

**Jim Riddle
Joyce Ford
Narrators**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

February 14, 2018

**Jim Riddle—JR
Joyce Ford—JF
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: This is Ron Kroese. It's February 14, 2018, and today videographer Kyle Grindberg and I are at the office of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, where we have the pleasure of interviewing Joyce Ford and Jim Riddle, longtime organic farmers and sustainable farming advocates from Winona, Minnesota. Jim and Joyce, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this sustainable agriculture oral history archive—and, Happy Valentine's Day!

JF: Nice to be here.

JR: Thank you.

RK: Well, there's so much to cover: your work in organizing with a few other farmers in your area to establish the first farmers market in Winona, your persistent efforts going back to the 1980s to establish sound organic standards, your continued work in your own backyard to protect farmland and the waters of southeastern Minnesota, the formation and ongoing operation of the Community Land Cooperative, where you raised your family and continue to live and work. But, as I do with all these interviews I've been doing over the last three years, I like to start at the beginning with backgrounds going all the way back to your childhoods and your education. So I think I'll start there, and Joyce, if you're willing, tell me about how you got interested in agriculture and about your upbringing and that sort of thing.

JF: I grew up in south Florida, Jupiter, West Palm Beach area, a small town, and did not have an agricultural background at all, went to the University of Florida, degree in history and political science, and it was in the early 1970s, the Vietnam War was still going on, got involved in doing some demonstrating there, and started getting interested in agriculture, getting *Mother Earth News*, back to the land kinds of activities, doing for yourself ... and *Organic Gardening Magazine* also. My parents had moved from Florida to north Georgia, and they were doing some organic gardening, so I got exposed to that a little bit there. But I was not a farmer—I had no farming background—and so when I graduated from college, my goal was to move somewhere and to buy farmland and start farming organically and do vegetables. So ended up in Minnesota, southeastern Minnesota and, ironically, bought land that was all woodland, so I had to actually clear the land. [Chuckles] So it was quite a challenge. So I started very small and was going to the farmers market in LaCrosse, and then Jim and I met, and he had farming background and was a very handy guy and very charming as well and wrote poetry [Jim chuckles] and just pulled me

off my feet, I guess. So we fell in love and got together. Would you say that was about in the mid-1970s or late 1970s?

JR: Close to the 1980.

JF: So, and then he got involved ... he was already involved in the land cooperative where we now reside. So, turn it over to you, honey.

JR: Yeah, so I grew up on a small farm in south-central Iowa, Colfax-Newton area, and we raised sweet corn and sold it, roadside stand, and had a few dairy cows, but probably, most importantly, my mom was quite an avid gardener and did composting and mulching and subscribed to *Organic Gardening Magazine*. So that was something that I leafed through as a child, but I didn't realize how influential that was in my life to come, so was raised with a lot of those skills, also building skills and just outdoors, farming-type related skills, and pretty much have always had a garden except for a couple of years in college. I first went to Oregon State, had a scholarship from the Maytag Foundation and thought I wanted to study forestry and traveled across country, went to Oregon State, but it was big classes, multiple choice tests—I didn't feel like I was really applying myself, and their idea of forestry wasn't that different from growing corn in Iowa, very much production oriented and Douglas firs instead of corn. So anyway, I transferred back to Grinnell College, which was about 45 miles from where I grew up. My dad had died, I was the youngest of the family, so it was just a lot better to be close to my mom during those years. But, yeah, and went to Grinnell then, my final three years, and I graduated with degrees in biology and political science, which seems like an odd combination, but that really has been a lot of my life work, a combination of ecology and political action. So then after I graduated, I taught school for awhile and worked in a sawmill, but then my sister was living in southeast Minnesota, and I'd come up to visit her, and just beautiful area—all the woodland and trout streams and Mississippi River Valley. A lot of alternative stuff going on, a lot of conservation farming, contour strips, a food co-op in town, learned about that in Winona, and just was really drawn to the area, and then just happened to meet this beautiful blonde woman, who was a mutual friend of my sister's, and I was drawn back to the area, and packed up my dog and a bunch of belongings and moved up to Minnesota. I first lived with my sister for awhile, but then eventually Joyce and I got together, and she was already doing the LaCrosse Farmers Market, and then we did that for a couple years, LaCrosse Farmers Market, but it was very disorganized and very cutthroat, no publicity, and it wasn't the best outlet, and the Winona Downtown Business Association and the extension agent located some growers that were doing produce farming and invited us to some meetings to help organize a market in Winona. And so us and two other couples and one single guy were really the core of the market, 1986-'87 were those first years. We were located under the interstate bridge, so easy to find the market, and just stuck with it, and today it's a market 40-to-50 growers, just vibrant market, which we love to go to and shop now. We sometimes sell, which we can get into that later, but mostly we go there and shop and social experience. Just a couple things about that—when starting our own market and setting our own rules, we learned some things not to do from LaCrosse. There, there was no set start time and people didn't have assigned stalls, and so it's like OK, those are easily remedied by just saying no one sells until 7:30, and you're going to have a set stall. But we also, even though all of the growers were organic, we didn't require that of everybody that wanted to sell there; we just really wanted to build a local market, but we did say that you have to produce

it or process it yourself. It has to be your products within a 50-mile radius of Winona, and that has worked really well. Those are still the rules, so it was a local foods market way before the whole local food trend. Musicians play, and it used to be we could only have not-for-profit bake sales, but now state rules have loosened up a bit, so we have regular bakers there, we have people doing crepes, you know, for eating at the market.

JF: I think there's a lot more selling of processed food, canned foods; there's some Amish people that bring pies and canned things.

JR: Right, right, so it's a great diversity.

RK: Sounds a lot like my friend Ken Taylor, the late Ken Taylor, and the work he did in organizing, or really changing the face of the Saint Paul Farmers Market and putting those same rules in place that have been much appreciated now after quite a bit of controversy in getting them started, as compared to the Minneapolis market. It's still fun to go there, too, but it's much more focused at the Saint Paul Farmers Market.

JF: I would say, too, that the experience with the farmers market organization—Jim was the first kind of coordinator, and we did some innovative...

JR: Well, then we formed an association.

JF: ... advertising things.

JR: Right. We did get some small grants from the state...

JF: The McKnight Foundation gave us a...

JR: Well, also Southeast Minnesota Initiative Fund, which ... yeah, un-huh, right.

JF: And that was very instrumental, because it was only for \$3,000, but it gave us some experience in grant-writing, that when we got to the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture], it kind of gave us some confidence.

RK: You mentioned the early '80s. That's actually when we actually connected first, because at the same time that was happening is that's when Land Stewardship Project was also still going strong, even though I'm not there. I always say in spite of ... [All chuckle] the best thing I ever did was leave... But there was a lot of good activity in southeastern Minnesota at that time, built on that early history, going back to the '30s, of these pioneer conservation farmers.

JR: Right.

RK: You kind of landed at the right place, think.

JF: Well, the land really lends itself towards taking care of it. If you don't take care of the land, it washes away with the hills that we have.

JR: Right. Having grown up in Iowa and seen the abuse that that land suffers—southeast Minnesota you just can't get away with that—it's too steep.

