

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultivating A Movement

### Title

Janet and Grant Brians: Brians Ranch

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0t25x8c5>

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### Publication Date

2010-05-01

### Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0t25x8c5#supplemental>

# Janet Brians & Grant Brians



Janet Brians and her husband, Bob Brians. Photo by Ellen Farmer.

## Brians Ranch Hollister, California

*This two-part interview with Janet Brians and her son Grant Brians, conducted by Ellen Farmer on July 19, 2007 at Brians Ranch in Hollister, California, documents their pioneering work as organic farmers and founders of California Certified Organic Farmers. Janet Brians holds a master's degree in East Asian studies from UC Berkeley and a master's in library science from UCLA. In 1973, she and her husband Robert (who worked in the computer industry) were living on the San Francisco Peninsula. Desiring relief from the increasing smog and urban congestion, they bought one hundred acres of farmland in Hollister, California, which came with several historic buildings that dated back to the 1860s. The Brians' restored and preserved these*

*structures and founded Brians Ranch, where for the past thirty-six years they have grown row and orchard crops organically. Their son, Grant, spent his teenage years on the ranch, and has been an organic farmer his entire life. Janet Brians feels a deep passion for farming and for her historic farmhouse.*

*Today the California Certified Organic Farmers is one of the oldest and most influential organic certification and trade associations in North America. Janet Brians kept the minutes and records in the early years of the organization, and Grant became the most prolific organic certifier for CCOF in the 1970s through the mid-1980s. He is currently on the board of CCOF. An activist as well, he traveled to Sacramento to lobby for the California Organic Foods Act (COFA) of 1990. Heirloom Organic Gardens is but the latest incarnation of Grant's organic farming activities. In the second part of this interview, Grant Brians reflects on his more than thirty years in the organic farming movement.*

#### Additional Resources

History of California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF): [http://www.ccof.org/history\\_mr.php](http://www.ccof.org/history_mr.php)

**Farmer:** I'm here today in Hollister with Janet Brians on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007, at Brians Ranch. So could you start by telling us where you were born and then where you grew up?

### Family History

**Brians:** I was born in 1935 in a farmhouse in southern Illinois (Effingham County), in my grandmother's farmhouse. I was three months old when my parents decided, determined they were going to come to Southern California.

And so my brother, a year older, and I, my grandmother, and my parents took off in [chuckles] an old Chevy car and drove across the country.

My father's health had not been too good, especially during the winters. He had worked for General Motors in Detroit as a young man; they were on the fourth floor, tuning carburetors for Chevys, with no ventilation, no windows open. He lost the use of one lung, was put in a sanitarium, and after six months GM sent him home to die. So he wasn't too good at farming at that point. [Laughs.] He was, I think, twenty-two at this point. He was still a young man. He had been driving trucks on and off for neighbors since he was about twelve, driving livestock trucks to St. Louis and picking up animals and such. They didn't have driver's licenses then, at least in that part of Illinois. His brother, George, lived in Southern California. He was an older brother, and he had come out, and he was working, helping build post offices in Pasadena and Santa Barbara. Dad got jobs with him as a day laborer, and then eventually he worked for a trucking company.

He (Cecil C. Leonard) came from a family of ten children on a farm. He was the youngest son, and was expected to stay on the farm and take care of his mother. But his father died at a rather young age. Dad, who was visiting in Southern California, went back to Illinois. Our dad really wasn't that interested in farming, with his health problems and such, and after he had our family he returned to Southern California.

We returned to see Mother's parents (Daniel and Magdalena Wurl) in 1939, before the war, and spent the summer with Mom and Dad both working at different farms so we had enough to eat and earned our keep and were able to visit with family. Then we returned in '46, Mother and my brother and I, on the train, and a number of times thereafter. So we had a connection with my mother's family, who were German farmers who had come to the United States in 1848, to Upstate New York. The people from their village checked out different parts of Illinois and Wisconsin, and they finally settled on this rich, flat land in Effingham County, Illinois. They all had their farms centered around the Lutheran church, where the children went to school, as well as worshiped on Sunday. Some of Mother's family continued to farm up until now. I still have cousins who are farming there and own several farms. So there's always been an agricultural connection, but no one ever expected that I would go into farming. [Laughs.] Of my Leonard relatives who live in Southern California, I'm the only one who is in agriculture. Some of my mother's relatives, Wurl relatives in Illinois, do still farm.

**Farmer:** And did she have a lot of brothers and sisters too?

**Brians:** Yes, Mother (Edna Wurl Leonard) had four younger brothers, and one older sister. So there were six children in that family. Most farm families were rather large then, because often children died. None of Mother's brothers or sister died in youth or young adulthood. But two of my father's brothers did die, one from a ruptured appendix—he was close to twenty—and another one from pneumonia, both of which could have been taken care of nowadays, but back

then couldn't be. These were older brothers. The one with pneumonia—I think he was in his early thirties.

**Farmer:** Is it just that they were too rural, too far out in the country to get help?

**Brians:** They didn't have antibiotics. And they couldn't do surgery for a ruptured appendix the way they can now. I'm very aware of that because, well, here on the farm, my younger son, at age nineteen, woke up in the middle of the night and had all this stomach pain, and at six o'clock in the morning we called our family doctor, and he said, "I'll meet you in fifteen minutes at the hospital." My son had a ruptured appendix. So that was a close call for him, but with good surgeons and antibiotics people pull through now.

**Farmer:** So how many children do you have?

**Brians:** Two boys. Both were born before we came to the farm. Grant, our older son, was born shortly after I received my master's of East Asian studies at UC Berkeley. And our younger son, Craig, was born about three years later, just before I received my master's in library service at UCLA. So they both had academic connections. My husband started out teaching high school physics and math, and he went into computers quite early, in the early sixties, when the high school was given a large, refrigerator-sized computer. [Laughter.] So gradually he transitioned into computers and did a lot of traveling.

## Brians Ranch

At one point he knew he'd be traveling a lot and he wondered where I'd be happiest. We were living in Los Altos, and the smog was getting us—getting me, and bothering me a lot. We had been growing gardens on our neighbors' land (we were actually in Los Altos Hills), and we had the smallest house on our block, a little twenties or thirties house, two bedrooms, one bath—which isn't there anymore. Some mega-mansion went in years ago. So my son, Grant, had been growing vegetables on a quarter-acre here and a quarter-acre there of our neighbors' properties. We decided we were interested in moving south, and so we found this farm and were very, very happy to move here, even before we had figured out how we were going to pay for it. [Laughter.] We rented it for six months while we tried to figure out how to get enough mortgage money to buy a farm.

**Farmer:** So what year was that?

**Brians:** October 1973.

**Farmer:** Were the trees already here?

**Brians:** No. When we moved here—we first saw this property—it was one hundred acres on the corner of Shore Road and Frye Lane. The Pacheco Hall is right on the corner, a half-acre that was given in the 1890s by Mr. Chase to the community to use as a community hall. The elementary school was diagonally

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across from the hall, so the hall was used for plays and voting from [the] 1890s through about 2006. They finally discontinued voting there because the hall didn't have ramps. And this old building, they figured, was not worth fixing up, modernizing it that way.

