

**Ron Rosmann  
Maria Vakulskas Rosmann  
Narrators**

**Ron Kroese  
Interviewer**

**January 29, 2018**

**Ron Rosmann—RR  
Maria Rosmann—MR  
Ron Kroese—RK**

**RK:** Today is January 29, 2018 and I am in Ames, Iowa, the Midwest office of the Environmental Working Group, where videographer Nick Ohde of Practical Farmers of Iowa and I have the pleasure of interviewing Ron and Maria Rosmann. The Rosmanns, whose 700-acre organic farm is located near Harlan, Iowa, are longtime leaders in the production and marketing of organic crops and livestock. Going back to the 1980s, they were among the early members of Practical Farmers of Iowa, participated in PFI's on-farm research into organic and soil building practices, and as leaders of the organization helped build PFI into one of the most effective farmer-based sustainable agriculture groups in the country. Over the years their activism has extended beyond Iowa borders to the halls of Washington, D.C., where they brought their practical farming experience and knowledge to the development of key policies of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. That work included both Maria and Ron testifying before Congress on behalf of the policy proposals that benefit family-size farms and conservation of working lands and organic agriculture. Ron and Maria, thank you very much for agreeing to meet with us today and for sharing some of your experiences and lessons learned with this sustainable agriculture oral history archive. You know, there's so much about your farm itself, your commitment to building the soil and protecting the water, how you add value to the crops and livestock you raise, your work to advance organic and sustainable agriculture, education, and public policy efforts—there's so much to talk about. But as I do with all these interviews for the archive, I'd like to start at the personal level. How did you get involved with farming and the way you farm, going all the way back to your childhoods. Where were you educated; how did you meet? So let's start with some personal stories.

**RR:** Well, I grew up, was born in 1950. I was the third of four boys. My youngest brother was Down syndrome, and that had a great effect on our family, and some of the social messages that were involved with that at the time were important. Looking out for others was something our parents taught us from an early age. So, actually, we are farming the farm that I grew up on. My dad was born a quarter mile north of us in 1907, and our middle son, Daniel, and his wife, Ellen, who farm with us now live there. So it's really neat to have ... well, it's the fifth generation now on this land for over 125 years. I went to Catholic school in Westphalia, German Catholic small community, through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and that's when the high school closed, so I went to another combined Catholic high school for three years, and then that closed and then we went to Harlan and were the first graduating class there of the consolidated school district, and went from a class

of 20, in Defiance, Iowa, to 186 in Harlan. And then went on to Iowa State. I was kind of the last hope to be the farmer in our family, my older brothers going different directions. And so I started out in farm operations, expecting to go back to the farm, but then I kind of got caught up in the social movements of the '60s and civil rights and Vietnam War and decided to get out of ag and went into psychology, sociology and zoology, three different areas, and ended up getting a degree in biology. Then I was kind of faced with one of the biggest decisions of my life. My dad was ready to retire and rent the land out, and he said—why don't you give farming a try for at least a year? If you don't like it you can always leave and maybe go to graduate school, which I was kind of thinking about. So I decided to come home, and I never really looked back. I appreciated from day one the independence, working outside, which I always liked, being involved with nature, and then being a member of a small community where you could make a difference vs. living in an urban area where that might be tougher to do. And there was a sense of security in that, although there was also a lot of apprehension about, kind of, social life—would there be ... etc., you know, those kinds of things. So that's where I got my start.

**RK:** Well, Maria, how about you? Where did you grow up; how did you guys connect?

**MR:** I was not raised on a farm. I grew up in Sioux City, in northwest Iowa, and attended Creighton University. I was earning a degree in journalism, and then my senior year I had an internship at what was then called WOW Radio, in Omaha, and had an assignment to cover an event where—then running for Congress—Tom Harkin was to appear with Hubert Humphrey in Council Bluffs. And as we have found over the years, for these events nobody's ever on time, I managed to meet Ron. The specifics will not be shared, but it had something to do with the former mayor of Omaha, who has a big park named after him now, somehow introduced us—we'll put it that way. Anyway, we dated for a few months, and in my mind and heart I thought—wow, things are getting a little serious, or progressing. And at the time, the last thing I wanted to do was live on a farm and live in a small community. I had already been able to secure a job at a television station in Sioux City upon graduation, so I broke it off with him, and over the period of about 18-months-to-two-years, honestly, truly regretted it. Anyway, how do you politely and appropriately ... so out of the clear blue, as I'm working—I worked doing promotion work and on-air work for this station in Sioux City, and then secured a job at Creighton University as their news bureau editor. So I moved back to Omaha and was having the time of my life, still, but once in awhile lamenting the fact that I had dated this guy that I really liked and never really found someone after that to match his aura. [RR chuckles] Anyway, so I happened to mention it once to a friend of mine who was very surprised to hear this because, long story short, it was her cousin, and so in August she said—we got to have a party! And she called Ron and said—we're going to have a party and you've got to come, because someone who really admires you will be there. And so Ron went through his whole list of women—I wasn't on it. [RR chuckles] But in August he came to that party. We started dating in August. By March we were engaged and by September we were married, of the following year. And going on 40 years.