RK: I grew up with the same thing also in northwestern Iowa, so I know exactly what you're saying. Well, you know, before we move on to some of the other accomplishments that you've done, I think it might be a good time to talk a little about your actual living situation with the Wiscoy Valley Community Land Cooperative, how that got going, what it really is. I mean, because it's not the way a lot of folks live, and it's had a lot of wonderful things going on there, and your own family, raising them there—talk a little bit about Wiscoy and how it got going and what it does today.

JR: I mentioned that when I moved to Minnesota I lived first with my sister, and we just happened to be in a valley that was across the ridge from this land co-op that was already going on, and got to know people there, and they were doing organic flour milling in southeast Minnesota, Wiscoy Sunshine was the brand name, and they were shipping to food co-ops all throughout the Upper Midwest, and by the time ... you know, living with your sister, those days are usually numbered anyway; you can only do that for so long. It was a great entry point, but as space became available at Wiscoy, was actually a converted hog house that was turned into a dwelling.

JF: Two-room dwelling.

JR: Right, and the woman who had done that renovation, she had moved away, and so this place was vacant, and so I moved there and then Joyce moved in with me shortly thereafter. We had land available to start doing our organic produce growing together at Wiscoy. First it was big gardens and then it got more small-scale equipment and expanded a bit until we were up to 11 acres.

JF: I think the focus of the community was communication, consensus, decision-making process...

JR: Egalitarian.

JF: Egalitarianism—there wasn't any...

JR: No one leader, no one dogma.

JF: Right, and also organic farming, organic living, sustainable living...

JR: Renewable energy.

JF: ... using recycled materials, engaging with alternative energy. So as many of us were building houses—there's about 20 people there—we have solar, we had a wind generator at one point in time.

JR: Right, for about 20 years.

JF: But most people still use solar incorporated into their...

JR: All the houses still have solar.

JF: Either if they are hooked up to the grid they still have solar, which we have as well. And so there was also a growing movement for the bio-region in northeastern Iowa and western Wisconsin and southeastern Minnesota that we were getting together on quarterly meetings and learning from each other. We had different workshops, we had big potlucks, we had softball games, so we had a lot of fun.

JR: Music.

JF: Music. So there was this growing community of people that were all interested in organic vegetable growing. It was the beginning of the Organic Valley Company, CROPP. There was a food co-op in Decorah, Iowa and Viroqua and LaCrosse and Winona, so there was a lot of people that were involved, and we often had meetings that were 200, 300 people. So it was a very good connection and very affirming for the lifestyle that we were choosing to live.

RK: Well, a lot of the co-operative or communal-type living situations that were happening in that era didn't hold up.

JR: Right, right.

RK: But yours did, I'm glad you're still there, and there's more than 11 acres...

JR: Yeah, that we were managing that.

RK: Now you have how many...?

JR: The land co-op itself is 360 acres, so it includes both valley land and ridge land. It was originally incorporated as a co-operative, with the state of Minnesota in 1976, so it was going before we arrived. We arrived there in late '79, 1980, and I think a key to its sustainability is this regular Sunday meetings where you're not required to come, but if you don't come you lose out on what's happening and your voice, and we all have equal voice as members. We're all equal owners. There's certainly times where it's been questionable whether it would continue, but not ... I mean, people have had a very high level of determination to make things work, and we've lived ruggedly, so to speak, hand-to-mouth. We were living in this hog house for awhile, but then we were the first people to build on the ridge. It was like the frontier up there, a half-mile hill up, 5-, 600-foot change in elevation, different climate. It was farmland, rolling farmland. So first we built a 12-by-12—that's 12-foot by 12-foot—shed that we lived in for about a year-and-a-half, so it was a place to sleep, cook, and eat; otherwise, we were outside working on our owner-built passive solar home.

JF: We had one two-and-a-half-year-old and then a baby on the way.

JR: We had one child and another one on the way, so that was limited, too. But a lot of people went through that kind of hardship, but you know we loved what we were doing.

JF: Adventure, more...

JR: We saw it as adventure and really controlling our own destinies.

JF: We didn't have to go into debt. We had recycled materials, we were providing our own labor...

JR: We tore down a lot of buildings.

JF: ... for building our house.

JR: Right, re-used materials. For 25 years we were totally off-grid. Used solar and wind and a battery system and such, and now we've upgraded to a bigger solar and hooked up to the grid, so we sell power to the grid. But in the early days it was one panel, one battery, and one light bulb and a car radio, and that was progress from candles.

JF: I can even remember when we got like a vacuum cleaner, and my mom was always laughing because I could only vacuum when the days were really sunny. [All chuckle] But it was a lot easier to vacuum than it is when you have wood heat, because there's so much dust created with wood heat, so...

JR: But as far as kind of the dynamics of the community, there are a number of people that were there before we were, but there are others who have come and gone and there are some there that have come more recently, in the last 10-15 years. And we have limits on how big we want to get or how many houses we want to have, but we have young people coming all the time, approaching, interested in what we've done. We had, at one point, three couples come wanting to join, and it's like it was more than we could handle, but we knew there was a land available for sale down the road, so now there's kind of a sister community just two miles down the road called Zephyr Valley Land Co-operative that they've settled, so there's a number of houses, and we do a lot of things back and forth with them.

JF: I think one of the things that we've always thought about that's made it a success is having fun together. We have a recreation area, volley ball, swimming, we do have a sauna. We did a lot of dances. We had community potlucks.

JR: Potlucks. Work days.

JF: So it wasn't just meeting together and doing community projects together, but we also had a lot of fun together.

JR: I think it's important to point out that, yeah, we own the land in common and we have a few buildings that we own as a co-operative, but it's not a commune. We're responsible for our own

households, our own finances. We have our own gardens; we're not gardening communally. So I think it's a good blend. We've got a lot of personal freedom, but at the same time the strength of working in a group. You know, sometimes there are challenging decisions where we do need to reach consensus. We operate by consensus, so somebody wants to block a decision, it needs to be based in our shared values, which we have a statement of our values and visions as well, so it can't just be arbitrary, or I don't like that person. So we do have some rules, we have by-laws, we have budgets and there's a certain business side, but there's also the spiritual and the social side.

RK: And there's young people coming into the picture?

JR: Yeah, un-huh.

JF: We do, Jim and I just recently, in the last year with another person there, bought a small building and renovated it into a cottage, so now we have housing for people to kind of come and go. Sometimes it's people that are working for us, but sometimes it's other people that are just wanting to visit for awhile.

JR: Check out the community.

JF: So we have some housing opportunities.

RK: Well, thank you for going into that. I guess we can probably move now to some...

JR: One other thing I'd like to ... excuse me, but ... just thinking about, yeah, both of us have been pretty active on state, national, and even international, mostly organic-related issues. But one of the things that's really given me kind of strength and freedom to go on is living at Wiscoy and not having debt and having that connection to the land, a place to come home to where I can let go of all the other things I'm working on and just focus on the garden or now on the fruit bushes or whatever, but be part of a community where I'm just one, I'm not the leader, nobody's ... I'm just one voice. It's provided, I think, a very healthy foundation that has made the work we've done much more rooted, much more real, and freedom to take risks, too, because we're not working for some employer that kind of stifles us psychologically or whatever or...