When we moved here to the farm, there were perhaps a dozen trees, including one giant valley oak, which is probably four or five hundred years old. I'm not counting the number of willows and a few black walnuts along Tequisquita Creek, at the bottom, south end of the farm. The homestead area, which is the highest area of the farm, had five artesian wells here back in the 1860s (we've been told), when this property was bought from the rancho. Where the first irrigation well was put in, there was an artesian well. The domestic well was also originally artesian. They're quite close to each other. The others are in a ridgeline across our property, and along this ridge for several miles apparently there were artesian wells at certain points. We have very good water here.

When I first saw the farm, there weren't very many trees other than half a dozen or a dozen perhaps right around the two houses, but the silage corn was standing ten or twelve feet high so I could hardly see the buildings. [Laughter.] As we drove around Frye Lane, we were, like, eight hundred feet from the buildings, and all I could see was this giant corn growing. I thought, wow, *that* is soil! Most of the property is alluvial silt, Sorrento silt-loam with a little Pacheco silt-loam toward Shore Road, and Pacheco silty-clay toward Tequisquita Creek, but most of it is Sorrento loam.



## Historical Ranch Buildings

The first house was built by Henry Chase and his brother Newton in 1867, and it had four rooms. Two brothers and their wives and several children lived in these four rooms for at least three or four or five years, until another piece of property nearby was bought. Newton Chase moved with his family there. I think they had three children when they moved, and they eventually had two more children born on the farm. They lived right across from where we are now.

The 1867 cottage now has about seven or eight rooms in it. Not big, but they're the same single-wall construction, with redwood floors, walls, and ceiling. They moved another little four-room house here, because people did not waste houses. When one was not being lived in, it would be purchased and rolled over on logs to the site, and then they just nailed the two walls that adjoined each other together. We knew about this because we had to re-roof the cottage in 1974, and we could see where the two single-walls met in the middle of the building. So that was very interesting.

**Farmer:** So that's this cottage right over here, this house?

**Brians:** Yes, the building across the way.

**Farmer:** So that's from the 1860s?

**Brians:** Yes. It doesn't look as old as it is, because on the front, the narrow horizontal clapboard was put on. I don't remember what period that is from.

And also this type of fancy window that swings out, it's only on the front. On the sides and the back are 1860s windows, and it's all board and batten on the other three sides of the house. But this was fancied up, and it's all square nails, so it was added sometime before the 1890s or earlier, perhaps the 1880s. I think they paid off the mortgage in the 1890s. They had some good crops then, and they were able to get cash by raising a certain number of hogs. We have the little hog houses still here, sow houses. They would walk the hogs (I think it's about six miles) to near where the Bolsa (Highway 25) and [Highway] 101 meet, where the train depot used to be. And because the fields were all fenced, the animals would just walk along eating grass, and the workers would walk them there, and then they would put them on the train and send them to market. People were very creative. You did what you had to do.

In 1973, we lived in what had been the main farmhouse. Tirzah Chase Bromley, the oldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Chase, was widowed when her husband was killed in a mining accident. She lived in the 1890s in this little four-room house on Frye Lane. We have a picture of her and her three children standing in front of that house. She died of tuberculosis in the late 1890s. In about 1912, this little house that was on Frye Lane was rolled over here and put down—it's about one hundred feet west of the cottage. Another sister Charlotte (Lottie Chase) had married a dairy farmer in 1914, and they lived in that house until 1934. They were then able to add a master bedroom and a kitchen and dining room, and indoor plumbing in 1934. They lived in that larger house for the rest of their lives. This is where we lived from 1973 to 1991.

**Farmer:** They had a dairy?

**Brians:** Well, yes, Mr. Henry Chase had started a dairy here, and we have a big dairy barn that was put up in 1900. It was built by Mr. Chase, who died in 1910. But Mr. William Little, as Mr. Chase's health went down, was running the dairy in 1912, and then he married the daughter, Lottie, in 1914. So they lived here, and he operated the dairy. In fact, Mr. Little brought in the first registered Holstein bulls for this area. I guess he probably brought in a bull and maybe a couple cows. And eventually he had thirty-seven cows. Mr. Little had a dairyman who worked with him from at least 1912, and it might have been a few years earlier, until 1955, when the dairy closed. William Little died in 1951.

**Farmer:** Did they have electricity?

**Brians:** Yes, there was electricity down at Dunneville Corners, which is three-quarters of a mile from here. It's at the intersection where the Rohnert Seed Company was. Mr. Chester Bromley, who was a grandson of Mr. Chase, worked putting in telephones and electricity for this neighborhood.

**Farmer:** So would they have had electric milking machines?

**Brians:** Yes, because there are still some. I don't know how soon they had it; it might not have been 1912, but there is the old wiring still in the big milking barn, and the girls' names are on the metal name tags over the wooden stanchions in the barn.

**Farmer:** That's great. A lot of history here. And you haven't taken these things down at all.

**Brians:** We have tried to maintain the buildings, because my philosophy has been that since we were fortunate enough to move onto this property it's our responsibility to be stewards of what is here. There is so much county history here. A little bit is modernized. Like, we don't have the wooden shingles on the roofs of the houses, and we have insulated the buildings. But the exteriors—we're trying to keep them original as much as possible, and as much of the interior also. The bathrooms have been modernized, to some extent, and the kitchens and such. I really appreciate the history that does exist here, and I think our attitude, my husband and mine and Grant's, who also is farming here—our goal is to be good stewards of the land. And even before CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] was started, this was our interest.

### **Organic Farming and Being Stewards of the Land**

I don't remember exactly when we started, but I think it must have been in the early seventies. Even before we had moved here, we had subscribed to Rodale [Institute] publications, and when they started their *New Farm* magazine, we subscribed to the first issues of that, and *Organic Gardening* and *Small Farmers Journal* and *Countryside*. After we were here, I took a bee class at Gavilan [Community] College, and so I then subscribed to *Gleanings in Bee Culture*.

This property has always been in agriculture since it was just a wild, wild area, when the Indians were here. Then, of course, they just gleaned the oaks and took fish from the streams, and ate the elderberries, which we still have on the property. I planted more of those in different spots, also.

Improving the soil has been our number one goal while we've lived here. We acquired a farm with very good soil, and for many years it was taken care of. It was farmed conventionally from 1958 to 1973, when we came here. So there had been sugar beets and other field crops that were grown here. Of course, most of the bigger farmers used chemicals, which is not in our agenda.