**RK:** It seems like you adapted pretty well to the farm life, after all.

**MR:** Honest to goodness, there have been easier things to adapt to, to be honest. It was a change for me. Sometimes it was extremely easy, sometimes it was not as easy. I remember my late parents, especially my mom, telling me out of the clear blue once that she and my dad were

worried that the marriage would last. And I thought—mom! And she said—no, not because of Ron, she said—because of the farm. And although they had great respect for the farm, the land, the whole picture of it—it is isolating. Although, when I was like three weeks old I was left on a farm by accident—my mom and dad used to buy eggs from a lady in Salix, Iowa, so they went to take the new little baby with three other children in the car on a Sunday ride, and they got the eggs and left, and I was still at the farm. So my mom teased me that I was destined to be a farmer. But anyway, that’s how I became a farmer—I married one.

**RK:** That’s interesting. Well, I would like to have you at least briefly describe the farming operation. As I told Nick here who’s manning the cameras today, one of the things that helped me prepare for this interview is the podcast that he did with you folks last fall before you had your field day, and I would urge people to take a listen to that if they want to get more detail that you provide on the actual farming practice. ([www.practicalfarmers.org/news-events/podcasts/](http://www.practicalfarmers.org/news-events/podcasts/)) But I would like to hear some about that, particularly within the context, I remember, it’s 1973, I think, when you actually came to the farm. It was farmed with conservation, but not organic at that time. One of the things that you obviously resisted was the push at that time from people like (former Secretary of Agriculture) Earl Butz and the push towards industrial agriculture was basically was all about get big or get out. Certainly your operation has grown over the years, but it hasn’t grown in the direction that a lot of conventional agriculture folks think things ought to go, and I’d like to have you all talk about that.

**RR:** Well, I think I have my parents to thank for a lot of the attitudes that we now have, and that our children now have, for how we felt about get big or get out, let’s say. My dad, throughout the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s—we could have farmed 800 acres, which would have been a huge farm for that time. Instead we farmed 320 acres, because his philosophy was let’s rent two 160-acre farms out. My dad didn’t buy the other 160 till later on, in about 1970. But anyway, there were two 160-acre farms that were rented out to beginning farmers in our community. And my dad said having new beginning farmers and families in our little predominantly German Catholic community meant more than us having a greater income. Farming was always a struggle for prices. I mean it’s not like we were that wealthy. We weren’t any different than anyone else, but my dad was not driven by the need to always have more. So that’s how we grew up. He never gave up. When I came back, you know, some of the ... well, the message of getting big, get out was just starting because of the emphasis on mono-cropping corn and soybeans was just starting to happen, and accompanied by larger machines and more technology, farm policies that always rewarded getting big. I remember one of the first things I became involved with was the Center for Rural Affairs, and Chuck Hassebrook called me up. I don’t know how we met, if it had to do with fighting the investment tax credit, which rewarded farmers directly through, they could take money off their income tax payments, federal, if they invested in confinements, for instance, and big machinery. But my dad always resisted, because he understood, I think, what good farming practices were. And that meant you needed a good soil building rotation that included legumes and pasture and small grains like oats, and it included a cow-calf operation and farrow-to-finish hogs and chickens, etc., etc. He never gave that up, and I saw no need to give that up, because I saw, in my heart and in my mind, the value of diversity, and not having all your eggs in one basket financially was a good philosophy to live by, and we still do. Diversity is one of the keys to our success. We have 700 acres now, and two of our sons are farming. We have increased the number of cows—we have over 100 cows. We have 60 sows in the farrow-to-finish hog

operation. We feed out all the cattle. We have a popcorn business. Our son has egg layers. We grow about 40 different species, every year, of cover crops and just in species—cover crops, you know, with oats, wheat, barley, field peas, etc., etc. And we have around 50-some fields. So, if anything, we've gone the opposite, by being more specialized in quality and value added through, now, certified organic.

**RK:** And the diversity there not only is a good economic strategy, but it's a real strategy for building sort of a holistic system on your farm, is it not?

**MR:** One of the things that you did not mention was that it wasn't just your father.

**RR:** Well, no, it was...

**MR:** Your dad and mom. Particularly she and many others like her—both are deceased, both our sets of parents are deceased, but she and many others like her were very, very much an integral part of the farm, not only just raising the ... what was expected of yours, to have chickens or whatever, but she was very active, very active with farming. Not in the physical work, but in ... and not, maybe, in many of the day-to-day decision making, but they were a farming team.

**RK:** Um-hum, and that's one of the strengths that you folks have brought. I know in the podcast it talked about Richard, about the Thompsons, that they were a team. Many of the folks involved with Practical Farmers of Iowa who have been leaders have been men and women teams working together on their farms. That's kind of a fundamental aspect. Even that was sort of going against the grain of the get big or get out. I remember I got to talk to Wendell Berry about this. Accompanying that whole movement towards industrialization of farms was the idea that they tried to influence women to think of themselves as being more citified. And there was a whole, like, when you looked at old *Farm Journals* of that period—it was about buy your Tide so you're more like the ladies in the city and things like that. That was all part of that tide that was trying to be pushed on the countryside at that time.

**RR:** I think it was part of the early subtle messages that you had to go elsewhere than to your local area to buy things. That was really ... not only were the farms getting bigger, but at the same time it was easier to go to Omaha or Des Moines, because it was "cheaper" and they had more to offer, and somehow small-town businesses started taking on less meaning and importance. As farmers began to buy their inputs away from the local community, too. Now we really see that with confinement animal operations where very little comes from the local community in terms of the infrastructure. The problem I have with that is that the money does not stay in the local areas. It leaves and goes to the investors and stockholders. I'd feel much better about the agribusiness world if they did put their money where their mouth is in terms of investing in rural people and communities.