JF: Plus it's a place when you drive into the valley you start seeing the wild animals. I saw a flock of turkeys yesterday morning, crossing the road in front of me. The roads are the worst roads you've been on, the whole time you've been gone, but it is a place of beauty as well. Whenever I drive into the valley I always have this sense of, oh, I'm home.

RK: Well, thanks for saying that and it made me think, too, what we didn't talk about in this context, maybe we should right now, would be—what is your farming operation, the berries? Talk a little bit more about this very interesting ... the berry farming.

JR: Sure, so we used to do organic produce, the typical stuff you sell at a farmers market. But then we got involved in inspecting other organic farms and training inspectors, etc., and gave up the farming ourselves. But someone who'd farmed with us, Jack Hedin, Featherstone Farms,

wanted to rent some of the land that we used to farm up on our ridge top. So that was from the community he rented this land, and we have tremendous deer pressure, very heavy populations of deer, and the only way you can do produce or really pretty much anything that's edible, is with protection from the deer. So he put up an eight-foot-high deer fence around five acres up on our ridge and rented that for a number of years. But the deal was with the co-op, between Jack and the co-op, that if he pulled out the fence stayed. And eventually he did relocate his operation down by Rushford and so we were left—and this was after the big floods where we got 17 inches of rain in 24 hours in southeast Minnesota—it didn't affect the ridge field, but it affected some of his others, and that's why he...

JF: That was in 2007.

JR: ... in 2007, right. So he reorganized. So by 2008, 2009, we were looking at this five acres of weeds protected from the deer. And Joyce had this idea—let's grow blueberries. Which is an easy thing to say.

JF: It's an easy thing to say, right.

JR: [Chuckles] But turning it into reality is...

JF: We started with the holistic resource, kind of doing a business plan. I did a 25-year financial plan based on just blueberries, but bringing in some of the LSP training, what we had.

JR: What were our resources, where would we like our lives to go and all that.

JF: Well, that was helpful, too, because we saw this as kind of a retirement hobby thing, but also something where a young couple coming into Wiscoy would have a business that they would like to take over. You know, a lot of young people don't have the financial resources. We finally had financial resources that we could invest in a farm, and that was a thing I said—we're going to get the equipment that we need and not worry about trying to farm with really bad equipment, which is what we'd been doing in the 1980s. So we started with blueberries. We did some land preparation in 2008 and '09.

JR: We just cover cropped to try and get the weeds under control and build up the organic matter.

JF: And start to acidify the soil.

RK: You didn't have to use the poisons; you kept...

JR: Right, right, and this land has been managed organically since the mid-70s.

JF: Right, so it's beautiful land. The soil that you can...

JR: Long-term, and really strong native pollinator populations and all that—very healthy ecology.

JF: Yes. Surrounded on the woods on the south side and then some prairies that have been planted on the other side, so it's really a beautiful place to work. So then in 2010 we started planting with blueberries, and we started ... we put in some aronia berries there.

JR: Right. You know, our soil pH is around 6.8 to 7, so pretty neutral. But blueberries must have acidic soil, so 5 to 5.5 pH. So I knew that ... blueberries are very popular, they're tasty, they're delicious, but they would be hard for us to grow. We've done a number of things to amend the soil for the blueberries, and that's been successful, but a lot of work. But I also had been attending some seminars and doing some readings about some alternative fruits and things that like our soil the way it is. And so aronia, elderberries, black currants, June berries were some of the things we introduced early-on. Yeah, the plants do really well, but the downside is they're not a blueberry. People aren't familiar with them, they are unique tastes, and most of them need to be processed before you have something really salable.

JF: And we didn't know much about them ourselves, so it was a challenge.

JR: And you can't go to Extension; there's not much information out there about some of these alternative crops.

JF: When to harvest them.

JR: Right, right, how to prune properly.

JF: We had to just train ourselves on those things.

JR: Right, so we end up doing a lot of workshops and tours for extension agents and others who want to learn about these, these days. But both Joyce and I, I think we thrive on a challenge, so long as it's rooted in the earth, and I think this was a perfect thing, because it's given us a platform, we're still farming, so some of our activist work is more authentic, but also we're out there educating people on some of these things that can be grown that are incredibly popular in Europe or Scandinavia, Russia, and are incredibly healthy and packed with flavor, but they're unique flavors to American palate.

JF: I think with the growth of local foods it's been a lot easier in terms of reaching our consumers. We have a lot of retail sales. We have about one-third retail sales and about two-thirds wholesale sales these days. We actually made a profit this year.

JR: Yeah, yeah, for seven years.

JF: So that was exciting, and I look forward to this year. But, I mean, the different things we're growing ... it starts ... we're starting to finish our pruning or continue our pruning now, but in April we have a couple people that are going to start working with us. We'll finish the pruning. By late May we'll start harvesting, and we'll continue harvesting through the end of September until the frost.

JR: Then during the harvest season we put a crew together of eight-to-ten people. It's all hand-harvested, right, so we have some school teachers that look for work during the summer. That's a perfect combination, and then a few college students and...

JF: We often have people that call us and say—could we come out and work for you?

JR: Yeah, yeah, so that's nice.

JF: And we can take people for a week or we can take people for a month during that time period. So we get a lot of different people coming and going. In fact, that was one of the challenges of a business that I hadn't realized is just managing people and hiring people and keeping people trained.

RK: Do they stay around in tents there, then, or go into town, or what do they do?

JF: Mostly are local people; they're just coming...

JR: Yeah, except the people that are working from April through the end of October, they live in this cottage that we refurbished, which has a bathroom and kitchen and all the amenities that we didn't have.

JF: And they've been living in a tiny house, so they're really excited about this, having some space.

JR: Yeah, right, the couple that's coming this summer.

JF: Which is really interesting. I think that the young people today, there are so many fabulous young people today—that's so encouraging—that are involved in agriculture. Like this young man just contacted us out of the blue and said—I'm interested in learning more about fruit production, and I've done all my research and I found you guys—are you interested in...

JR: He'd been working on an organic farm for a couple years, so he already has some background.

JF: These people just come, and we've been able to work with new young people either every year or every other year.

JR: But we haven't formally been part of an internship program or hosted WWOOFers (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) or something like that. We're kind of operating on our own so far.

JF: But it's fun being a part of that training new people that want to grow real food for people, because I think that's something that's really needed in this country.

RK: Very true. Well, good, so now I think, for the sake of time, and your voices, we should move on a little bit, and the way to maybe get into it is that, Jim, after that original stint of

farming you stopped and for eight years focused more on inspections and training certifiers, traveling around the country, ultimately even the globe. Talk a little bit about that period, where that led.

JF: Well, I would just like to interrupt if I could and just start with what actually started that, because it relates to LSP [Land Stewardship Project], and back in, I think, it's 1985, '86...

JR: Well, OK, I mean, but '83 is when I met Ron, and I think I was involved in Mississippi River Revival, and we were putting together a tour, because you can't just focus on the water, you have to look at the watershed and what's impacting the water, and so that's when we got involved in the formation of Land Stewardship and on the steering committee in southeast Minnesota there...

