about? What are you doing to that thing? Well, it's my ... but I was at the university and was learning some things. And they were impressed. Karl was not. He stayed hard-boiled. He said—this is just freaky stuff. It will never grow, it won't mature, you can't begin to imagine all the things wrong with it. But Dad had faith in what I was learning, and so we kept it and we found out what it could do, fertilizer. That was the first experiment in the county, I think.

RK: Really? And that brings to mind another kind of hallmark that also grew out of some of your work on policy is there's the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, called SARE, and the fundamental aspect of that program is on-farm research, the farmers doing the research...

BB: That's right.

RK: ... and proving it to themselves and to the neighbors.

BB: They have to do it that way. You can't depend entirely on extension research service. You've got to take that knowledge and spread it, and that's what we did.

RK: Right, right. And they even are learning some things that the scientists don't always know, too, which is...

BB: Well, a lot of it by accident. To this day we sometimes don't know what happened, but we know it did.

RK: Yeah, that's right, that's right. Well, that's really good. So then I know you worked with the ASCS in the state for a while, and then, I believe it was after Orville Freeman became secretary of agriculture under Kennedy, they invited you to take more of a regional position and move to Washington and work for the Agricultural Stabilization...

BB: I was what they called an area director. The agency was the ASCS, the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service, and I was the director for the Midwest area of states, from Wisconsin to the Dakotas and in between.

RK: And then I think that lasted several, six years or something—I don't know, something like that—and you decided then to take, at that time, in '68, an unsuccessful run for congress, but then you ran again in '70, and you won.

BB: I ran in '68. We didn't have much money. The Democratic Party wasn't very well organized, and I was advised by the people, the senior members of the party—don't get into any heavy spending plans.

RK: 'Cause you didn't have a lot of money either.

BB: I didn't have any money to put into it, and I told them that very early-on, I said—I don't have any money to put into this. Keep that in mind, I said. All I can do is provide my time, and I'll do that willingly, but I can't pay for any expense, and I won't, and I didn't. I kept myself free of debt. We just spent what we could get. No television advertising. We did local radio and some newspapers, local newspapers, and that was about it, because we just didn't have the money to do it. I think our budget the first campaign year was \$13,000.

RK: Wow.

BB: But we paid all our bills. I lost the election, but not by much. I ran against a well-established Republican, a fine man, but he was getting a little bit old for his day, and his judgment wasn't the best, and he hadn't kept up on all modern changes taking place in agriculture, and I was and did. People saw I knew what I was talking about. The fellow I ran against, he just tried to dismiss it as child's talk—you know, put me down because I was too young. And anyhow, I didn't win, but I came close, and I didn't leave any debt.

RK: And you got name recognition.

BB: And I got name recognition, and the understanding I had with the party leaders was if I run well enough, I want the right to decide whether I want to run again, because if I have a chance, I want to go twice. And they said—good with us—so that's what I did, ran a second time around, and I beat him pretty handily. But by that time I was well enough established so that other people took an interest in my campaign. They were able to raise enough money so I could run a respectable show.

RK: Good, good. So that took you to Congress.

BB: That took me to Congress.

RK: And you ended up serving there from '71 to '76.

BB: I was elected four times, served out three terms.

RK: Yeah, that's what I thought.

BB: I resigned my fourth term. Jimmy Carter was elected president, and he asked me to join his cabinet, as secretary of agriculture. And that idea came from Walter Mondale.

RK: Oh, it did?

BB: Mondale was vice president, and Mondale was my buddy in every respect, and he told the president I'd make a good secretary of agriculture, and Carter took his word for it.

RK: I bet you and Carter probably hit it off pretty well, I would think.

BB: We hit it off real well, yeah we did. He was an honest guy. He didn't pretend to be somebody he wasn't. He was a religious fellow. He practiced what he believed, and he was easy to talk to. He was not terribly overbearing, not terribly sophisticated, but he was honest and true. You could believe his word, you could put it in the bank, and that's the way we got along. He was an environmentalist, even then before it was fashionable. He had had experience in Georgia on matters relating to the environment, and he knew that we had to deal with the water and we had to do something about air pollution. He understood all that, and he did not pass it off as a whim. He knew it was a very serious national problem and had to be dealt with. And instructed

me to do everything I could, whatever it might be, to follow suit in the farm policy, without specifying what it should be, just that I should ... I sort of had a blank check.