**Farmer:** Yes, so did you just clean up the soil over the years?

**Brians:** Well, putting on compost and gypsum have been two of our major activities, and cover crops, of course.

**Farmer:** How many acres do you actually have in crops?

**Brians:** There are ninety acres in row crops and then the five-acre orchard. And as I said, when we first came here, we had perhaps a dozen trees on the farm. And even in January 1974, before we put our life savings down and borrowed everything we could to buy the property, we bought ten apricot trees. A neighboring orchardist had extra trees. Three dollars a tree. I wasn't going to pass up a bargain like that. [Laughs.] So we planted those trees along the driveway, not realizing that eventually the six-acre field on the east of the

driveway would become a full orchard. That was my idea and hope, though. So we planted those trees, and one of our early projects has been to plant windbreak trees all around the total farm perimeter. Most noticeable, I suppose, are the eucalyptus that are along Shore Road, because nobody else on Shore Road has trees. We can always say, "We're the property with the eucalyptus trees." We planted those because we needed firewood, and we wanted plenty of firewood. I heat and cook with firewood.

One of my best purchases was within about two years of coming to the farm. The first winter that we lived in the ranch house, it had no insulation in our bedroom. Well, it had no insulation in the house. In 1934, I guess they weren't very much into insulation. We had a winter that was thirteen degrees outside. This was within the first year or two. It was sixteen degrees in our bedroom. There was frost inside our bedroom windows, which was a west-facing room. We had a central heating system that didn't work very well. We kept it at about sixty-two or so during the winter, because we were paying something like a hundred dollars a month for propane during the winter, and in '73, '74 one hundred dollars was a lot of money. So the next year, when I received an income tax refund, I took it and I bought a Monarch wood electric stove, since we never have been connected to any gas lines out here; we only had electricity. So I had to have some electricity. It was a wood-burning stove, and it came from Bob Yant at Enterprise Electric, this electric store that has been in business in Hollister since I think the thirties. When we came in and needed electrical things to start fixing these buildings when we first moved here, Bob Yant said, "Oh, are you new to town?" We said, "Yes, we've just come." "And where are you living?" "Oh, we

bought the Chase property out on Shore Road.” He knew where that was. And he says, “You’ve got credit here.” In fact, there were several businesses that operated that way back in the seventies. If you were a property owner and you lived on a farm, obviously you’d pay your bills. They always did. In fact, Bob Yant told us at Enterprise that during the Depression—well, I guess they must have had the business in the thirties because a lot of farmers, of course, had no money coming in, and so they could not immediately pay their bills, but eventually they paid them. So, they would be carried. Anyway, we had a lot of repair work to do.

This modern house was built in 1983 for Bob’s parents. They lived in Salinas, and their health was such they couldn’t live in their home anymore. So we built this little house for them. Then unfortunately their health kept deteriorating and they weren’t able to come and live here. But it was built, and we bought a Canadian wood stove to put in the modern house, and we used it until we moved here in the nineties, after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. We moved the Monarch stove from the other house because I *love* that stove.

**Farmer:** Yes. So it’s in your kitchen?

**Brians:** Oh, yes.

**Farmer:** And it heats the house, too?

**Brians:** Yes. Well, in this house, the contractor and I lined it up so it's nearly north-south. It's about twelve degrees off of south. The property is a long, narrow piece. It's 1,000 feet wide by 5,000 feet long, going from Shore Road to the creek. This modern house faces basically due south. Of course, people in [the] 1860s and in 1912—they didn't think about passive solar orientation—but that was our main thing in putting up this house. It has R-19 [insulation rating] in the walls and R-30 in the ceiling, and it's a wall of glass across the south and a cement floor with tiles, so that it holds the heat. The coldest in the winter that I think it's gotten in the solar house since it was built in '83 is about sixty degrees, or maybe sixty-two. And the hottest it's gotten, even when it was 109 degrees last summer, it got up, I think, to eighty-six, or maybe eighty-eight degrees. We have two fans in the great room, and upstairs on the balcony there are windows. We open the windows upstairs, open the front screen doors, and the hot air goes up and out. It feels cold when you come inside if it's ninety or a hundred outside. So when it's ten or twenty degrees cooler than outside, it's pretty nice.

**Farmer:** What a good design.

**Brians:** So that's been a definite advantage to this house. Even in the summer it'll cool down enough that I often will cook a meal with the wood stove if I have something that needs it, especially if I do tortillas, because I need that big grill to lay the tortillas on. And we've upgraded both the big ranch house and this house with solar panels, PV [photovoltaics]. We saved a number of years to be able to get those and generate our own electricity. If we can get the farm even more



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profitable, hopefully we'll be able to put in more PV panels. That's again, part of our stewardship.

**Farmer:** So do you think of that as part of being sustainable?

**Brians:** Right, absolutely.

**Farmer:** And so the organic part is the CCOF part.

**Brians:** Right.

**Farmer:** So how do you look at that: "organic" and "sustainable?"

**Brians:** Oh, dear, what a question. [Laughter.] Well, my general attitude is stewardship. I want to be the best steward I can of the resources God has given us, and since we have a wonderful farm, every morning I get up and thank God that I can live here and breathe clean air and always have chores, never be bored.

**Farmer:** There's plenty to do.

**Brians:** One thinks in terms of years and decades, not in terms of just what one can do this year or the next year. The tree-planting projects and soil projects are long term. For instance, certain fields have streaks of alkali that need continuing attention. In fact, I was just looking at some paperwork, and in the seventies, Grant went to the tomato canneries in town and they were looking then for

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places to dump cannery waste. So we had a number of loads brought out to our number five field in the back, which had an alkali section, and there was great improvement in that field after that cannery waste (tomato pulp) was put out. We had tomato plants coming up for several decades afterwards, but that was no problem. [Laughs.] Improving the ground and the soil is one of our key interests here.

**Farmer:** So have you studied that as well as learning by doing?

**Brians:** Well, we're always reading about various farm interests: soil improvement and cover crops and all these things we were doing before the farm advisers had recommended it. With CCOF, we were with like-minded people who also were passionate about building the soil. Everyone would say, "What are you doing now?" So we shared what we were doing, and anyone new coming in would have people to learn from.

### **California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]**

When CCOF's Central Coast Chapter was started, Russel Wolter was one of the prime farmers.<sup>1</sup> He started out in Carmel Valley. I think he's retired now, but he had farmed there when there were a number of farmers. Now I think there are maybe one or two who still farm in Carmel Valley. But he was a wonderful farmer and inspirational, and I think Grant learned a lot from him. So there was a lot of exchanging.

I made some notes, and I thought I'd tell you a little about CCOF and its formation.

**Farmer:** Great.

**Brians:** I was talking to Grant, and I had thought I had read about the meeting to form the local chapter in the newspaper. But Grant thought maybe it was in the *New Farm* magazine, because Rodale had been instrumental in getting the CCOF started in 1974. There was sort of a unified group then, with farmers scattered all over the state. Organizationally, it didn't do too well. People were too far apart. I think the first president was Barney Bricmont of Santa Cruz.<sup>2</sup> He was the one, as I recall, who called the meeting. We met in Watsonville on—let's see, I wrote it down—March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1976 at the Greek Orthodox Church in Watsonville. George Ivancovich was a member there, and so he got us a room. George and Russel and Barney and us, Grant and I—are the four who stayed the longest with CCOF. A number of people have come in over the years who are still with the organization, like Dale Coke.<sup>3</sup> I remember going and helping inspect his place and get him certified on his little tiny—I think it was, like, ten acres of strawberries on the hill there in Aromas. Now he's farming hundreds of acres here in San Benito County, and some in Santa Cruz.