JF: And then that led to the Organic Growers and Buyers Association, which was an organic certification body in Minnesota, wanting some rural board members.

JR: Someone affiliated with Land Stewardship Project to be on the OGBA board.

RK: George Boody, I think, was working with OGBA.

JR: Right, right, exactly.

JF: So I ended up being on the board, but you...

JR: I was busy building a house and wasn't available, but...

JF: But I was.

JR: ... you said you could get the time.

JF: I ended up going to the Twin Cities once a month, and LSP was actually helped fund me, because we didn't have any money, literally we did not have \$25 in those days. I remember the support that LSP gave me financially as well as just intellectually—I knew nothing about organic certification in terms of just where it was going and what was involved and learned about IFOAM and the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements, and just really exposed both of us to a whole wide world of organic certification.

JR: Right, and so then Joyce was on the OGBA board; I was involved in Land Stewardship Project.

JF: Nineteen eighty-seven we took a training.

JR: Right, and then 1987...

JF: For inspectors, that OGBA gave.

JR: ... they needed more inspectors, OGBA, Organic Growers and Buyers Association. So both of us attended a training workshop that George Boody and Prescott Bergh led, and I started doing inspections that first year for OGBA, and then learned, well, they weren't the only certification body out there. And there was another one operating in the Midwest called the Organic Crop Improvement Association, and they also were looking for inspectors, and so I was technically an independent contractor and so started doing work for them, too.

JF: It was very chaotic in those days, because each of the certification bodies had their own standards, they had their own set of forms, what the inspector was doing wasn't necessarily quite the same.

JR: Right, there was like no unified format to conduct an inspection; you were just kind of sent out there to confirm that people are organic.

JF: There was no reporting forms; you just reported what you wanted.

RK: Let alone from one state to the next.

JR: Yeah, right, right. And during that time different states were passing laws to define organic. Minnesota had passed a law in 1986. California, I think, back in '79, had been the first one. In Oregon in 1980. So there was this momentum building, but really the action was the private certification bodies. So we did that, and then Joyce started doing, I think the next year, maybe two years later you started doing a few.

JF: It was in 1991 that I actually started doing inspections.

JR: But you helped me with my reports, because...

JF: I was typing his reports.

JR: So she was involved—I would go out there and do it and come with all the notes, and then she would turn them into a report. So, yeah, that was a great service—I still miss that.

JF: Jim lost some fingers and said he couldn't type. [Chuckles]

JR: Yeah, yeah. A little slowed me down, it hasn't so much, so ... but anyway...

JF: In 1991...

JR: Right, so, yeah, we, I guess, I was...

JF: ...we went to two or three...

JF: ... asked by the director of OGBA and the director of OCIA, independent of one another, if I would organize an inspector training. I'm coming up—they must have liked the typing that Joyce did. [All chuckle]

JF: Professional.

JR: Yeah, the work we were doing and the reports we were submitting. So I said, sure, but only under one condition—that the two of you work together and it's one course. I didn't want to deliver two courses. Mostly it was laziness motivating me. It's like let's do one course. Well, this was the first time that certifiers had ever had to cooperate. They were fierce competitors operating on the same turf, a lot of turf protection. And so anyway, the inspectors came together that were working for both of these agencies. And then in the evenings inspectors sitting around talking. It's like—we need our own organization. These certifiers don't have our interests in mind. This training needs to be more professional. We need to form some sort of association, and I got drafted by my supposed friends into chairing this effort. And so first we formed a steering committee that I chaired, and we worked for nine months drafting bylaws and a slate of candidates and kind of a mission and all this, and then that fall ... it was in January that these discussions happened and that initial training, and by October in Baltimore at the Natural Products Expo East the inspectors got together and we ratified our bylaws, elected officers. I was elected chair, and we officially formed what's now the International Organic Inspectors Association, which we then ran from our off-grid home for eight years. The first, what—at least three—no pay whatsoever—it was purely volunteer effort on our part. And then we started applying for little grants, got a little money to manage it, and then after five years I stepped down as chair, but we continued as the directors, as managers for three more years. But I've always worked for my own obsolescence. I want to be useless. If I can set up a farmers market and it operates on its own, that's a success. The same thing with IOIA, that we didn't want it dependent on any one personality, but that we have people engaged and invested enough to carry it forward, and it still is *the* premier organization worldwide that trains organic inspectors.

RK: When you travel—we've been talking off-camera about your trips to India and to Jamaica and work there—is that still connected into the certifying world?

JR: The certifying world, yes, but not inspecting and not training inspectors. For the last four years we've been doing a volunteer project in Jamaica where we've been working with some small growers to help them form essentially a grower cooperative and get certified organic as a grower group. So that's been part of our work. So it's related to certification, but not...

JF: And we've been working there to increase the capacity of local organic certification rather than having it come from the United States or Europe.

JR: Right, right. And then also working with government officials and the Bureau of Standards to really embrace regulation of the organic sector in Jamaica and then help them understand what it means to be a competent authority and actually enforce the term. So it, yeah, it's related to that, but we're no longer actively inspecting. We did that ... well, I did it for 20 years, and we're now not actively training inspectors. There's occasionally a time where we might bring some expertise to a training course, but we're not organizing them and doing all the logistics and all of that. But we were ... I received a grant from the Ministry of Environment of the government of Finland, in the late '90s, to write an international organic inspection manual, that is a joint

product of IOIA and then IFOAM, the international federation that Joyce talked about, but funded by the government of Finland. And that was released in 2001 or 2000.

JF: I think we actually had the FSMIP (Federal-State Market Improvement Program) grant before that.

JR: We did, but I'm just focusing on what's currently still the...

JF: Yes, the current manual that's used in the training.

JR: ... manual that still trains inspectors worldwide. Was released before the USDA organic regulations were finalized, so we had to anticipate what was going to be in those as well as what was already on the books in European Union and IFOAM and other ... Codex (Codex Alimentarius). I was part of the U.S. delegation to the Codex that helped set the international organic guidelines that are Codex as well. I mean, that was some of I think some really foundational work that, like I say, is still used as the curriculum.

JF: Prior to that we had, as an organization, the IOIA under our leadership had ... well, we were solicited by the USDA to originally kind of bring some consistency to the organic certification process and industry as it was becoming, by writing an organic inspection manual, and also we did templates...

JR: Well, forms development for inspection.

JF: ...we did templates of all the different certification forms and record-keeping forms.

JR: Right, right—we gathered all the different forms from all these different certification groups around the country and then came up with templates for standardized forms. For the certification side of it, but the inspection side as well—how to conduct an inspection, how to report on all these different types of operations—crops, livestock, processing.

JF: But I think that was important because it looked at the standard—it was very standard-based—looked at the standard—what are we actually inspecting, and what kinds of information do we need to know from the farmer to show that they meet the standards.

JR: Right. Well, one thing that's unique in organic certification—the inspector is more of a journalist. They're out there as a fact-finder to tell the story. They never make the decision of whether somebody's certified or not. And that's fairly unique compared to some other like dairy house inspectors or something—they make the call right there. Here, you have to be able to convey what the reality on the ground is and then point out areas of concern, they're called. That they may not be in compliance, provide the evidence, and then it's the people back in the office of the certification agency who make the decisions. So you have to provide them enough information to make a solid decision. And that wasn't happening consistently, even despite all of our work and work that's carried on, there's still inconsistency—people are just different. They see things differently, they report things, they communicate differently, but trying to bring as much consistency as we could.