RK: Wow! That's wonderful. I know that that was some tough times, too. During your time in Congress, in the '70s, the Vietnam War was still going on. About '74 the farm prices started going downhill, after all the Butz years and the over-production really kind of hit the fan, and the prices went down. You were having to deal with all of that while you were in Congress on the Ag Committee, and much of it was still going on, as I understand it, when you actually took over the Department of Agriculture.

BB: Yeah, the farm prices were falling. We inherited a mess, as they say today, but it was really tough, because there was huge surpluses in the United States, and the world market was not developing fast. There was a spurt after World War II, but then it kind of tapered off, and they tapered off largely because Europe had got its feet under itself, and it was able to grow enough to feed itself. It had been the market for enormous shipments of ... boatloads of grain and other foodstuffs to Europe right after the war. That all tapered away, of course, as expected. The production kept increasing, technology changed all the time, even then. Varieties improved, genetics improved. Genetic engineering was just getting, it was kind of in its infancy, but the scientists knew that great things could happen, and they did. And I believed them. They didn't have to convince me. And so the results of those changes in technology did produce a big increase in yields and to this day that's continued.

RK: That's true, and at the same time, from what I've read and I understand from my past, somewhat, some of the downsides of the ... like the use of fertilizers and pesticides and things like that were starting to show up, too, during the '70s, when that environmental surge came to the fore.

BB: Yeah, there was, and they were primarily, the things they worried about were legitimate. They were worried about things we didn't know, things we were doing and didn't know why or things that we should be doing that we didn't even know about. And they'd prompt us and prodded me and taught me a lot.

RK: The other thing that—and we'll get to this—a real important thing I'm going to cover if we may, like four studies, four things that happened during your tenure that had a long-lasting effect on policy going forward. One of them had to do with the structure of agriculture, because while there was good things happening in production and almost miraculous levels of increase in production, there was also a decline happening in number of farms, and particularly that mid-size family farm.

BB: And it's gone on to this day. They're still happening. Yes, I took a keen interest in that. The Homestead Act of 1856 created the basis for the iconic American family farm. That law was federal and applied to all the lands that were within the jurisdiction of the United States. It did not affect the Indian reservations and land set aside for parks and the forests and that kind of thing. Everything else was eligible for homestead, but the law said only 160 acres per family, that's all. No giant farms under that law—160 acres, and you didn't have to pay for that; all you got to do is live on it, what they call “proving up.” That meant going in there and building a

house, establishing a family, and clearing the land and doing whatever had to be done. Of course, it was very primitive; they farmed a lot of it with oxen and horses and human power and did whatever they could. But eventually overcame it, got it going and started, and then World War I came along, and by that time things were improving rather drastically in the farming technology field, and yields were up and fertilizers were becoming available. Pesticides were developed to control weeds and insects. That all happened around World War II time. And so after the war ended all that stuff started to bloom.

RK: And during your tenure there you were dealing with some of those ... even in Congress, with what reforms were needed to be made around some of that early legislation and things like that, as I understand it.

BB: Well, we did, and we had big fights over payment limits, for example. I maintained the policy we were going to restrict payments. We wanted them to be true to the principles of the Homestead Act—160-acre diversified, family owned and operated farming. That was the basis of all our studies in development on agriculture policy. There was ... I came under heavy fire on that one, because people said I should let them go, get 'em big, do what they want. It's their land, it's their choice. And I resisted it, and I got in trouble for it, but I did. And I stuck by my guns.

RK: I know that you had some arguments with the American Agriculture Movement, with the ... and at that time the tractorcades were happening. I mean, you can't underestimate the desperation people were feeling. A lot of people got kind of, as they say now, under water, but really over their heads.