**RK:** Yes, yes. Part of this strategy, I'd say, part and parcel with it that you've demonstrated, both of you on the farm, is the whole notion of adding value to the things you produce. I'd like you to talk about that—the farm store, the other things you do with your sons, too, that bring this whole even more profitably together.

**MR:** For about 21 or 22 years we have had a private label for our certified organic beef. We've had one butcher for that in Des Moines. Same thing with our pork; our pork is butchered closer to home and with our private label, *Rosmann Family Farms*. Many farmers—we were no different—would be if you bought, like in my mom and dad's case, bought eggs from a woman years ago, about 20 miles from Sioux City, but it was still that connection to a farm. In our case, neighbors would buy quarters or halves from others, and in our case we became, having our own little niche with organically raised beef and pork. So for quite a few years we were able to sell it, quarters and halves, predominantly, to customers heavy in Des Moines, somewhat around home, and then to grocery stores, which was really quite fun. And we still have the same two grocery stores that we started with, and we were one of the—both of them, one in Des Moines, one in Ames—to be their first meat vendors, much less organic meat. These were in our case a co-op, Wheatsfield Co-op in Ames, Iowa, and Campbell's Nutrition Center in Des Moines. But then we were starting to, fortunately, build a client base, and we were kind of getting tight on legal storage area to have this all housed together, and admittedly Ron's always been more of a forward thinker than I, and he's—why don't we put up a store? And I said—OK, and we ended up putting up a 4,800-square-foot facility on our farm. We thought initially about going on to, possibly, into Harlan, on the square—and this was five years ago in 2012—and initially thought about that, where the client base would be. At the time our downtown square in Harlan was not all that active, and I wasn't that confident with it. Fast-forward to 2018, it's a very thriving area now. But I don't regret staying at home. It gives people an opportunity to come out to the farm. Children get a chance to see animals that are actually outdoors, and families ... it's a cute little, like a general store-type set-up, and it's something that, with all due respect, it's mine. It was my chance to finally, in my late 50s, identify with something on the farm, because, yes, I can help you do some field work. Yes, I can do certain things; however, I cannot manage the farm. As an aside—we lost two friends early in our marriage to death, both by accidental death. One was electrocuted, and one was killed in a farming accident, and I made the decision then that if I had to take over the farm tomorrow I wanted to know enough that I could get by in either managing someone or knowing what to do. And I wanted involvement with that, but, for the most part, I didn't have involvement, because there can only be one person in charge, and for that it was him. So, the store, which I named *Farm Sweet Farm*, is a delightful opportunity for me to contribute to the farm, and I love every minute of it.

**RK:** That's wonderful. You've talked about the influence of the Center for Rural Affairs and Chuck Hassebrook, Marty Strange, but I know that Dick and Sharon Thompson, some folks with Practical Farmers of Iowa influenced you in your decision to move away from some of the conventional methods and more towards the organic, too, right?

**RR:** Yes, 1982 a handful of farmers, after I'd read an article about Dick and Sharon, decided I wanted to go check their farm out. That was before we stopped the use of pesticides, but I was already thinking about it. The farm crisis years were just starting, and we were trying to figure out then, already—how are we going to save money and survive? Those were very tough years for us as well as many other farms around us. So we went to Dick and Sharon's farm and what impressed me immediately was that he was looking for scientifically credible answers to his farming questions—could he get by with less fertilizer? What would his yields be like? These were not just anecdotal experiments or experiments that were not rigorous in terms of randomization and replication and statistical analysis so they could be published. He wanted to

know for sure. And so that impressed me, since I had a science background as well, that impressed me that he wanted scientific answers.

**MR:** Plus you came home, and you said that, he said that Dick and Sharon's fields were cleaner than ours, not using pesticides, and they were cleaner than ours, using pesticides.

**RR:** Yeah, it's interesting, he was one of the first people to utilize the tillage system called ridge-tillage, and so he became my mentor for that, and we still use ridge-tillage on our corn and soybeans for organic, in part because of these on-farm research trials that we have conducted in Practical Farmers of Iowa now for over 30 years. We have had over 40 research trials on our farm with both crops and livestock. And for four years, four separate years, over a 20-year span, we did ridge-till vs. conventional disked tillage in soybeans without pesticides, and then we would hand-count the weeds across the length of the field, and in six replications, so you'd have 12 strips to count, and every time we'd have five-to-seven times more weeds in the conventional disked strips vs. where we ridge-tilled. So ridge-tillage is one of the closer ways you can get to no-till in organic without tilling. Nobody's figured out yet, in organic, how to till alfalfa, for instance, without doing some kinds of tillage. The only way to no-till alfalfa is to spray it with Round-up or some other chemical, and then plant into it. But organic farmers, we have to disturb the soil. Of course, that brings up, you know, there are people that don't understand the systems part of it would say, well, aren't you destroying carbon? Well, to some extent, for one year, but when you consider we have a seven-year rotation of corn and soybeans and small grains and at least two years of alfalfa, we're only going to be disturbing the soil at most two years out of seven. Then when you take into consideration that our whole farm is over half pasture, over half hay and small grains, we beat the conventional no-till corn and soybean farmer. We blow them out of the water in terms of carbon sequestering, because we also use cover crops. Anyway, this whole systems thing that you brought up is ... thank goodness for biology. I learned at Iowa State the importance of photosynthesis. The importance of biological systems where all players contribute something, even the bad ones. Sometimes you need birds, you need good bugs, you need all the good so that they can keep the bad ones in check. Just like a predator-prey wildlife system. The lessons are the same. If you kill all the good organisms, you get rid of the diversity of life, both in the soil and above the soil in terms of animals and crops, you are opening yourself up for negative things to come in. That's the kind of system that conventional agriculture, unfortunately, has to live in, because as of yet there are, you know, broad spectrum, they kill everything. They don't just kill the bad, they kill the good with the bad, and so much of the life that is taken from the soil. The good mycorrhizae, the good fungi, the good bacteria, which now science is really starting to understand the role, just beginning to understand the role of microorganisms in soil quality. I know now after 30 ... this is our ... 1983, we're in our 35<sup>th</sup> year, now.