Anyway, we met there, and we started meeting monthly on Freedom Boulevard, at the UC Extension farm office. We met monthly, and Barney was our first chapter president. I kept, at least for ten years, all of the paperwork. We published newsletters and I did some secretarial work in writing minutes. After

about ten years I had a big box, and it was over in the house, and I was thinking, this should really be in the CCOF central office. Some day someone will want to be doing a history. So I gave this [box] to Grant, and he took it to one of the meetings, and it went to the central office. Then in 1989 the Loma Prieta [earthquake] knocked down the building where the office was.<sup>4</sup> Grant and I were just talking, and he said it wasn't that it burned, but it was so badly damaged that a lot of the records could not be taken out because it was too dangerous to go into that part of the building. So all of my good records were gone, you know, who attended meetings and all these kind of things. I put in articles and meeting notices in our local Hollister newspapers to invite people to come to our meetings. And other people put notices in the Santa Cruz and Watsonville papers. All this paperwork and copies went in the box. Well, so that went down the drain.<sup>5</sup>

**Farmer:** Oh, my goodness.

**Brians:** That was sad. Anyway, it's hard to remember all of the particulars, but we had various speakers who came in, which would be interesting. The two that I remember the most were the first meeting with Dr. Bob Bugg, when he had just, I think, been hired by UC and he had just gotten his doctorate. Here was some actual academic research that was verifying what we were doing. [Laughs.] So that was really nice. And then Miguel Altieri. One of his early activities was meeting with us and telling us what he was doing. And then, of course, we all told each other what we were doing and what our projects [were].

**Farmer:** Do you remember the Rodales coming, or sending representatives?

**Brians:** No, that was when the state organization was first founded. We were down here in '74, but there wasn't anything in the paper, or anything that we heard about that, which I recall. I may have vaguely known about it, but we were just barely getting moved in. But we did go to that first 1976 meeting, and I think there were perhaps a dozen or so of us there. It was so wonderful to meet people with the same philosophy, who weren't just saying, "How big a crop can I get by putting more chemicals on my land?" They were concerned about feeding the earthworms, feeding the soil—these kinds of things. That was wonderful. It was very reinforcing of what we believed in. Because just here in our own neighborhood, we had some neighbors who were very negative toward us when they first got those CCOF signs (and that wasn't for a number of years), but we put one up, of course. They were saying, "Why, you're going back to horses." Well, we actually did go back to horse farming. We had draft horses for a few years because of my grandfather, when I was eleven, allowing me to "steer" his horses, which were so well trained they didn't really even need someone on the lines. Early on, I think it was about 1977, a neighbor was interested in draft horses, a dairyman, Billy [Carreiro], and so he and we went up to Northern California, where he knew someone had some Belgians for sale, and we bought this team. I really couldn't justify it. But it was wonderful. We had them for, I don't know, five years or so. We did a certain amount of work—we actually spread that tomato waste with a Fresno that we had picked up, and the team. And another horseman helped us, Louis Cibral, who was a rodeo stunt actor person who'd worked in movies and trained horses how to be "shot" and fall

down. When he found out that we had draft horses, he came over to see them because obviously, if there were horses, he was the expert for the county, so he was the one who needed to look at them. So he helped train my younger son and me on driving them, and gave us clues on how to be safe and things like that. In fact, once I drove them all the way down to Tres Pinos, on Shore Road and Fairview, down Airline Highway to Tres Pinos, which was about thirteen miles. [Laughs.] That was quite a trip. We didn't even have those orange triangles for slow-moving vehicles. But it was a lot of fun. We did different kinds of cultivating and things with the team and such.

**Farmer:** Did you have to buy old equipment?

**Brians:** Well, there was a little bit here. And many people would have a little bit of horse equipment around. They would give it to us if they knew we were interested. We were also buying tractors then. Because obviously we started farming here and we had no equipment, moving from an urban area. So we bought all old equipment and one tractor. My husband was doing some computer work with a fellow who farmed over in the Valley. Bob did a certain amount of work for him, and so we paid him a dollar for a nice old fifties Oliver Super tractor that worked. Grant also was very good at scrounging equipment, older equipment from all around the various local counties.

**Farmer:** That makes me curious about where you first sold your vegetables and other crops that you were growing.

**Brians:** Grant has always been interested in vegetables. He was thirteen when we moved here, and he started taking ag, as well as Spanish, and math and other things. The classes he was enrolled for and taking at Los Altos High were not the kind of classes San Benito County had. So he had to shift his program quite a bit. In fact, when he turned sixteen, he was in his junior year at high school, and there weren't any more math classes he could take. So he started at Gavilan [Community College] as he was able to drive there. But when he was taking ag classes here at the high school, they had a project of growing crops as well as raising animals. Most people were into livestock, but he did crops, and he got a seed contract with Keystone Seed Company down the road. So he was growing different seed crops here. And then later on, I remember he grew peas; I think it was on a contract for baby food, organic baby food. He knows all the details on what he was growing. But I do remember he went to farmers' markets, especially in Santa Cruz. One Sunday or Saturday Grant was busy doing something else, so Bob and I had to take the truck over. We had a load of, I think it was peas, and I don't know what all other vegetables. That was our first experience selling at a farmers' market. It was Aptos, I think, where we went. Grant grew a lot of different crops, most of them, I think, on contract. But later on we can go and ask him. He said he'd be there.

**Farmer:** Oh, great.

**Brians:** Oh, and the one thing I wanted to say about CCOF was that besides our monthly meetings, when we started, we visited everybody else. We went around to other farms so that we could certify that they were growing organically. We'd

poke our noses into everything and check, “You don’t have any chemicals or anything of this sort?” They’d show us what they were doing and all their processes and such. So that’s how we did inspections for those first number of years. Later on, there was a certification committee, as opposed to the whole group being assigned to go to different areas. And then the certification committee—I think they had people assigned for—you know, if you were in orchards, then you’d go see someone with orchards.

In those first few years the farthest Bob and I went was up in the mountains to see an apple orchard. I don’t even remember the person’s name, but I was talking to Bob, and he said it was in El Dorado County, near Placerville, because there was no other nearby CCOF chapter. There was Sonoma County, North Coast, and there was the Central Coast chapter. I don’t know why—they must have asked us rather than ask Sonoma. So that’s why Bob and I took the drive and spent a day up there.

Then when Larry Jacobs up at Pescadero, along the coast, joined CCOF, Bob and I went up and visited him. He had just come back from the Peace Corps and was starting to do farming on a couple hundred acres his father had. And now apparently he’s a huge farmer down in Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

**Farmer:** Yes. Jacobs Farm.



**Brians:** Yes. So that was when we first met Larry. That was kind of interesting. But mostly we would do local visits. When the Van Dykes over in Gilroy joined, we visited them, too, to do inspections.<sup>7</sup> It was sort of a bootstrap operation.