BB: Over their head, way over their head, and they got talked into some of the dumbest decisions they could ever imagine. Bought land they couldn't afford, paid more money than they could afford, bought equipment on credit, no money down, easy payments. But they couldn't meet the obligations. The traditional family farm that had stayed true to its original intent—diversified, small-scale, livestock of all kinds and crops to go with it, and no heavy debt—they survived. But those high-fliers didn't. They went under early-on, and came to me begging help, and I said—no, I'm not going to help you guys; you made this mess and you're going to have to work your way out of it. I flatly refused to put in federal money to bail them out of a bad choice. I stood by my guns and they stormed the Capitol. They stormed the White House. I was forced to leave the White House, forced to leave the department one day. Police came and said—you've got to get out of here. These people have surrounded the building and they're carrying shotguns, and we don't know what's going to happen, but you can't take a chance. So they escorted me out of the department through a basement corridor I didn't even know existed, got me into the White House, and I was there for four days.

RK: I've never heard that story before, that's very interesting. I did read one place when you had gave a talk, I think in Amarillo, Texas, where they were throwing eggs at you.

BB: Oh, yeah—I had a lot of that. I was not very popular. I'd go to a lot of places where I had ... the local police would have to escort me. Because they said they didn't know for sure that anything would happen, but it might, because there was young people, mainly, debt-ridden, not very experienced, frustrated, and didn't know what to do, except rebel. So they did.

RK: You have to, I would think, put some of that on the previous administration of Earl Butz telling people to farm fence row to fence row. These prices are going to last forever.

BB: That's right. He made promises that couldn't possibly be kept, but he wasn't honest with people.

RK: So that's all that you inherited, and I think one of the seminal reports that came out of this—I want to talk a little bit about it—is this *A Time to Choose: Summary Report on the Structure of Agriculture*. And that came when you were saying that there had been a lot of goings-on around all through the '70s decade in tweaking with the farm program, but it never got down to the depth of really examining what kind of structure do we need going forward to have a sound food and agriculture system.

BB: There was a lot of resistance to that structure study. I was urged by a lot of the Democratic leaders in the Congress—don't do this. Let those big guys go and let them do their thing. Don't get in their way, because they can make big trouble for you. And I said—well, I've had trouble before, and I wouldn't yield to them. So we got into a real scrap, and I stood my ground in support of the doctrine that had been established, and I stayed with it.

RK: I know I read that basically it talked about some real reforms. I'll just touch on a couple of them. Efforts are needed to reform policies to slow the march towards fewer farms and more super-farms, basically discourage what is called—I think you wrote it—economic cannibalism with this continuous concentration happening in agriculture. Modifications are needed to help small and medium-size farmers, and recognizing the growing demands and concerns of consumers, and recognizing some of the dangers of the consolidation of the food industry and the ag input suppliers...

BB: All true. Those are all targets of mine. I got blamed for them, and what I did was claim credit.

RK: Good. [Chuckles] Well, I know it came out just in the waning days of the Carter administration, right? And then what happened with that? Not too much, maybe, after Reagan came in, or what happened with that report?

BB: It was ignored. They just buried it. Stopped printing it.

RK: That's what I'd heard.

BB: Yup, they stopped printing it and wouldn't carry it in their libraries anymore.

RK: I have in my little briefcase over here a copy of that report and read through it.

BB: Do you?

RK: Yeah, you can get it online. You have to do a little digging. It kind of got resurrected by somebody. You can get the whole report online.

BB: I remember that. I didn't know it was online, but I remember that report and all the trouble it made, especially from the Southerners. The Southern Democrats had a lot of power, and they knew how to use it, and they really bore down on me hard. Carter stood by me. He didn't rebel.

RK: That was something, coming from Georgia...

BB: Yeah, that's right—he stood by me. I had told him what I was doing. I didn't surprise him any, and he encouraged me. I kept him apprised of it, and I said—this is going to make trouble for you, and he said—well, that's nothing new. He just shrugged it off. Stick by your guns. So I did.

RK: Yes, yes. The other thing that was going on at this time, too, was we'd just come off the Arab oil boycott, you know the whole OPEC controlling the prices of oil and everything, and one of the big concerns was all the energy consumption in the country as a whole and in agriculture, too. I know that was part of the picture at the time.