**MR:** Without anything on...

**RR:** Without any pesticides and no added nitrogen other than our own composted manure and legumes, and we really see the results. For example, this last year we averaged 180 bushels an acre on corn, on 180 acres of corn, across the board, over 60 bushels an acre on soybeans, and on oats we averaged 140 bushels oats with...

**RK:** That's incredible.

**RR:** ... with 42-pound test weight. I don't take the credit—I don't want to take the credit. If you give Mother Nature a chance to express herself in the good ways that we try to do, she will do it for you. You're just watching. You're a participant. That should be humbling, because industrial ag has just the opposite mentality, that man, that we do it all, we control everything, we have the last word—it's not true; we don't.

**RK:** No, it's like I've heard Wendell Berry talk about, there's more to be discovered than invented. It's really all about continuing discovery...

**RR:** Very true.

**RK:** ... and getting more and more tuned into what you can discover. This has been so fascinating to see the way, and hear you talk about the way your farm has shaped up over the years and gotten better and better. But also, despite how busy you've been on your farm and with your adding value, you also both have roles in policy work, and I wanted to make sure we devote some good time to that. Ferd Hoefner from National Sustainable Ag Coalition sent me copies of your testimony, Maria, in 2001, talking about the things that were needed on the farm, and I know you did a great job in Washington before the Senate. I think Senator Harkin was part of the people there, your audience there. And then in 2007 Ron you got to go, you were willing to testify, and advocating for a lot of NSAC's programs, the Conservation Security Program, now called the Stewardship Program, the Beginning Farmer Program, several of the organic programs. So, I'd like to have you talk some about that, and then, if you can, also bring it to how did some of those programs actually kind of manifest, as it were, on your own farm. Did you benefit, yourself, from any of those too? Talk about your policy work.

**MR:** The opportunity that I had was something I will never forget. It was quite an eye-opening experience for me. With all of the meetings, initially, with, as Ron and others were putting together the PFI organization, and as he was being asked to speak here and there, we made a pact that one of us would always be home for the kids, that both of us could not be gone at the same time. Well, it was very comfortable for me to stay home. We have three sons and they were young at that time, and it didn't make sense to me to having—daycare options were not the way they are now—but, nonetheless, a lot of it was overnight. Ron was, in those years, gone far, far more than I ever was. But I had an opportunity...

**RR:** If I could interject, Maria always said—and I think it's very, very true—just the other day she said, well, you know, we could talk about how great it would be to have kids grow up on the farm, but if they were attending daycare, that's not the same as growing up on a farm, is it? I think that statement says a lot.

**MR:** Well, and for us it worked. There's ... times have certainly changed, where daycare is both a wonderful option and an opportunity. Two of our sons, our two sons who are married utilize that. It's ... and must. Their wives both have extremely important careers, and I applaud it, particularly that they have decent daycare, even better yet. When our children were little and the

job opportunities for me were quite limited, it just didn't make sense, and it didn't seem to work. Well, I was learning about farming right along with my kids, to some extent.

**RK:** And then you got to go to Washington.

**MR:** Then I got to go—that was so exciting. I had to prepare, I think it was like a five-minute script, and memorize it, which for me, if I read something, I'm very confident. I have no issues speaking and reading. However, memorization for me—I was nervous, very nervous. We called the night before this testimony; it was five or six men and me—from National Cattlemen's Association, Pork Producers, the turkey people—I had forgotten the year until you had brought it up. But I held my own. But I had great help from Martha Noble, wonderful help from Martha Noble, who came the night before to my hotel room and eased nerves and told me what she and the SARE (program) hoped would come of it, and I believe I was able to do this. And saying my piece and try to say this is what we feel is important and why. But I do remember the testimony. I did not know that I would get a copy of the testimony, and there was a question asked of me by Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, alluding to—boy, you're organic farmers; how much do you make in a year? was his question. That was not one of the questions that Martha was peppering me with the night before. You may asked this; you may be asked that. And that was not one, and I just quickly panicked, but I quickly answered (God bless my dad)—well, my daddy—and as an adult I never called my father Daddy—but, I said, well, my daddy always said, when I got my first job, never tell anybody what you make. [RR chuckles] When I saw the testimony come through I thought—I've got to look to see—and that wasn't in there. But it was a wonderful learning experience. I was very humbled, very honored, felt very much like—oh, my gosh; I'm here!

**RK:** Ferd told me that you definitely carried yourself well and held up against some of those questions like that in a good way.

**MR:** I felt ... pleased is the word. I felt at peace with what I had to say, because it's your only one chance of doing it and you don't want to ... people who have faith in you to deliver appropriately, that's what I wanted, just to be appropriate and not be remembered for something else.