**Farmer:** Self-regulating at that time.

**Brians:** Right. Every once in a while we would hear about someone who would claim they were organic. Nothing in our area, that I recall. I think this was in Southern California somewhere. Someone who was a neighbor farmer knew that they were not organic, and they would bring out the evidence. So they would be disenfranchised. They could not use the seal any longer.

**Farmer:** So this seal was important. And do you remember how the legislation got developed?

**Brians:** That was in the late 1970s. I was active, very active the first five or so years, and Grant was active at least ten or fifteen years.

One of our early chores was we had actually bought a few milking goats in early 1973 from a Stanford professor who was moving to UCLA, and the does were pregnant. That was one of our incentives for coming down here to a farm. I called up the Santa Clara County planning or zoning department. The first person I talked to before we got the goats said, "Oh, yes, you have half an acre, so that's okay." And then the next person said, "No, you can only have one goat per acre," or something like that. I had two different stories. I was getting tired of

living in an urban area anyway, so the goats were another excuse for moving down here. But goats had to be milked twice a day. When Grant was really busy on the farm, I guess when he was going to high school, I milked in the morning and he milked at night. But then when his activities became more vigorous, I was ending up milking in the morning and the evening, and I had other chores and other groups I was active in, too.

Anyway, I was president for one year of CCOF in those early years, when we were much more informal. That's why I wish I had that material, because it listed who the officers were, since we did have officers.

**Farmer:** And this is when it was a completely volunteer organization, right?

**Brians:** Oh, yes, correct. We had no money. I was just trying to think, and I haven't had time to look this up, but I don't know when we even started paying dues. Because in the first few years, I didn't see any dues payments to CCOF. And I guess we didn't pay anything to use the Farm Extension meeting room, so they were encouraging us.

**Farmer:** You don't hear much about those groups supporting organic. So, in that way they supported you.

**Brians:** Well, Santa Cruz has been a lot more supportive than many counties. [laughs] For years, I felt I was the only organic farmer in San Benito County. I'd go to apricot meetings, and I'd go to walnut meetings, and they'd never say

anything about how you might grow these crops, and what were the best, beneficial, organic ways to do apricots and walnuts. Well, now I go to these meetings, and there are [conversations like]: “This is conventional. You use these chemicals. Now, for organic, you do—” We have, I don’t know what the organic acreage is, but it’s fairly substantial in walnuts, especially. Apricots acreage has really decreased. They’ve gone down some. We used to have six thousand acres of apricots in San Benito County. We have something like under, I think, nine hundred now. And every year there’s more apricots coming out, organic apricot growers. I didn’t have a crop of apricots for the last two years. This is the first crop I’ve had in three years.

**Farmer:** What was the reason for that?

**Brians:** Well, we had rains, and we do not have organic fungicides that can be sprayed so the little fruit doesn’t fall off. And the bees do not pollinate during rain.

**Farmer:** In April it rained last year.

**Brians:** Yes. And the year before, the rain was also harmful for apricots.

**Farmer:** So if you farmed conventionally and you used fungicides, you’d get through that stuff.

**Brians:** Yes, you can survive a bit better, though you probably don't get quite as large a crop. This is the only time we've had two years in a row when we haven't had a crop. I've had apricots for over thirty years. I'd have to look back, but I'm pretty sure, other than these last two years, I've had at least some crop.

**Farmer:** Now, are these the same trees? Or have you replaced them?

**Brians:** Oh, yes, these are the original trees. In fact, I have a huge amount of pruning to do because *Eutypa* [causes] dieback that has become quite prevalent on apricots. It'll take a whole limb down to the trunk, and that's kind of rough. I've got quite a few branches that I need to take out of the orchard.

**Farmer:** Is that a fungus?

**Brians:** Yes, *Eutypa* is a fungus. One thing you're supposed to do is, if at all possible, is prune one foot below the dieback.

**Farmer:** Okay. So let's talk some more about CCOF. You were president for a year, and then you had too much going on to—

**Brians:** Right. Oh, yes. So Grant was on the certification committee, because after five years or so, we had more formal committees and things. He was very active. In fact, he was on the state certification committee too. He was also working on the organic bills, the California Organic Food Act of 1979, and the California

Organic Foods Acts of 1990. I don't remember if he went to Sacramento, but I know he and his committee were working on that.

So Grant was representing the farm, because he and I were basically the two who were most active on the farm. Bob was traveling, and agriculture wasn't his main interest for most years. I don't think it is, still. [Laughs.]

### **Marketing and Distribution**

Grant grew a lot of vegetables for the first five or ten years. And then with the ups and downs of vegetables he wasn't making money. So he had to get a computer job. We shifted from vegetables to hay, and he did my hay planting and most of the harvesting, and then I sold the hay from here. We had two barns full of hay in good years, so it was a pretty fair source of income for a number of years.

Of course, we weren't making enough money to put a lot of gypsum back in the soil, and compost and things. But we didn't really need it with the hay because we had good root systems and we did some cover crops and things.

Then in the nineties, TKO, Todd Koons [Organics], had rented part of the Keystone Seed Company, and he was farming organically in this area. He came and visited us and asked if he could have his people grow organic vegetables here. He, of course, is very committed to organics, and he was a great person to

work with. But unfortunately he had some business problems. Farming is not an easy occupation, you know.

**Farmer:** High risk, yes.

**Brians:** So he was here for four years. Then I think he had some bankruptcy problems, and he knew the people at Misionero Vegetables [in Salinas]. So they took over. They had a year of growing here, and then we did a five-year contract with them, also. They were very nice people [and] fairly good farmers, but their organic commitment was not philosophical the way Todd's commitment was, the way our commitment is. That was kind of a difficult situation. We were very, very glad to get out of that contract when it ended because one of the really bad things, which was organic, but was really bad for *our* farm— Their farming was basically in Monterey County. The soil and climate and things are different there. And they use sugar beet for the limestone, and sugar beet pulp. With our soil, that's about the worst thing one can do, and it has taken us years to get rid of the bad effects from that.

**Farmer:** And they just wanted to put the same thing on everything.

**Brians:** Yes, because they got a good price over at Spreckels. They didn't put it, fortunately, on every field, but the two back fields. Grant has worked really hard the last three years to clean these up and to get that alkalinity out of the soil. Because gypsum has sulfur in it, and the calcium. And with our soil composition, it works beautifully. It helps get rid of the alkali streaks, and the white spots, and

this sort of thing, where there's too much mineral. That was really a bad experience. They were very nice people, but we just did not agree philosophically, and I wish we had never signed a contract. I would have rather just had the ground in hay than have that happen to it.

**Farmer:** Did the plants grow well, or did they start to—

**Brians:** No. I mean, the foreman—he was a fairly good farmer, and he understood. But, you know, your boss tells you to do something. I tried to tell them, when they were talking about it, that that wasn't good for this soil. But I was a female who didn't know anything, even though Grant and I know this soil so much better than anybody else. So anyway, that's a bad, sad story.