BB: That's right, and had to examine ... Carter directed that we examine everything that went on to see if there was anything we could do to reduce our dependency on oil. So we started kind of locally, one-on-one, to see what we could find, and we were searching. We didn't get much accomplished, because we couldn't find anything big enough to make any national difference, but it came later.

RK: Yeah, yeah. Well, that's a good segue, I think, to this other report that I want to talk about in particular. Well, there was actually two other ones to draw on briefly I'll mention; I think it makes sense. One of them was to point out that in 1977 there was a national resources inventory, and, as far as I can read, that was really the first time there was a really deep, consolidated look, maybe since the Depression years, that showed the degree of soil erosion and damage being done to the land by the big plow-out that happened during the '60s and that sort of thing. And so that was another thing to have to contend with.

BB: That's right. That really was an eye-opener for everybody, including me. I hadn't realized that it had gotten so serious. So with that I changed my plans and my outlook and attitudes and took a much more serious interest in soil control and soil erosion and soil management.

RK: Yeah, there was statistics that when they were extrapolated came out with things like two bushels of soil for every bushel of corn in Iowa, things like that. Wendell Berry pointed that out in that book, *The Unsettling of America*, which was such an important book to me and...

BB: We really countered that one largely through the extension service, county agents scattered all over the United States were our sentinels out there. We said we don't know, really, where to start on national policy, but we want you to start looking locally what can be done to deal with soil erosion and all the things that were mentioned in this report—cleaning up water supplies, what can be done locally to start? So we'd get some idea of what this is going to cost and how to

go about it. So they did. We had a county agent starting local experiment stations on a local basis, not federally supported or sanctioned, just done by what they could do with what they had. And we put together a lot of useful information on what could work and what didn't. And that was the basis for what became a kind of an environmental action report, federally.

RK: And another one that came sort of on almost the same topic was in '89 there was the national—I mean in '79—there was a national ag lands study, and that one was done with, maybe, some support from the government, I'm not sure. But it revealed that one million acres of farmland were being lost every year to development uses.

BB: That's right.

RK: It was being used, but it was being converted away from agriculture, and in a way that usually couldn't come back.

BB: That's right, that was a devastating report. We all knew that it was happening, but didn't realize how extensive it had become. So that was kind of an alarm bell.

RK: I bet it was. I know it got a lot of attention. So that all leads to this last thing I really wanted to cover in depth if we can, and that was what became known as the *Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming*. It was a relatively small report, certainly didn't require much budget or anything, but really it's considered a seminal report when we're looking at the development of what has become a growing movement in sustainable and organic agriculture. The purpose of the report is stated in a brief note at the beginning by Anson Bertrand. He was the person at the ARS that I think you worked with—the science and education to kind of coordinate that report. And the purpose was to learn more about the potential contribution of organic farming as a system for the production of food and fiber. Another way of looking at what are we going to do about this situation. So why did ... it was launched in '79, this study, ultimately Garth Youngberg and all of the folks involved, James Parr and others, were all inter ... all went around the country and interviewed 69 different farms, went on the farms, looked at them, how they were doing organic farming, to get a real picture of it. So I think I kind of know, but talk a little bit why you commissioned the report. There's a good story about your neighbor who was an organic farmer. Wanted you to touch on that—do you recall that story?

BB: I'm not sure—can you remind me?

RK: I'll mention his name to you; I think it was Bill—just a second here. You had a neighbor who was 1,500-acre organic farm, and something like Bill Bertrand or Billberg something.

BB: OK, I know who it was. Yeah, I gotcha.

RK: Some of this lore around this whole report is that that was one of the things that spurred you to take a look at this.

BB: Right. He was kind of a ... he was a genius in his own way, kind of a low-level, not very flamboyant fellow, but tried things and did things that produced results. And he kept good track

of it, so that was the basis for my interest in the whole thing. I could see that we could do things on a local scale without much investment if we took care of it properly, and that's how it started.