**RR:** I have some fond memories of my chances of testifying...

**RK:** That was in preparation for the 2008 Farm Bill.

**RR:** Yeah, well, I actually testified four or five different times.

**RK:** Oh, you did, oh. I've only read the one.

**RR:** Yeah, the last time was 2007. The first time was 1992, I think. That was before the House, when Earl Pomeroy was a representative from the Dakotas. I just remember him. I don't remember who the chair was of the hearing. I can't think of his name now; he later became ... had a stroke ... Johns ... Johnston, from South Dakota. Oh, you would remember him, too. Anyway, I took David along with me. I had the wonderful chance to go to Washington, D.C.

quite a bit of times, and every child got to go at least once when they were young. So David was 11, and the chair of the hearing introduced myself and then recognized David's presence as well, and it was about the role of livestock in the farm bill, I remember that. And I remember the closing remarks were that, well, I hope there'll be a future for your son David in family farming. Well, lo and behold, he is now family farming with us. But then all of the opportunities really speak so highly of the Sustainable Ag Coalition's efforts, and especially the high regard I have, and so many other people have, for Ferd Hoefner. He, through the Sustainable Ag Coalition, the issues of the day came out on the table and were discussed, and decisions were made as to what should be priorities. What should we be asking for? Well, it was things that were important to all of us. Beginning Farmer Programs. Value-added agriculture, so that people wanting to do value-added agriculture would have some grant money available, competitively. The Conservation Stewardship Program, so that conservation practices would be rewarded, and thank goodness we had Senator Harkin to champion that. The SARE [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education] Program, which our farm—I think we had one or two grants, one of the first years we had grants, through the SARE Program, competitive grants, where I applied, where I came up with an idea for a project, and that's where PFI helped, because we would do on-farm research trials. And that's exactly—in 1993, OK, we were doing some trials that had spot spraying with ridge-till—yes, we hadn't used any pesticides, but on these research trials we were experimenting with a band of herbicide, and I was asking the question—were we going to get better weed control and better yields? We did not. That year is when we decided no more. No more. We had quit pesticides, but I was toying around with the idea maybe we should be using a little, because we didn't have any organic markets then, yet.

**MR:** Organic wasn't even a word, where it was sustainable ag, low-input sustainable ag, and...

**RR:** That word, LISA [Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture].

**MR:** ...LISA, the acronym.

**RR:** I would say in my presentations—low-input sustainable ag, if that meant ... I could lower my inputs on the farm to zero and not survive economically, unless I got more for the product. Well, there weren't any ways to get more for your product, unless you could get more for your product. Back then there were just a few farmers getting premiums for crops grown without any pesticides, but that only happened ... it was hard to get into. There was no National Organic Foods Act. No national organic program. You couldn't certify meats as organic until the year 2000, through USDA, even though we certified through Organic Valley, which I haven't talked ... that's another important part of this whole economic diversity model. Yes, even though we have our own beef and pork label, if it wasn't for Organic Valley, the big co-op, of which we were in at the start with the beef and one of the very first on the pork, where would we be selling the rest of our pigs, for instance? You know, we're not selling all our pigs. Now, we are selling the majority of our beef through our own business, but not the pork, because there's larger numbers. But anyway, getting back to that, that's ... it's interesting to note that we have the Japanese to thank for the spread of organic in the Midwest, because they wanted organic soybeans for tofu and food products. That was the opening for certification. They needed volume; that's how we started and became certified in '94. And then, after that, a lot of things started taking off, slowly. Organic demand has skyrocketed ever since. But, again, I give so

much credit to the Sustainable Ag Coalition in identifying the important ingredients and programs that we need to make this happen, and we are still fighting for them today to make sure that we keep having them. Organic research, for instance. Back when I got to be on the Organic Farming Research Foundation board, we traveled a number of times to Washington, D.C. to meet with Senator Harkin and staff, when he was chair of the Senate Ag Committee. We actually were able to invite him to the farm for about three hours. He finally was able to come, and we had some key people there like Fred Kirschenmann and Jerry DeWitt, and we just looked and studied and talked for that whole time, and that's when Senator Harkin became convinced that, yes, we do need the Organic Research and Education Initiative in the farm bill. Now we've had it ever since. Is it as big as we think it should be? By no means, but it is there, and I don't think it's going away anytime soon.

**RK:** One of the things that's so profoundly important in it, too, is its farmer-based research. The ideas come on the farms, the research happens on the farms, working with the land grant, but it brings those two together.

**MR:** And the farmers become the owners of the research. You can read about research, you know, opportunities. You can read about findings, all of the ... they may not make that much sense, or may not be as pertinent to a farmer, but when that is seen on their own farm, and when you're networking with others—well, this worked for me but this did not work for me, or how did you find ... you know, like through Practical Farmers of Iowa, acronym PFI, but that's how we learned, was by visiting with others, by sitting down and finding out. You can find out a whole lot more from the person doing the actual research than reading about it in some brochure, which has its place, but this works.

**RR:** One of the things that Marie and I are the most proud of is this model of Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Organic Farming Research Foundation fell into that also, in that it was run by farmers, truly run by farmers and its board of directors, in its directions and programs. That says a lot, because there's a lot of very good people with all very good intentions, who are involved in all kinds of very good programs pushing sustainable agriculture, but there aren't very many that put farmers as equal partners. When we talk about diversity on the farm, we also need to talk about diversity of leadership and people, so ... In PFI there's this little saying that Dick Thompson coined. He said—you know, we not only grow crops in PFI, we grow people. So we try to develop leadership qualities. But the diversity in our own case of being involved in a lot of different things is because we're interested in a lot of different things beyond just farming, and these things are so important because they are going to dictate what the future will look like, so we have to be involved in policy as much as we can give ourselves time for. And then diversity of knowledge there to understand how all these programs fit in the government, how they fit in what you do back on the farm need to be understood. So we got to know what we're fighting for. It's interesting, these programs that we fought for in the '80s haven't gone away. And that says a lot for Sustainable Ag Coalition and others. There's a lot of groups in that, as we know.