So when that contract ended, we only rented part of it to several other organic growers who wanted small acreage: forty acres here, twenty acres there. This was the non-limestone type of areas on the front half of the farm, which fortunately they hadn't ruined.

Then Grant, just in the last couple of years, grew some hay. We grew barley one year and forage mix. Barley pulls alkali out of the ground, and so that's very good. And then putting gypsum and compost in, gradually it's getting built back where it should be.

But that's a very sad story. That's sort of like a scar in my heart. Under my watch, something bad happened to the farm that wasn't intentional on anyone's part but

just—you know, bad things can happen. So anyway. I keep planting my trees, because trees drop leaves, and they go into the ground near them, and they improve the soil and all of this, so—

Now, let's see, what else do we want to talk about that is nicer?

**Farmer:** Okay, so Grant was going to farmers' markets, and you had to take over for him one time.

**Brians:** Just one time.

**Farmer:** So you haven't done that very often?

**Brians:** No, no.

**Farmer:** So what are the other ways that you market?

**Brians:** Well, he marketed through contracts, when he had the baby food contract. Green beans and peas and things.

**Farmer:** So they tell you how much they want, and you grow it?

**Brians:** Right. They order ten acres or five acres or whatever. But we'll have to ask him for particulars on that. And then when we had the hay, that we marketed here off the farm—



**Farmer:** Oh, yes, because you still have the signs that say that.

**Brians:** Oh, yes. We had our milking goats for about twenty years, and then arthritis was bothering my fingers, and so I had to sell the milk goats. I really miss having fresh goat's milk. I got sheep, so that we could put them in the orchard to keep down the grass. I mow a certain amount, and then during a certain part of the year they can graze it down. Finally, we got too many sheep. About a year and a half ago, I had thirty-nine sheep. [Laughs.] So I was practically giving them away. But I sold a whole batch. Now I'm down to about five sheep. I'm shifting over to Barbados sheep. They do not have wool, they have hair. So one does not have to have them sheared. There used to be a market for wool in this area. We could take them down to the Red Barn, and the Salinas 4-H kids would gather all the wool together. They'd have a big eighteen-wheeler, a big trailer and fill it. And then they'd take it over to the valley, and there's a co-op, and it was all sold there. We'd get a little check, and that paid for the shearing. Now I don't know anybody who does shearing in this area. That's one reason I'm selling off all my Dorset and other wool sheep, because I've got pounds and pounds of sheep wool sitting in bags and sacks around here.

**Farmer:** I'm wondering about lamb as a food, meat.

**Brians:** Oh, well, the sheep—yes, they sell pretty well. When we had extra goats—goats are a really popular meat. It's ethnic food, especially with Filipinos, with Mexicans, with Near Easterners.

**Farmer:** For barbecue?

**Brians:** Everything, and medical. Like, some of the Filipinos—one gentleman came; his mother wanted the blood for building up their bodies and such. They drain the blood out anyway in order to use meat. And so she saved it and used it for the family food.

**Farmer:** Like vitamins, kind of.

**Brians:** Yes, right, yes. Well, especially for anemic people, or anything of that sort. So, yes, it isn't that hard to sell goats and sheep, the extra. But it's not very profitable, and it's a lot of work to have them.

So then we had America Fresh—Brian Gardiner, an Englishman. He was growing down here on forty acres for a couple of years. He had a lot of connections with restaurants. And then came another person, Stuart Dickson, he was a friend of Brian's. He's another Englishman, and he had a lot of farmers' markets he went to with his business. Then his health became bad. He was having some very major health problems. Grant was sort of unemployed from his computer job at that point, after the downsizing that occurred, and so he was doing some consulting and assistance and [working as a mechanic] for Stuart, and so when he decided he didn't think he could really handle the business anymore, Stuart asked Grant if he wanted to take it over and buy it. So he's done that. Grant took over also the farmers' market contracts that the business had. A truck goes to San Francisco twice a week, to Ferry Plaza, to Menlo Park, and

there are two Palo Alto markets now. That's a source of weekly income. Then there were a number of contracts that Stuart had with restaurants in different places, so some food is shipped to places like Boston and the Midwest.

**Farmer:** Oh, my goodness.

**Brians:** Well, they can grow organic food from June through maybe October. But for the rest of the year, if they want organic food it has to come from California, basically. So there're regular shipments to such places. And Grant does some selling to Whole Foods, especially root crops.

**Farmer:** So do you arrange that through a distributor, so they handle the trucking part and you just get it to them.

**Brians:** Well, sometimes, with different people—Grant has three trucks here, delivery trucks, that they use for farmers' market and deliver to Dale Coke over in San Juan [Bautista].

**Farmer:** Oh, he's got the cooler.

**Brians:** Yes, there are two coolers here. And then San Francisco Specialty, and L.A. Specialty trucks come and pick up produce. And In Motion. They have fancy trucks. And then FedEx and some others come and pick up crops when it goes different places.

**Farmer:** Like, if somebody in Boston has a restaurant and they want something really fresh tomorrow, you can FedEx.

**Brians:** Right, yes.

**Farmer:** Wow.

**Brians:** I don't know if they're doing it now, but Brian— Earlier, he had a contract with Caesar's Palace, and he would a couple of times a week ship organic food from here to Las Vegas.

**Farmer:** They have to need a lot of food there.

**Brians:** Well, as Brian said, high rollers who go there, if they want something in the food department, they get it. [Laughs.] If that brings more people in, it brings money. So they're willing to spend the money to have it fresh, because they have good chefs, and good chefs want the best product.

### Labor Issues

**Farmer:** Interesting. So as far as labor goes, do you have workers that you hire, or how does that go?

**Brians:** Well, Grant inherited a batch of workers from Stuart. And he had one person working for him when he was growing crops on his little ten-, eleven-acre

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parcel over on Fairview. He's come over and he's working for Heirloom [Organic Gardens—Grant Brians' business]. That's basically that situation.

**Farmer:** So these are people who have lived here a long time.

**Brians:** I think so. I don't know them too well. One recent employee is a gentleman from Switzerland, who has worked at dairies for about forty years. He's lived here thirty-two years on the farm with us. He rents half of the cottage. Fred is a wonderful, wonderful man. There used to be twenty or thirty dairies in this area. There were six cheese factories up until the Second World War. With the artesian wells, this area grew great alfalfa. It was a wonderful dairy area. Well, since the last thirty years, the number of dairies has gone down to, I think there may be two operations. Fred is working one day a week to help out a dairyman. But the other dairies—they may be raising, like, dry stock, calves or something like that, but I don't think they're milking cows because it's been a tough road. The [Central] Valley dairies have gotten so gigantic, with three, four or five thousand animals that are being milked, in inhumane conditions, as far as I'm concerned. But Fred has been working five days a week now for Grant, because he's used to working six days a week. He has his whole life.

**Farmer:** Yes, a good worker.

**Brians:** Oh, he's a wonderful man. He sometimes goes down to Panoche and picks up the crops down there, or will take them over to San Juan [Bautista] or whatever. He's a very dependable person. Or drive a tractor, whatever.