RK: Yeah, and he'd been an organic farmer for six years or something, I read. Well, a lot of people, as we have been saying, were in debt and having trouble, his mixed organic operation was going along all right, as far as you could tell.

BB: Yeah, he was going all right. He didn't fall for the trap for getting big into machinery and growing wheat and corn and soybeans for export at prices below the cost of production. He stayed away from that.

RK: Right, right. So Dr. Bertrand pulled together a bunch of people that they went around and did these visits on farms. They even, a couple people even went to Japan to look at some organic. That's all covered in this report and recommendations, and it also provided the first official definition of what organic farming really was, which is important, because there was a lot of misunderstanding and mythology around that whole notion of organic, and just like a lot of things that you've been talking about, it was pretty much dismissed by a lot of people, the whole notion that organic could even have an important role in American agriculture.

BB: Yeah, big chunks of the government wouldn't even acknowledge that the problem existed. The Republican Party fought it tooth and nail. They wanted no part of it, because they saw that if the organic thing could ever take root, the importance of some of the fertilizer and some of the insecticide people and other folks who had an interest in the way things were going would never agree to it, and so they got the Republican Party to oppose it, and we fought that one all the way, but we didn't make much headway.

RK: That was released, I think, just about four months before the end of your term, and there's some interesting stories out there about the fact that they were going to actually suppress or even, apparently, even burn the report.

BB: Yeah, they were determined to stomp it out.

RK: Yeah, right. And one of the things that Roger Blobaum talks about, who is an organic activist, and I'm sure he lobbied you over time.

BB: He was one of my confidential advisors.

RK: Yeah, oh, was he? Yup, and he's been a stalwart advocate for organic farming ever since, and he and a guy named Bob Scowcroft from California, they have these stories about how they grabbed as many copies of the report as they could and kind of smuggled them out, [Both chuckle] and spent the next several years, basically, letting people know about this report and sending it to them when they had copies. And they got a lot of press, and Garth Youngberg talks about how, even though it was disliked by the Reagan administration, which had come in right after the report came out, it was very popular among ... people were curious about it and interested. And it was even translated—within two years it was translated to seven different languages.

BB: Is that right? Didn't know that.

RK: Yeah, so it really had an extensive influence, despite the reaction it had to it. So it's one of those things that people really cite as sort of the, kind of, the father of the organic policy efforts. And so nothing too much happened for a while, but with that report, folks like Senator Leahy, Jim Weaver from Oregon, ears perked up, and they had some constituents that were interested in some of these issues, and this gradually built up over the years, as you know, into the Organic Food Production Act, the Sustainable Ag Research and Education Act—all of these things eventually have been growing out and still are from that original report.

BB: And the current debate over renewable fuels is part of that; it grew out of it. You know, we have been so totally dependent on petroleum and natural gas that we have come to believe that that's an infinite resource, which it's not, of course. And we've come to learn how much damage is done to the air and the environment, and so the argument for alternatives, for renewable fuels, is very compelling, very strong. And it's a part of the same debate here that we had back then. The opposition is about the same, from the same sources, and they are well-financed, and they are determined to stomp us out.

RK: That's one thing it reminded me of what you said—both this report on the organics and also especially even on the "*Time to Choose*—the structure report is, when I read through it, it's a lengthy report, *A Time to Choose*, and it's just painful how accurately true it is still today. Some of these same issues. I think that's the number one thing of these interviews I've been doing that most people say when I ask them—what's your biggest regret or what really hasn't happened?—is these fundamental structural reforms haven't happened. And so these trends of diminishing number of farms and consolidation have continued to this day.

BB: Yeah, something is going to happen on that frontier. It's going to collapse. It can't be sustained. The power that the big farms have over the small farms is enormous, and the small farms have no chance. The big farms are just so powerful that they can absorb them, and it's happening as we speak. The small towns are changing, because the small farmers leave; they go to the cities to find jobs. So it's having a major impact on the structure of rural communities, and the big farms keep growing, and they have all the advantage. They have price advantage and they have clout in the marketplace, and they are very good at what they do. They're well-managed. These people are smart and they have a lot of money to deal with, and they don't know how to handle it. What they can't handle is their debt. They are really limited on what they can borrow. They are at the limits in many cases, and the farm consolidation keeps going on, and the pressure is going to come from financing when it comes. It will hit them hard. But up until that time, they are a real threat to the future of the small-scale farming in rural communities in general.