**RK:** But you know, speaking of important areas, one of the things that has come to the fore in the last decade, probably particularly in the last five or six years, is concerns about climate change, global warming, and I know that you probably didn't get into organic farming because of concern about climate change, but when you look at what needs to be done to mitigate and

adapt to climate, it's very interesting how some of the solutions now that are being put forth around soil tilth and soil health are coming out of that same view of how to operate.

**MR:** Last week on our farm in southwestern Iowa, January 20<sup>th</sup>, something, it hailed. Thunder, lightning, hail. If that isn't our climate changing, what is? Not a January thaw—this was hail.

**RK:** What do you think then is ... do you see the soil health and the work you've done there being part of the solution for climate? When you look at all the contribution, with all the nitrogen fertilizer, the ammonia, the other things that cause the problems, it seems like it's one of the ways that we have to go.

**RR:** The basic question we have to answer is how can we use up the excess CO<sub>2</sub> that is the result of climate change and fossil fuels raising the amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere that come both from burning fossil fuels and from less green vegetation being out there around the world to utilize carbon dioxide. That's how we have to understand photosynthesis. If we do, we know that carbon dioxide is taken up by plants in the presence of sunlight, and that's where you are creating carbohydrates and oxygen. If you understand that, it's pretty easy to see that if we got too much carbon dioxide is one of the answers to that is to simply plant more green, like planting more trees, planting more permanent vegetation like pastures and making sure the ground is covered as many months out of the year as possible. Those are the keys, because if we did that on all of our land around the world, in terms of cover crops, in terms of appropriate row crops, more trees instead of less, more vegetation instead of less, we would completely free our atmosphere in a much shorter period of time of CO<sub>2</sub>, and we would begin reversing that process. I think I heard Francis Thicke, soil agronomist and farmer, say that the soil has seven times the capacity to hold CO<sub>2</sub> than what is out there in the atmosphere. I might be wrong on that quote, but in terms of, you know ... the goal was to keep carbon in a stable form, and that's what you do when you keep it down in the roots in the soil through soil quality, and in the oceans. The oceans are a good carbon sink. The problem being we are producing more excess largely through fossil fuels than we can ... if we don't do more in agriculture, we can't keep up with this spiraling increase. We'll become out of control; there won't be going back, because of the exponential increase.

**RK:** Right, right. And without getting maybe too much into the so-called weeds, too, do you think that if the animals are dispersed that it will kind of compensate for that methane issue that one hears about in animal agriculture, being methane is such a greenhouse gas?

**RR:** Yeah, I think the dispersion is certainly a factor of CO<sub>2</sub> if livestock are spread out on the land. And the fact that you have livestock out on grass and pasture means the grass is soaking up more CO<sub>2</sub> by its growth than you are ever going to emit through the rear end of a cow, let's say. The growth of the grass is so much greater than that, the net result. So, I think what is not known or appreciated by the general public is the value of animals, and the value of pasture. We were all hunter-gatherers. We were all meat-eaters. Not in our history less than 10,000 years ago. So, there's a reason all these evolutionary life processes have taken quite a few billion years to get to where they are. The principles don't change, that's what my point is.

**RK:** I also want to make sure we cover a topic that I often don't get the chance to talk to people about, and I know from your work in the Catholic Church, Maria, before, I mean with the ... worked for the diocese right for awhile, didn't you?

**MR:** No, I was development director for Shelby County Catholic Schools.

**RK:** OK. And I know that, Ron, you've been on the National Catholic Rural Life Conference board. How has your faith affected your operation, or how does it jibe with your commitment to sustainability? I was hoping that we could talk about that.

**RR:** I might just interject that Maria was chosen to be the lector for when Pope John Paul II came to Des Moines to Living History Farm, and, of course, his message was...

**MR:** His message was...

**RR:** ... about the land.

**MR:** ... conserve the land well so that your children and your children's children will inherit the land even richer than the one entrusted to you. But it was ... I got to meet him after the mass was concluded, and it was the first time ... my maternal grandparents were born in Poland. The paternal grandparents were born in Lithuania. So I was trying to remember ... my parents were at this mass, along with a quarter million other people, but what was really neat was my mom told me an expression, which I honestly cannot remember what it was, to say to him if I had a chance to meet him, say to him in Polish. I remember saying it, I got it off flawlessly, and then he said, "Oh, you are Polish, too." In English he said that to me, and I said, "Yes, and I'm a farmer." And I thought, oh, my gosh, I just said I'm a farmer, because before that I, honest, did not say I was a farmer.

**RR:** I remember he said, "God bless you."

**MR:** "God bless you."

**RK:** Well, I know the profound effect, going back to ... that's when I at that time got really interested in this whole area and the statement that came out from the Catholic Church about the land and it spread around like in Minnesota and the Lutherans then came up with one very similar, and it had a real profound effect.

**RR:** It was called *Strangers and Guests*.

**RK:** Yeah, that's it!

**RR:** That document, yes, we still use that document today, and Bishop Dingman was a hero of mine, because...

**MR:** That would be something, that is a very timeless piece of writing.

**RK:** Right, and I think would resonate with Pope Francis.

**MR:** Absolutely.

**RK:** Now that we have him in there. I'd like to have you talk, then, to that. How did that affect your own ... does that come into your thinking on how you farm yourselves?