JF: We also put into effect kind of a code of ethics and a code of conduct for inspectors, because it's a serious job and you can be bribed and there's all kinds of situations worldwide. I mean, when we did a training in Russia, we talked about like using information that you would get during the inspection for your own benefit.

JR: You cannot do that. And they're like—what do you mean you can't do that? Or you shouldn't have a shot of vodka when you first arrive at the farm. [Chuckles]

JF: Which would be typical situation for...

JR: Which is, you know, that's just cultural.

JF: ... you know, government people. So that was the kind of thing that by working with people all over the world—Australia, the Costa Ricans, the Mexicans, the Japanese, we were able to bring in the strengths of their certification programs and coalesce them into one unified international kind of program that we were all doing the same thing.

RK: That's really fascinating, I think, and one thing I remember points to, too, then, was the problem of paying for certification, and you worked on that issue, too, trying to get farmers some support to help cover those costs, right?

JR: Right, right. So, yeah, in those earlier days I was working as inspector, and one of the most common complaints you hear from farmers is—why should I have to pay, basically, to be regulated? So they are doing everything they can to take care of the land, the water, biodiversity, produce good, abundant, healthy food, and then paying to prove it. I had participated in cost-share programs for conservation work, and was also serving as an elected soil and water conservation district supervisor at that time.

JF: And you also had some exposure to the European systems of conserving water and rewarding farmers for good farming practices.

JR: Yeah, kind of green payments type thing. But, yeah, I can't say that that factored into, it was more just hearing these complaints and being aware of conservation cost-share programs, like—why can't we put the two of these together? And at that time, well Minnesota for quite a few years has had an organic advisory task force to the Department of Agriculture for organic policy, and a state senator, Janet Johnson, called some of us together, said—I see these markets for organic, but how can we help support organic farmers in Minnesota? And it just happened that was about the time I'd had this idea—why can't the state offer an organic certification cost-share to help defray a portion of these expenses? And this was 1998. We had a Republican House, a Democratic Senate, and Jesse Ventura was our governor, so we had a tri-partite government. I worked with Senator Johnson's staff person, put together some bill language, and then went and testified to the House Agriculture Committee, and I really pitched regulatory relief, that here are farmers doing everything you could possibly want to prevent pollution, take care of the land, and can't we ... and they are paying for their own regulation—can't we provide a very modest—it was two-thirds of the cost up to \$200 per farm per year. Total appropriation of \$35,000 that we

were asking for. And it did pass in the House. Took it to the Senate; Democratic ... and it was an easier sell. It was like here's this opportunity, organic market is growing, General Mills had just launched an organic cereal called Sunrise, passed that around the room, and they put it in. Then it was part of the budget bill, the first budget bill for Jesse Ventura. In Minnesota there's line-item veto on budgets, so he went through that budget bill and anything he didn't like he gave a pork stamp, a pig stamp, and it missed the pig. It survived Jesse and went into law. That was the first state in the country to offer an organic certification cost share. Iowa, North Carolina, Montana, and Vermont picked up on it and set up similar programs. I communicated with various people there what we'd gone through, what worked, and so there were a number of states now running these cost-share programs. And then I was able to work with Senator Wellstone; I was a friend of Senator Wellstone's. He and I had been roommates at the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta for Jesse Jackson. So we roomed together, I'd stayed at his house in Northfield. I just totally miss that man and Sheila.

RK: Yeah, I would say. Hard to talk about it.

JR: But anyway, I worked with Senator Wellstone and his staff and got it into the 2002 Farm Bill. That farm bill had a number of, I think, progressive provisions, conservation language. So this was one of them, and so we went nationwide. But it was underfunded...

JF: It's a pilot project.

JR: No, it was nationwide, but it only had five million for the entire country, and setting up a totally new program, so it actually ran out of money after the first about two-and-one-half years, so there was a little lapse. It was still on the books, but there wasn't money to fund it, so in the next farm bill, I think it was 2008, we got it fully funded and it's existed. But now it's on the chopping blocks, it's got a target on it, and the Republican leadership, especially in the House Ag Committee, want to eliminate it. So that's an ongoing fight to protect that.

RK: And I know NSAC and probably the National Organic Coalition are really ... that's one, that's an important plank in their platform.

JR: Right, I mean farmers love it, because it puts money right back in their pocket with minimal bureaucracy. It's not like going through, setting up an EQIP program through NRCS. You get certified, you pay for it, you submit proof of certification, proof of your expense, to the state department of ag, or now you can also go through the FSA office, Farm Service Agency office, and you get reimbursed. Seventy-five percent up to \$750 per operation per year. So it's better than we started with, but I sure hope that continues, because it's a very popular program.

JF: You still hear that from farmers that aren't certified, especially the small vegetable growers...

JR: They aren't aware of the cost-share. They are like—oh, it costs too much...

JF: ... it costs too much.

JR: ... there's no way I can afford it. It's like do you know you get 75 percent back?

JF: And it's important, because I think especially vegetable growers, oftentimes the record-keeping systems can be a little challenging, and record-keeping is required for organic certification. But it's also something that really helps you develop your business.

JR: And it opens doors for market access, too.

JF: And it opens doors for marketing, so...

RK: It's important to consumers, too. I don't think that consumers realize, because some people are loosey-goosey about what's organic and if it doesn't have that stamp...

JF: Right, so it's important to get certified, and I think it really helps farmers be better farmers.

RK: I think so, too. I'm sure it does. I'm sure it does. Well, maybe we should talk then about the whole effort around the Organic Food Production Act, and we should at least touch on this—you played a role in that trying to get the act passed, and then when it passed, trying to get the standards set up so that they would be sound. I know you folks were active in that, too.

JR: Yeah, well, way back, 1989 I think it was, I think it was a House Ag Committee was having a hearing on the next farm bill in Rochester, Minnesota, and I remember going and testifying in support of passing an organic act, that Minnesota had a state law, and the need for federal standards. But I don't think I, I can't say that that was terribly influential. It's just that it is on record that I did testify, but I wasn't going to DC; I wasn't part of the group really moving those bills forward at that time. But the Organic Foods Production Act did get included in the 1990 Farm Bill. Even though it didn't originate from the ag committee, it came on the floor and really was the voice of the people saying we want this. Even though a lot of the traditional ag groups were opposed to it, they kind of stood back and let it happen.

JF: Well, we had over 40 certification bodies, nationwide, with different standards.

JR: I think 30 states had passed laws by that time with different standards.

JF: It was very chaotic for international and even interstate trade, because one certification body didn't accept the certification of another person.

JR: Right, right—California only required one year of transition, where most of the rest of the country, it was three years. So there were some substantive differences. Passing that law set in motion the writing of federal standards, essentially. And the appointment of the National Organic Standards Board—that was a key feature to the organic community to have this board have some actual powers. Makes recommendations about the standards but has the unique authority to control the approved materials. So things that are allowed and things that are prohibited must have a two-thirds vote of this board before they can go on the national list. So the secretary of ag can't take action without this 15-member citizen board passing it first with a two-thirds vote. And that remains that way to this day. So it took a few years before that first board was seated, I think it was 1993 before they were seated, and they held hearings around the country, drew from

other existing standards, state laws, made recommendations, looked at the international standards.