RK: This hasn't reached to the depth that it needs to, of course, but I think another way that that is leading to this demise is the fact that there is a growing consumer demand for sustainably grown and organic foods.

BB: There is.

RK: And much of that—not all of that; that’s a big debate—is grown by smaller farms. A lot of the farms out in California that produce a lot of the organics are big farms...

BB: Yes, they are.

RK: ... no getting around it.

BB: The size doesn’t matter, as far as I’m concerned. It’s what they are doing with it.

RK: Right, right. So that’s another thing that this whole sustainable ag movement may be contributing to, ultimately, in having some structure—if the right laws can get put in and support the people that are moving in that direction. It continues to be a struggle. Well, we’re getting near the time here, but I wanted to ask you ... I didn’t talk much about those important 10 years you had after you left the Carter administration to work with the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and, as I mentioned, we were talking before how important that organization was even to my own family, and my grandparents’ farm, the one my mother grew up on, how much difference it made when that cooperative came through and they finally had electricity on their farm. So what did you basically do there?

BB: Well, the REA was a New Deal program. It started with Franklin Roosevelt started the thing in the early ‘30s, and it was an idea that caught fire quickly and started in the South, primarily. But it kept growing and it came up here in the Midwest, and by the late ‘30s it was going almost everywhere. People were agitated to find a way to form an electric cooperative. Federal government created an agency called the Rural Electrification Administration. They provided the engineering support, they provided the know-how and how to build and run and manage and maintain a rural utility company—were hugely important—and financing to go with it. So that thing really took off.

RK: By the time it was in the ‘80s, what were you doing—just trying to maintain these, or...?

BB: Well, maintain it, of course. The power industry by that time had given up trying to kill it. They saw they couldn’t kill it, so they would do what they could do, kind of irritate everything, but we kept the thing going, the REA, that is, and it is to this day. Its role is diminished, because there’s been a lot of consolidation in the utility business. REA cooperatives merged with one-another, formed larger cooperatives and farm utilities of their own, but they’re still locally owned. There aren’t very many independent local REAs anymore. They’re a part of some kind of a larger organization that deals with the power supply and transmission questions of their time.

RK: Yeah, I know that’s how it is in Minnesota.

BB: Yeah, that’s the way it is almost all over the country.

RK: I see. And I imagine they are doing things like, I would think, with like one of the issues that’s sort of similar to the REA in the New Deal was getting the internet out there in a good way to everyone.

BB: That's right—that came after my time.

RK: Oh, yeah, but I would think they are part of that whole effort.

BB: Oh they are. It's the same energy, but it's generated by young people, not people my age. I'm from the mechanical generation. I don't understand even the jargon that my grandchildren use today. I don't know what they're talking about, and they don't know what I'm talking about. So we kind of cross paths there. [Both chuckle]

RK: Right, well, you've got to keep talking to each other. They can learn a lot from you.

BB: That's right, we do.

RK: And you finished up your formal service then with, were invited to become a regent at the...

BB: Yes, I was. A regent's spot opened up. A man retired, and I had a couple friends on the Board of Regents that ... and some members of the legislature came to me and said I should apply for that job. They'd like to see me on there. So I said, well, I don't know how to go about this. So, we'll help you. So I said—OK, let's go, so I did. I became a candidate and went through the tests and talked to the people I had to talk to and introduced myself and got acquainted, and I was elected. That was a job I enjoyed immensely.

RK: Did you?

BB: Oh, I sure did.

RK: Yeah, it was ... and you did that for what was it—a six-year term was...?

BB: Six-year term, yeah.

RK: I think about that, you came to the university, having never even been to Minneapolis before, in 1946, and now come back full circle to be a regent.