**RR:** Oh, it ... that was the motivator from day one. Sure it's economics, sure it's ... well, we quit using pesticides for the practical reason of I did not like mixing chemicals. You had to get your hands in the chemicals. You could not unplug a nozzle with rubber gloves on—it was impossible. So now today there isn't hardly a farmer that applies their own chemicals.

**MR:** At least in our area.

**RR:** Because they are afraid, for one thing—they don't like it either. Some would say that they're completely safe, but I think there's less out there that would say that than there used to be. But the philosophy and the spirituality of that and the native philosophy of our Native Americans I think is what we try to live by, and that is the land is not ours. It is meant for the good of everyone, and we are supposed to ... the stewardship principle: we're supposed to tend to the garden. Be keepers of the garden, that's what the book of Genesis really says. If you really study it, what the interpretation of those words in Genesis say. Somehow, I think all churches, all religions, have maybe gotten away from that idea in the sense that emphasis has been placed on the use of the earth for man's physical good only, and in doing so we have forgotten the true meaning of it. That's where we are such big fans of Pope Francis, because I think in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, he said something that was very profound, and that is that the marriage of ecological justice and social justice are forever one. Yes, there's social justice and how we treat each other, but there also has to be ecological justice and how we treat all of life and our ecology—that all of life is sacred, and if we destroy the good parts of nature, we really have not done the kind of stewardship job that we should. Just look at our soil, for instance. We only have half of the topsoil left, meaning half of the organic matter. That's what sustains this planet. So we have to understand the science in order to understand God. We have to understand science as well. And we have to understand each other and respect each other, and that's what the message of *Laudato Si* is, and it's very powerful.

**RK:** You can extend those ideas to, then, to how you even raise animals on your farm, can you not?

**MR:** Exactly. By the normal everyday care of an animal, the treatment of an animal, and some are things that are outlawed—not outlawed, discouraged—by organic standards, but our animals have access to the outdoors. Our animals are where they should be. They're dry when they—for the most part—dry when they should be dry, and we try our best, and can only ... because, financially, you know, if we don't try our best, we pay for it in some way. But for, like, without the use of antibiotics—we will use an antibiotic in our cattle if need be, but to maintain organic standards, antibiotics are not allowed. With good herd health, out of a hundred cows in the course of a year, we generally have to administer a shot to two-to-three animals, and

automatically it goes off the organic market, but they're not getting a day-by-day-by-day regimen of it being part of their feed.

**RK:** Very important difference, right there.

**RR:** Well, there again, that's a case of where science is telling us we can't use large amounts of antibiotics in animals, because we are jeopardizing their use in humans. Over the years we've been involved in that issue as well through the Pew initiative for animal agriculture.

**MR:** Their program is called "Supermoms Against Superbugs," and it was fascinating that we were asked to participate, our son David as well, but what we learned out of that was when you need an antibiotic for yourself or your children, you want it to work. When our kids were little, if they needed an antibiotic, generally one round of the vaccine worked. Now it's not always the case. You have multiple ones. Well, each one ratchets up a little more, a little more. Well, we've got, I think the figure that Pew puts out is 29.9 million pounds of antibiotics are ingested annually in the United States. Seventy percent go to healthy livestock. And when you need that vaccine, or you need antibiotics to help you, you want them to be able to work, but if you've built up an immunity—and the people whom we met with on this initiative were people who lost children, who lost a spouse to antibiotic resistance—healthy in the morning, deceased by night: superbugs.

**RR:** We actually have a very sad personal story to relay about antibiotics and cancer. Our youngest son Mark's wife Courtney died from Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma a little over a year ago. Her immune system was so weakened with all the cancer treatments that never worked that one of the problems she encountered before she died was methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, otherwise known as MRSA resistant, so that when she was in intensive care in the hospital she contracted that disease and that nearly killed her in itself, but she was on two or three very powerful antibiotics that would work on those resistant organisms.

**MR:** Because that's when you want them, when you truly, truly need them, not to be eating it.

**RR:** She lived through that, but then died about two weeks later from the Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. All these things make you wonder, because she was a Peace Corps worker in Central America, in Honduras, and she was exposed to some chemicals that are outlawed in the U.S., such as DDT, Malathion, Parathion, some of those older chemicals that have some proven relationship to Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and so that's ... being an organic farmer, and if that is true—we will never be able to prove it—but if it is the case, one finds that kind of hard to take.

**RK:** Yeah, yeah. Well, this conversation has been just what I was hoping for. I very much appreciate it, learning about the work you have done and continue to do. I would sort of like to wrap this up now with a little talk about what do we do now. We've touched on some of those things, but I always try to end it more like looking forward—how do we get more farmers on the land and what do you think needs to be done next to continue in the legacy that you guys have created with your farm. As you've mentioned before, you are very fortunate to have at least two of your sons working with you on the farm, and the third one involved in agriculture. Think more broadly about that a little bit.

**MR:** Our lives would be very different if David and Daniel were not farming. We probably would be semi-retired. I, hopefully, would have the store, but I would bet he would be semi-retired. But we are able...