JF: Codex.

JR: Codex, and made recommendations on what the regulations, the standards, should say. But then in 1997, right before Christmas, December 21...

JF: Not 19 ... 20...

JR: No, 1997.

JF: Oh, you're right, you're right, right—sorry.

JR: Right before Christmas, the USDA issued their first proposed organic rule. And they really totally ignored the recommendations of their own organic standards board, or existing laws, existing certification standards, and would have allowed genetic engineering and sewage sludge and radiation and...

JF: Irradiation.

JR: Irradiation of organic food, and still labeled organic. Antibiotics in livestock, feeding of slaughter byproducts to organic animals—any number of things that have been historically prohibited. And it just happened that I was scheduled to leave in early January and do an organic inspector training in Japan and have a big speech and meet with government officials in Japan. So I saw this release on December 21, I'm leaving in early January—I dedicated my entire Christmas-New Year's holidays to reading this proposed rule, line-by-line, critiquing it where it was wrong, and then offering replacement language, based on existing organic standards and NOSB recommendations and put that out kind of as a treatise before I left for Japan, because I wanted to get my say in. And this was now the era of electronic rule-making, so it can be done by e-mail. Those comments got circulated far and wide and kind of became the play book for the substantive changes that the organic community was demanding.

RK: There were 60-some or something, wasn't there?

JR: Oh, that, yeah—66 points of darkness, that was kind of, yeah, yeah, right, right. That was kind of Roger Blobaum put that together, had a take on that. But it ended up there was an outrage.

JF: That's right.

JR: It really blew the USDA away, they didn't expect ... it set a record for any proposed rule—275,000 negative comments, essentially. And so, in their wisdom, and I give them credit, they withdrew that first proposed rule. They changed some staff, brought in some people who actually were knowledgeable about organic, and went back to the drawing board, went to the public comments, the NOSB recommendations, and then by March of 2000 issued their second

proposed rule, which was recognizable as an organic standard. And showed how they had changed it and all of this. So it really showed me good government at work, that they were responsible...

JF: In the meantime, you had been contracted by OTA to do the American organic standards as well.

JR: Well, right. We were concerned that this whole thing could fall apart. The USDA, you know, they took it on the chin. We can't count on them; we need to control our own destiny. And so, yeah, the Organic Trade Association and a number of other groups contracted with me, Lynne Cody from Oregon, and Emily Brown Rosen from New Jersey to be writers to construct what was called the American Organic Standards, which was a non-government set of unified standards that then really helped shape the rule that USDA did come back out with.

JF: The actual language.

JR: The actual language, right, right. It was a very historical moment in time, but it served its purpose. Because we had to reach consensus in the organic community before they were finalized, before OTA board ratified them, so it was quite a process we went through in writing those, and USDA was tracking everything we were doing. They did not want to move ahead until the community had resolved what we wanted. So we were able to do that. And then they came out with the second proposed rule, open for public comment. I was contracted by OTA to develop their comments, and there was, I don't know, about 40,000 comments that time around, but it was mostly people like me—fix this word here, this word there; it wasn't a major overhaul or anything. So they were able to issue the final rule in December of that same year, so they were able to make those changes and turn it back around, and then it had its implementation phase-in period. So it took effect October 2002.

RK: So it was a 12-year process.

JR: Right, right.

RK: I had the opportunity to talk not only to Roger Blobaum, but to Kathleen Merrigan, and I think she deserves some credit.

JR: A lot of credit.

JF: Yeah.

JR: Well, she was the staff person for Senator Leahy, the original author of the Organic Foods Production Act, and then she was at USDA—well, first she was a member of the National Organic Standards Board during that time, but then got appointed head of the Ag Marketing Service that the National Organic Program is under, and then eventually was deputy secretary under Secretary Vilsack.

RK: Right, so she's been a champion throughout the years.

JR: Right, right.

JF: Absolutely.

RK: It was good to get a chance to interview her, too.

JR: Yeah, so, but, you know, it's called a final rule, but it's never really final. It's final in the sense that it's in effect, but it's still a moving target, especially the approved materials. But we can never take it for granted, and I think we especially see that right now. It's our rule, it's the organic community, it's the organic farmer, the consumer, and we have to stay engaged, because it's going to get watered down if we aren't at the table protecting the integrity of this organic claim.

RK: Right. I know that's, maybe not exactly in the same ballpark or the same fight, but in things like the struggle to make sure that soil is involved in organic production, and hydroponics and the controversy around that, is an example of the ongoing struggle.

JR: Right, right. Organic has a very strong market, and any time there's money to be made, there's going to be people that want to cheat. They want to work the fringes.

JF: Stretch the... [Chuckles]

JR: Yeah, stretch the ... get involved—cash in on this! And yeah, we're seeing a huge growth in the import of things being sold as organic in this country. I have no problem importing organic coffee and tea, but when it's corn and beans, things that we can and should be growing organically in this country, it just shows a failure of our farm policy that we don't have any mechanism to help conventional farmers convert to organic, still.

RK: Wheat, too—wheat's another one.

JR: Yeah, and wheat, yeah, un-huh. And what's happening is that market demand is being met by imported product and there's evidence of a lot of fraud going on. So, yeah, we're involved and trying to push USDA to step up their fraud detection and enforcement at the border.

RK: That's good. Well, it kind of gets me to where I wanted to make sure we talked about is really ... we can talk more about anything you've done already, but I also want to move to, now that you've had this view that many people haven't had about what has been accomplished—what do you think needs to be done now? You just talked about maintaining the standards, but what else needs to be done to strengthen organic and sustainable agriculture? You served in Winona County, I believe, on the Soil and Water Conservation District, so conservation is a big part of this whole picture.

JR: Right, right. And the regulations require that organic farmers, to be certified, prevent soil erosion and maintain, enhance biological diversity, protect water quality. So all of these goals of the conservation movement are actually embodied in the organic regulation. And so there's been

a very good effort, oh, in the last ten years, I would say, but especially in the last five or so, to raise the awareness amongst the Natural Resource Conservation Service, NRCS, the conservation delivery system, to embrace organic, for them to really see this is a partnership—we're all on the same page—and to integrate organic within all of the conservation programs that they offer, and I think there's been some great progress made there.

RK: Has there?

JR: Right, right. Now they've become champions of soil health, and soil is living ecosystem. There's more life below ground than there is above ground, and that's always been a foundational understanding of organic agriculture is we feed the soil, not the crop. It's the natural systems that we're putting cover crops in to feed the soil micro-organisms that then release nutrients for your crop. And it's much more sustainable, stable nutrients and all that. So that's been very encouraging, but, like I was getting into before, we still have no program where a conventional farmer can say—I want to go organic but there's a three-year transition period that's required before you can get certified. But during that time you're using organic practices but selling at conventional prices. There's no market, a premium, or anything to help support—and it's risky when you're using new varieties. It takes more labor, it needs maybe different equipment to manage the weeds, and you're selling at different markets that are unfamiliar.