BB: I was vice-chairman of the board, and it got to the point where I had to decide. If I was going to stay, they were going to make me chairman of the Board of Regents, and I didn't think I could do it. I was getting along in years and I wasn't really up ... I didn't think I had the credentials for that job. So I didn't seek re-election. I retired entirely—I went home. I was 65 years old by that time. Time to slow down.

RK: And you still had a hand in ... your family still owns the farm.

BB: We still own the farm. Well, I sold it to the kids, but we don't farm it now.

RK: So you got your kids farming it?

BB: Yeah, they're farming it, yup. They take care of it.

RK: And then you and your wife, Helen, have a place in town?

BB: No, we have a home on the farm.

RK: Oh, do you?

BB: But we're right by town. Part of our farm is now incorporated in the city limits.

RK: Oh, it is?

BB: Yeah, we had land that was right adjacent to the city-owned golf course. They had a nine-hole golf course on the south side of town, along the river, and our farm was just south of that, adjacent to it. And the mayor of the town was a good friend of mine. He said—we're in a terrible fix here. We've got our golfers in town want us to expand, do an 18-hole golf course. The golfers in town were, a number at that time, business people and others—and said—we've looked everywhere for land. And they looked across the river from where we lived in the woods there, and said—it's just too expensive to try to open that land up for a golf course. If there's any way we could buy some land from you. I said, no, but I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll trade. Well, what do you have in mind? I said—I'll trade this 80 acres of land to the city. You could take it for the golf course, in return for which I want you to incorporate that entire quarter section in the city limits. Take over the water and sewer and streets. So they did. So now it's a part of the village of Roseau, and they run the streets and the utilities there, and the golf course has been developed; we have an 18-hole golf course.

RK: How big a town is Roseau, about?

BB: About 2,000 people. Small community. But the stipulation I had was that I wanted to be sure that the kids get a chance to play. I said—I want golf course policies to be that kids will be encouraged to play golf, and they can come there and play and enjoy themselves—but behave themselves, of course—no roughhousing, but I don't want any charge placed on them. So they agreed to that, and it's been that policy to this day. Little kids out there, 12, 13 years old, dragging their little bag around, learning how to play.

RK: Good. Well, the last thing I want, if you don't mind, would be going back a little bit on the farm policy front. If you were now back in the situation where you were in 1977, and were looking forward for what policies really need to change or what needs to be done, do you think? What course corrections going forward with this. We have a farm bill coming up in 2018; a lot of people are starting to think about it already. Do you have any thoughts about that?

BB: Not really. I've become rather discouraged. The farming organizations are falling apart. They can't agree with each other on anything, really. There's no consensus on any kind of a change in agricultural policy. The administration is no help, and we're just sort of floundering. Something's going to evolve and essentially gel. But right now it's not happening.

RK: I think you're right. The thing where we're hoping that one of the things that can grow, because of the fact that it's gotten more and more economics behind it, is this move toward the more sustainable and organic food production, and that a lot of the effort of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, going forward, is in that area, trying to strengthen more research dollars going to these farmers that are trying these methods and things like that. So I think it'll be incremental.

BB: It will be, but it will be steady, because a lot of the people that had believed that the campaign we're on, farming with all the techniques that modern society provides, based on non-renewable resources, is coming to an end. Things got to change. People know that, but they don't quite know how to do it. So it's going to happen. It's going to be a generational thing. People my age—I'm 85—88 years old, and I'm out of it now, and my kids are in their 70s, and they're going to be out of it, but my grandchildren are coming. They're going to the universities; they're getting educated in all these exotic sciences and all the new things, and they're coming home as college students and talk to me about things I never heard of that are becoming standard jargon in their community. And it's going to happen; these kids are going to take over the government, the universities, and the colleges, and the legislatures, and run things much better than my generation could run it. I'm very encouraged by what I hear among young people. They call them Millennials, and I say—more power to them.

RK: Good. Well, that's a perfect way to end this, and I hope that those Millennials also listen to what you have to say and what you've learned along the way, because there's many valuable lessons. I'm sure they will.

BB: Bless them.

RK: Thank you very much, Bob.

Transcribed by
Carol C. Bender
WordCrafter
carolcbender@msn.com
651-644-0474