**Farmer:** And you figure out what you want everybody to do? Like, you have the plan?

**Brians:** Well, Grant does. He checks with us to be sure, since we own the land. [Laughs.] We're the landlords. But he makes the crop decisions. We always talk things over, but it's his final decision, since the business is his responsibility.

**Farmer:** And do you think he'll stay here, carry on with that?

**Brians:** I think as long as he can make a living he will. It's what he wants to do. He's basically a farmer at heart, and hopefully it'll work out.

**Farmer:** What year was he born?

**Brians:** In 1959. We came in 1973, so he was almost fourteen. He definitely has farm interests in his blood.

**Farmer:** Yes, it sounds like it.

### Food Safety Issues

I wanted to know: do you have opinions about the current food safety concerns?<sup>8</sup>  
Do you have a sense of that?

**Brians:** I am very concerned about the fact that I don't think always the right questions are being asked, and I don't think the science is properly developed. I

feel that having cover crops, having hedgerows, having beneficial insects and wildlife is very important on a farm. In fact, I was reading something recently, it might have been a study out of Rodale. They had shown that organic production in the long run will produce more food for people than conventional chemical kind of growing. And I have a feeling when the research is finally accomplished— We need to pin down how this cattle manure that has *E. coli* in it gets onto farms, but we also need to not throw out all the good conservation items. Some people have torn out hedgerows and these sorts of things.

**Farmer:** In the last year?

**Brians:** Yes, because of the potential way that the laws may be written. This is wrong. I mean, I absolutely disagree. God gave us a certain kind of world we work with, and we don't try to sterilize it. Life is not sterile. We have to build up the organic matter, the humus, and then the soil will be healthier, the plants will be healthier, *we* will be healthier.

**Farmer:** And the *E. coli* won't survive.

**Brians:** Right. We have a certain amount in our systems. All of us do. But it's become out of control— I mean, I've had antibiotics, but personally I will do everything I can to avoid having them. Because broad-spectrum poison or antibiotics kill the good with the bad. I much prefer discrimination. [Laughs.] I want to find the best answers, not just something that may look like it will clean up a situation. Because philosophically, I do not believe that we can kill all the

bad things in life, evil and mosquitoes and these kinds of things. I was just reading an article in *Audubon* about flies and how we're so worried about mosquitoes and things, and yes, I have mosquito fish in my ponds and in my troughs, but we also have Syrphid flies and all kinds of good flies that do pollination for us. And if the bees are not as healthy right at the moment, then we are going to depend on these other insects, which is why we want to plant plants that will feed these insects, and that will give us a balanced life. We have to look for balance. I think if we're going in the right direction (we may always be making some adjustments), but if we're aiming to have a healthy, good world, then we won't throw out good things with some things that need to be contained. I think we have to look for more creative ways to contain certain problems. Washing hands is a very good way to contain disease. Often there are mechanical things or something that one can encourage that will discourage what you don't want. I mean, we were given brains for a reason. [Laughs.]

### **Challenges and Rewards of Organic Farming**

**Farmer:** My last question for you, then, is what are your greatest rewards and greatest challenges in farming?

**Brians:** Well, let me say it a little differently. One of my greatest surprises has been—when we started with CCOF, we weren't exactly outcasts, but we were in a way. We were "hippies" or we were—I mean, here my husband was working in the computer industry, but anyway— So we were "weird," weird probably. We were not normal, because we were farming organically. Most people didn't



understand what organic farming meant, because they had gotten away from their grandparents who had dairies, who put the manure back on the ground, [laughs] whether it was composted or raw manure. And they grazed their cattle out in their fields. This particular farm, the back twenty-five-acre field was in barley, which they harvested, and they sent the cows out there, and the number four field, another twenty-five- or twenty-three-acre field—it also had crops on it. But they grazed the cattle, and where they had the alfalfa, they—I don't know for certain, but they may have grazed it once in a while, because sometimes if it gets weedy it's better to graze it down, and then you let it grow again, and then you have clean alfalfa, more nutritious. But people used what they had in a sensible way, in my opinion.

[When] we started out, I'd assumed organics would always stay very small, that it would be some small niche. In the last ten or fifteen years, the way organics have grown and the demand for organic food has really flabbergasted me. I would never have thought that so many big companies would at least try to do the minimum organic so they could secure organic prices. So that has been one of the most surprising things in this thirty-year adventure that we've been on.

And the most satisfying thing is to be able to—well, like yesterday. Toward the end of the day, the afternoon breeze was blowing, and my husband and I had to go down and check on a hedgerow planting that some friends and I put in within the last month. The sky was so clear. There were mountains around us—they were like a painting. They were so clear, and the sky was so beautiful and blue, and the trees in the distance looked great. It was paradise. It made one feel

totally happy and satisfied that one could live in a place doing what one wants to do. So I think that's my feeling about organic farming in this particular place.

## **Grant Brians**

**Farmer:** This is part two from Brians Ranch. I'm here with Grant Brians, who has Heirloom Organic Gardens as a farming operation. We're going to talk a little bit about what you're doing.

**G. Brians:** I am Grant Brians, currently operating Heirloom Organic Gardens, which is an amalgamation of my previous farming operation that was individually mine, but then I merged with an operation that was winding down from another person called Heirloom Organic Gardens. And I chose to keep that name.

Of course, I was the person who did the farming with my mother back in the 1970s and 1980s here at Brians Ranch. I've been involved in one way or another with most of the farming that has taken place here since then, whether it was ours, or leased activities of other growers, or now back again, myself.

## **Working as a Certifier for California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]**

Also, I was, as my mother was, but in different ways, very active in CCOF in the early days. I was the certification chair for the chapter and on the state cert board for, it was either two or three years, in the 1980s. I was the most prolific farm inspector in the seventies and through the mid-eighties, or so. I can't remember

exactly when I stopped doing lots of those. At one point I was doing about forty farm inspections a year, maybe it was even a little bit more, in addition to my farming activities. I think at that time I may also have been working as well for a technology company.

I did attend most of the early meetings that were held here in the Central Coast chapter. I worked with Barney Bricmont, Sy Weisman<sup>9</sup>, and there was one other person whose name escapes me, who was involved in writing the '79 and '91 California organic legislations. I was one of the people who went up to Sacramento and lobbied for the 1990 act passage. I think I ended up talking to staffers in about six or seven of the legislative offices, plus two of the assemblymen.

**Farmer:** Do you remember working with [Congressman] Sam Farr?<sup>10</sup>

**G. Brians:** As a matter of fact, he was one of the people whose offices I remember talking with staffers. I don't honestly remember if I met him at that point. I've certainly met him various times since, in related ways, but I just can't remember back then in the late eighties, one way or the other. So those are some of the little things that I was involved in.