JF: And you still have to make your payments to the bank.

JR: Right, yeah, you still have your mortgage and capital loans and all of that, and you can't just take it to the local elevator and dump it and then hope you get some kind of government support through LDPs (Low Deficiency Payments) and this and that. So to me that's still missing. And in Europe, every country in Europe, their best agricultural support payment is to convert your land organic. So you see in Denmark over 35 percent of the dairy farms are now organic. In Italy, several years ago, there's over 48,000 certified organic farmers. In this country there's around 18,000 in the entire United States. So we're not meeting the potential, especially the market demand that's growing and the environmental benefits, so I see that as a policy need and an opportunity. To me it's an America First moment. We should be capturing all these environmental benefits and market for American farmers before we're importing anything that we can grow in this country.

RK: Is that a priority for this organization? Off-camera we talked about the Organic Farmers Association. Is that one of the priorities?

JR: Yeah, so just a little background there: For several years there have been a number of people in the organic organizational world, the non-profits, talking about the need for a voice in Washington, D.C. to represent the organic farmers. You've got the Organic Trade Association—they largely represent the trade—the processors, the big business in the organic world. You've got the Organic Consumers Association, representing a consumer perspective, doing some watchdog groups' work, and several other ... NSAC—National Sustainable Ag Coalition, which does great work, but organic is only a small part of their portfolio or their interests. You've got National Farmers Union, American Farm Bureau Federation, and there are organic farmers in their members, but once again it's not their banner issue. So some of us were working on

formation of what we were calling an organic farmers alliance, envisioning an alliance of existing groups. But then, independent from that effort, a little over a year ago the Rodale Institute that first coined the phrase organic farming back in the 1940s, J. I. Rodale, announced formation of this Organic Farmers Association, without any bylaws, without any officers—it just kind of was a concept that they launched. And we were working on this other concept, and it's like the last thing we need is two new groups saying they speak for organic farmers in Washington, D.C. So we worked very hard with Jeff Moyer, the CEO of Rodale Institute, to unify these efforts, and we've been quite successful in that. So we brought the governance. We have the bylaws, the mission, the vision, the officers and all of that, and they are our fiscal agent. They've provided organizational staff, they handle the membership database and press releases—so it's been a good functional partnership that's been going on now for a year, and I'm chairing that, the steering committee to form that, and we're electing our officers right now. There's nominations out there, people are voting to elect our governing council, and I am a candidate. Don't know that I'll be elected or what my role will continue to be, but to me one unique thing about OFA is only certified organic, domestic farmers have the right to vote on both leadership and establishing our policy positions. We have supporting members, we have a number of organizations that are supporting organizational members, and they have a voice, but not a vote. End of the day, it's the vote of our farmers that dictate our platform that then shapes what our policy committee and our governing council—and we have a lobbyist in D.C.—what our focus is. So some of the things that are priorities of our members are protecting the integrity of the organic claim, so firm enforcement of our existing regulations. At the border with these imports, that's a huge issue, and it's really hurting organic farmers in this country, as well as defrauding consumers, too. So that's a top priority, because it's so pressing. But also pasture rule—the regulation requires that ruminants to be certified, you had a significant portion of their diet from grazing on pastures during the grazing season. That's not being uniformly enforced in this country, and that's a huge issue for our members, so we want to see that enforced uniformly across the entire country—well, even beyond the country, anywhere NOP operates. So those are some high priorities, but then also these products grown hydroponically with no soil in a totally contained environment, artificial light—the only thing they meet of the organic standards is the use of approved materials. Otherwise, it's not an ecological system of production, and that's ... the very definition of organic production relates to ecology and maintaining biodiversity. But they're being certified as organic by a handful of certifiers, so there's products out there not grown in soil that are being sold as organic.

JF: And competing with...

JR: And competing with bonafide soil-grown that meet the...

JF: Lettuces and other...

JR: Blueberries, even.

JR: So that's a priority for our farmers is to object to USDA's allowing that.

RK: If I may. One of the arguments that I've heard about that is, well, the soil's all well and good, but we don't maybe have enough of this to feed everybody, so we need to have this going too, so...

JR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RK: ... but the big thing is maybe not so much that its bad, but that it's not organic.

JR: Right, right. I have nothing wrong with hydroponic, and do it as cleanly as you possibly can, but it's not organic. Find some word that works. They don't like selling it as hydroponic, they want something that has the value that organic has established, and right now they're being allowed to cash in on that. I don't know if we're going to win this fight, but we're taking it on. We just recently submitted a very pointed legalistic letter to Secretary Perdue stating our objections and asking that they retract a statement that they just recently issued, saying hydroponic can be organic, it's fine, without any guidance on how or what part of the standards it complies with, or how it complies with the law. So we're asking them for a legal interpretation first, but our members overwhelmingly support the role of soil and soil health being a cornerstone of organic. So we'll see where that goes.

JF: Just going back to your original question of, you know, what's the future and stuff like that, I kind of think that just growing real food for people and growing the number of organic farmers that are doing that is important future issue. You know, you hear about food that's being kind of made in the laboratory, and I've seen some reports coming out like that, and I think that's the kind of thing where I have a little bit of trepidation about what's going to be our food supply in 50 years from now. Are we still going to be eating real food, or will we be eating cloned food or food that's just made from some chemicals or something like that. I think if we want to remain healthy as a specie, that eating real food is an important basis for our own health. So that's a concern to me, and how do we as consumers, as growers, and as an industry kind of work together to make sure we have enough supply so that we don't have to rely on, because that's one of the things I hear—well, they're doing this because we don't have enough land to grow all the food as the population of the earth grows.

JR: Um-hum, but, yeah, and that's ... One of the things, I think, that's really encouraging is the ... it's more than the local food movement, but there's this underground economy that's happening that doesn't get a lot of attention, but thriving farmers markets, young people wanting to go into agriculture, or coming up in a couple of weeks is the MOSES, the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service annual conference in LaCrosse. Thirty-five hundred people will be there, young people, child care, enthusiasm—you know, people that want to be involved in agriculture. And that really gives me hope, when I see that that's happening regardless of what the government does, regardless of what big business does, that more and more people care about the food they eat, how it was grown, the nutrients in it, the potential contaminants, and that's one thing organic just ... it's irrefutable, that residue testing organic food consistently shows that it's either free or very low residues of pesticides, which makes sense. But that's validated, and that's irrefutable. So if people want to cut down on pesticide exposure for their children, organic is the way to go. If you want to know even more about it, then go to your

farmers market and meet the growers, ask questions, whether they're organic or not, and establish relationships.

JF: Or whether they're certified or not.

JR: Right, right, yeah, and making claims.

JF: And that's fine.

JR: But, yeah, this whole relationship marketing, whether it's a one-on-one with the grower or like we sell a lot of our fruit to Birchwood Café here in Minneapolis, or then Forager Brewing in Rochester, and it's a relationship. We meet with them in the winter—what are you going to want? We talk about what's working for them. We make adjustments. They're behind us good years and bad, and that's, it's something sustainable into the future is this kind of relationships. It's not just a USDA seal on a highly processed, highly packaged product in the freezer section or whatever. That's exploding, but to me the much more substantive is at the ground level, and that's really happening, too.