**RR:** If I might interject, I would hope that I would have been looking for a young couple...

**MR:** That's what I was...

**RR:** ... to—I'm sorry.

**MR:** That's what I was going to say.

**RR:** I didn't know.

**MR:** ... that we would have tried to mentor in someone who would take over, because you're not just going to rent it out after all these years to a chemical user. But we are fortunate because we have a generation now teaching their children about the importance of agriculture, much less organic agriculture, whether it's David and Daniel—I think David is the first one to be the second-generation board member for Practical Farmers of Iowa. So there's where it's carrying on that kind of mission. Our third son, Mark, who lives in Washington, D.C., works for the Foreign Agricultural Service, and works with small farmers in four Central American countries. I mean, it's with research, with value-added crops and the like. So, we are fortunate in that way that we can say, you know—a) we're blessed that our kids wanted to come back, and because it creates a dimension for us that we might not have had on our own. And especially like with Mark in his work where, I mean, I rely on him for a lot of question and answers for what I do, his thoughts, his opinion. My work with coffee is due in large part to his extensive work with coffee growers in Central America. So put that in perspective of what we want to see for the future is, from my vantage point, is that the next generation has started on it, whatever that generation's ages are. It's not just our kids, it's others, whether they're taking over the family farms, or whether they're young people or middle-aged people looking for either a second career or a change of career, that they want to farm in a different way or live on the land. Well, instead of ... there's a house there that means maybe that somebody ... it goes back to Ron's father and mother saying let's rent the land out, because another family member will be there. Well, we're seeing that in our community where the acreages are coming up. Well then, guess what—they have children, they're going to the schools, they're shopping in the stores. They're adding to the community, and the community stays afloat. So for me it's all of that, that what we choose to do is pass on to our kids and other kids, or others whom we meet, that this is a lifestyle and way of life that worked for us, and it may not be everybody's cup of tea, but it gave us great satisfaction and great meaning and purpose, because never were two days alike.

**RR:** I would like to comment on this. You know, there's a saying that says all politics are local. Well, what I find myself doing every day now is thinking and worrying about how are we going to keep our small parish going in Westphalia, Saint Boniface, how are we going to keep our small community going, because our numbers keep dwindling. Our county is losing population; we're only 50 miles from Omaha, 15 miles from Interstate 80. The opportunities for young

people in rural areas, as Wendell Berry so eloquently talked about, “the unsettling of America,” it’s still going on. Now there are some hopeful signs, like Maria just mentioned. There are more young people wanting to farm and farm on smaller acreages, because they could never afford to farm these big farms with the high capital costs, and nor should they. I guess I’ve been making a statement that, yes, we probably will always have big farms to some extent, but why couldn’t we have literally thousands of small farms in Shelby County, for instance, our county, that are growing food for people not only in our county, but for a million people around Omaha, Nebraska. This is where we need to talk about appropriate technologies, you know, the ability to live on a farm or live in a rural area, be a full-time or part-time grower of food, but still maybe have an off-farm job by utilizing driverless cars in the future to get to Omaha, or working from your computer from your own home. People want to have a quality of life experience where they are living. They want to be safe, both from bad elements, whether they’re weather or people. I think eventually we’re going to have a resurgence in our rural areas because of the detrimental effects of climate change on the coasts, like it or not, the high costs of living on the coasts, which we already are seeing people move off the coast to the Midwest. Yes, many of them to larger cities, but a lot of these larger cities in the Midwest will become too expensive to live in, and that’s when I think our real opportunities will come. But we have to be open, too, in rural areas. Rural people have to open their minds and hearts to welcome the immigrant. We were all immigrants, you know, not very long ago. Now we’ve got to do the same. We have to welcome the immigrant, if we are to grow. And that’s just one factor. So we’re working on these issues on a daily basis in our little town and church to try to figure out how we can not only maintain but grow down the road.

**RK:** I hope you take these lessons, then, and pass them on, as you have in the past, to some of the policies that NSAC continues to take on. Human diversity, is something that’s very important to NSAC— trying to broaden from being a largely Caucasian audience and knowing that ultimately there’s real strength in that diversity, and it’s necessary if we’re going to be successful as a culture.

**RR:** Yeah.

**RK:** So that’s a big part of it.

**RR:** You just hit the nail on the head, because that same diversity is what makes us successful as in growing crops and food—we tolerate each other, don’t we? We don’t kill all the bad—we put up with some bad weeds, right? We’re not going to ever get rid of them all; Mother Nature will make the bad weeds resistant, that’s what’s happening now. The same attitude we should have with people, the value of tolerance. Getting along, putting up with... that’s huge, you hit on the marriage again between social and ecological justice right there—perfect example.

**RK:** Well, this has really been a good conversation; I appreciate it. We’ve used quite a bit of your time. I’m very grateful to both of you. Thank you very much for giving us this afternoon. I very much appreciate it.

**MR:** We’re honored.

**RR:** We're honored, yeah. We're honored to be a part of such a high-profile group of people that have worked so hard on the same issues.

**MR:** Because what it did—and I'll go back to our children—what it did was point them to a way of life that they support, that their spouses heavily support. And working for the family farm—one may live—David and his wife, Becky, live in Avoca, Iowa, and she commutes as a clinical psychologist. With Daniel and Ellen, they are involved heavily with local foods issues, with their additional business of a restaurant that serves local foods, but also a delivery service that provides smaller farmers opportunities to market their wares. Instead of several of us delivering to the same grocery store, she has that service with the fruits, vegetables, meats—whatnot. So it honors us that they were able to find spouses, as Mark did with Courtney as well, his late wife—spouses who truly support this kind of life that we chose and initially chose—and by them being our kids, we chose it for them as well. But they married people who support that vigorously, and it makes it a whole lot easier.

**RK:** We're grateful for the example that you as a couple have provided on a number of fronts.

**RR:** Thank you.

**MR:** Thank you.

**RK:** Thank you very much.

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