JF: Well, and I think that also comes from like I've been involved with the healthy food charter development here in Minnesota. So there is a growing problem of childhood obesity and diabetes that the health departments are recognizing is a serious, very serious epidemic.

JR: And they're diet related.

JF: And they are very diet related. So how to get people to eat more fruits and vegetables in their diet.

JR: Just to have access to it.

JF: And have access—that was one of the issues. And I see that now our local county health department and food volunteer services area is looking at it on a county level. Many local departments are also doing that same thing. And that's happening not just in Minnesota, but across the country. So there's some natural allies here of people working together that want to see more real food being grown and are willing to help make it happen through policies either at the state or local levels.

JR: But also by just helping teach people to cook—basic living skills.

JF: That's right, that's another thing that they do is helping teaching people and kids to cook. The youth farm here in the Twin Cities is an amazing organization.

RK: Urban Roots, that group? Well, you know, your contention, on one more thing that—I think we're getting kind of near the end of our time here—that I've been picking up from other interviews lately, particularly after I got the opportunity of interviewing Elizabeth Henderson and Michael Sligh, people that are part of what's called the Domestic Fair Trade Association, and looking at issues of even ethnicity and racial diversity, fair treatment of farm workers...

JF: Labor issues.

JR: Access to land.

RK: ... as part of the organic picture, and I know that's yet another sort of thing that's being put onto organics, but I think we should bring that up and what your feelings are about that and where that is going.

JR: I'm totally supportive to those efforts and recognize the need. At the same time, having been an organic farmer for many years and an organic inspector involved in writing standards and regulations, we've got a lot on our plate that we've already agreed to, in terms of ecological practices and integrity and traceability and all these things, that I get a little uncomfortable trying to layer on social justice onto the back of organic, myself. I think it's great to have social justice certification, but it should be a companion label, an add-on. It's intrusive enough to go to someone's farm and ask about everything they've done in their agricultural operation for the past year and want to see receipts and records and everything you bought, everything you sold. I mean, it's a lot to ask of the growers, and then to start in—oh, if you want to be organic we're changing the rules and it's not just your agricultural practices, but it's also your social practices and all of that. I think that is a very high bar to add on to organic. I think, OK, we're done with the organic, I'm a qualified inspector for this agricultural justice, let's start asking those questions, and the person who signed up for that additional service, that's fine, but don't try and layer it on top of the organic.

RK: I don't know much about that, but I know that there, I think Elizabeth was saying, there is even a label that they have designed, and so that it could be more of a companion to the whole effort.

JF: I think historically, worldwide, some of the organic growth has been through that social justice standards that have been tacked on. Like IFOAM has standards that include social justice standards and Fair Trade has it as well. I did some work with the International Organic Accreditation Service, where I went to Kenya and observed some of the certification of those kinds of issues and how you actually go into the housing, you interview the individual farmer that is part of a huge cooperative growing tea, for instance, and you get to interview them. You interview, for instance, some of the employees in a safe environment. So it's very interesting to do that, but in this country, there isn't that history of so much of employment, of abusing the employees quite as much.

JR: Well, I think there is, not so much in the upper Midwest, but maybe in Florida, California...

JF: Well, right, right.

JR: ... where there's a real reliance on farm workers, but I think it's growing here, too. The big dairies all use migrant workers, and there's a need.

JF: Right, there is a need for something, because worldwide it is a big issue, is what I'm trying to say.

JR: Yeah, right, right.

RK: And Michael brought it up with this idea of what next. It seems like this is a topic that's emerging, that maybe somehow could be even positive when you look at Beginning Farmer and Rancher, offering more opportunities.

JF: Another thing is more humane treatment of animals. It's kind of a component that was not ... it's kind of in the organic standard, just in terms of reducing stress levels for your animals, but it's not...

JR: Oh, it's basic animal husbandry.

JF: But it's not specifically written into it as this, this, and this.

JR: Right, for ten years or more the National Organic Standards Board, the organic community, has been working on what's called animal welfare standards, which are an amendment to the existing regulation, that then was released as a final rule to make it more enforceable, the animal husbandry requirements for organic certification, but it came out at the end of the Obama administration, so it got caught up in the net and then tarnished, because it came out under that administration. So, after several comment periods, now USDA has announced they were withdrawing this, even though it was a final rule. Right. Had a kind of low-key *Federal Register* notice saying they were withdrawing it, but they did open it for comment. They received over 78,000 comments on that, and the Organic Farmers Association submitted very strong comments on that. It would help meet consumer expectations, improve animal health and welfare, and make the existing regulation much more enforceable. Right now it has vague language that's hard to enforce against someone who's violating it.

JF: And that has some historical context, too, of when the original OFPA was written, the Organic Foods Production Act. There wasn't a lot of organic livestock at that point.

JR: Well, no—USDA prohibited the word organic even appearing on livestock products.

JF: Meat was being regulated by...

JR: Food Safety Inspection Service, and they didn't have a definition of organic, so they actually busted people.

JF: They would take the organic meat off the shelves and...

JR: Right, right, so that suppressed both the growth of the industry, of the market, consumer demand and farmers going into organic livestock. Even though they were managing them organic, why get them certified if it's illegal to label the products? So that's been one of the benefits of the rule taking effect, is then USDA had to recognize organic dairy, eggs, meat.

JF: But it took them a long time.

JR: But it still hasn't been as robust a history as the crop side.

JF: But just a little historical background there to how that kind of is ... why those standards maybe aren't quite as detailed as they would have originally been.

JR: But there was another, a kind of future trend or thing that I see is really big picture, and that's basic survival of the human species on earth. And that's where organic, I think, can play a very vital role in sequestering carbon, helping not just mitigate, but reverse climate change. Protecting water. You know, water is life, water is critical, and we've got to all have clean, fresh water, and organic has a totally important role to play that's not being held up. We can help reverse climate change, we can provide clean, fresh water for our future. So I don't think we are working together with environmental groups strongly enough on some of these core messages, the deliverables that we can prove. We aren't the only ones—certainly grazing systems achieve this, various perennial production systems achieve this, but organic does achieve this, and it's federally regulated and defined, so why not be investing in it? Instead, we're looking at this administration with the budget that they've released cuts organic programs instead of investing in them.

RK: Right, right. Yeah, we're definitely in a dark time right now from trying to undo what has been accomplished. We can only hope that with the work from people like you continues, and your children and my children, that this moves forward, because...

JF: If we want to survive it will.

RK: It's a long slog, but it's critical.

JF: Or those that will survive, you know...

JR: I think it will move forward. It's just whether it moves forward with integrity and lives up to its potential is the question for me.

RK: Well, I think that really gets us there today. This has been a wonderful conversation, and I'm really grateful for it. If you have any last word, I welcome it, but otherwise, we bring this one to a close.

JR: Yeah, no, that's fine with me.

JF: No, I don't have anything to add.

RK: Well, thanks very much.

JR: Yeah, our pleasure, thanks—it's an honor to be asked.

JF: Yes, and very fun.

RK: [Unclear] could be in the archive with all the other interviews we've been doing. Thank you.

JF: Thank you.

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