One of the things which I found interesting about our chapter (which was true, I know, to a lesser extent of San Luis Obispo, also Big Valley to a limited extent, and very heavily North Coast) [was] first of all, of course, as with any volunteer organization, there was a very small core of people who did most of the

organizational work. But one of the things which was interesting was that [beyond] that small core, there were quite a few people around who were willing to at least participate in that work, if not do a whole lot of it. That was, I believe, one of the big reasons why the success was there in the early days, that it wasn't just the ten percent that you figure in a typical volunteer organization that does the majority of the work. Instead, there was another, maybe thirty or forty percent of the people who were very, very involved, and would at least make their opinions known in a fairly constructive way. There were always a few hotheads, of course.

We went through a number of different iterations of how the meetings took place. Initially, most of the meetings were held at the Co-op Extension/Santa Cruz County Ag Department Hall at the Watsonville County Adjunct Buildings, I guess is what they called them. However, even during that time, we had meetings, especially the Christmas parties—those were always held at somebody's farm, a house at a farm.

The chapter covered a lot of area, even though the nucleus of the farmers was, through all those years, in Santa Cruz County. The bulk of that nucleus was between Santa Cruz and Watsonville—that there were a lot of small operations that were in Freedom and Aptos and Corralitos and up into even the mountains above Santa Cruz. [So] there was an effort made to make sure that there were meetings held at different parts of the chapter. At the moment I'm not remembering specifically when we went back to a set location for a while, and then returned to the meeting various places around the chapter. But we went

through several cycles of that, because there was always a concern—how do you keep people involved?

It was probably around 1978 or 1979 when Mother stopped being the cert chair. Then we started having the certification meetings, almost all of them, at Betty Emlen's house. She was in Watsonville and she was a retired schoolteacher, and died a few years ago of complications from the ailments that had kept her on disability for a number of years. She had her backyard certified, and she produced and sold a little bit, just locally there in Watsonville. So we had our cert meetings there for probably ten years, maybe longer, just because she loved being involved, and she was excited and interested in the certification. So even though she wasn't the chair for most of that time, she liked having it there and it was easier on her as well.

**Farmer:** It was a totally grassroots kind of feel.

**G. Brians:** Totally grassroots. Though that time period there were always volunteers who were not farmers, who were essentially the consumer roots of the organization. One of the things which the structure included, starting shortly after that organization in '76, was making sure that on the state board that there was a consumer representative. For several of the years, and I can't remember how many, it was a person from Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco. At one point I think that Bu Nygren of Veritable Vegetable was. She was the handler representative also. We folded that in also, because we saw that there needed to be [more than just] farmers participating in the organization. So there were lots

of both comings and goings, but there was always a batch of people who were interested in a combination of evangelizing and making things work.

I want to say it was probably around 1983 that things started changing. That was when we started getting larger conventional operations which would start doing organic production. I well remember inspecting a batch of them in the southern Salinas Valley. These were people who had their own ideas about what organic meant and several of them were very secretive. "You cannot share *any* of this information with *anybody* else." Now, of course what they didn't realize, and I was very gently conveying to them (but of course it didn't really take), was actually what you're doing is just one of the methods that many people have used for years. But everybody was rediscovering ways to actually attempt to care for their land. Whether it was leased or owned, that wasn't the point. The point was that they were the stewards of the land. They were the stewards of what was being produced from their operations.

I'm thinking of two in particular. I honestly can't remember if either one of them is still farming. I think that one retired a number of years ago, and the other one I'm not sure. They felt that it somehow gave them a competitive advantage. Amigo Bob Cantisano<sup>11</sup> was advising people all over the state. He was one of the paths, if you will, of sharing practical information that's gleaned from what one grower's experiences were in such a way as to try and match it up to another grower's situation. [I found that] the people who truly ended up being the most successful, or had at least the best chance of it, were the ones who were the most open and the most sharing, because they generally were the ones who got the

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most back from other people. They also tended to be the people who were most open to thinking about things in new ways. That was another hallmark. For every instance where people would be looking to the past to understand what was done and why did it work or not work, at the same token there was (and I think still is, but I'm not sure about this), an openness to looking at anybody else's practices that are being tried today, not automatically to adopt them, but to see what works.

I think that one of the biggest influences that CCOF and the organic movement has had on conventional agriculture is the willingness of conventional growers to not just look to their chemical suppliers, or to the chemical regime which might be in one of the University of California papers as to well—this is the common way to produce crop *x*. There is more and more of a willingness to say, “Okay, what we're doing may or may not work right now, but given all the challenges that face us in agriculture, we can't ignore what's happening on the organic side. Let's pay attention to what they're doing and see if any pieces fit into our operation,” even if they have no interest whatsoever into going into an organic direction. I know [from] talking with a number of people in the last few years who are property managers or managers of large conventional operations, that there's more of a concern among most of them for not running down the soil. This was not even remotely the case in the 1970s. In the 1970s (and this was totally visible here in this valley especially), there was very much of an attitude of: we've got to get the maximum profit that we can get right now. If we put in for the long term, somebody else is going to reap the benefits from what we've done. There was a strong, strong interest then that long term wasn't the way to

look. It was a very short-term focus. And it was getting shorter and shorter term, as the generation of people who were the tree fruit growers in the Santa Clara Valley, in the Watsonville area, in the Santa Cruz Mountains—there weren't new people going into tree-growing agriculture. There weren't new people going into vegetable agriculture during the 1960s, the 1970s, who weren't the ones who were driven by this desire to somehow become more connected to the soil. It was a time period when you had the generation who went into farming around World War II, whose kids had been essentially kicked off their farms largely because they kept being told by their fathers (it was always the father who did this), "Well, this is a hard life. You don't want to do this. You want to go sell used cars." Or, "You want to go be an engineer." Or, "You want to go be a manager of something."

**Farmer:** [laughs] That's exactly what happened to my father.

**G. Brians:** I believe it. So that time period when, even though this area wasn't directly affected by the farm program very much, there still was that same idea of: well, the place where you can make money is by getting big and by growing commodity crops. This area didn't fit that model.

**Farmer:** This is specialty crops.<sup>12</sup>

**G. Brians:** Exactly. And the perception that the growing corporate influence coming through and out of the Salinas Valley, that that was all was going to be for vegetable production. All of those things are big influences.



Obviously, if the records still exist of which operations were out there as certified operations, it would be possible to take a look at the ebb and flow of the different kinds of producers. One of the early producers produced quite a few avocados. Again, this was here in the Watsonville area, up in the hills. It seemed like all through the early days there were at least one to three avocado growers. [In the] back-to-the-land movement of the seventies there were quite a few people who planted the non-Hass avocados in the Santa Cruz Mountains, because of the areas where the frosts don't settle on the slopes. All of it, of course, was on the ocean side of the mountains, not the Santa Clara Valley side. Another thing that ebbed and flowed was herb production. It seemed like people were going in and out of herb production, because the demand for the herb production that was specifically organic was very tenuous. That was something that really went into non-organic outlets, primarily, but the people who were interested in growing organically had to do that just to survive so they had a market for their stuff. I was growing some pretty significant amounts of vegetables in a number of those years, [but] I don't think in the first, say, six years of being certified that more than fifteen percent of our products actually went to specifically organic customers.

### **Organic Baby Food**

**J. Brians:** What about the baby food, the green beans?

**G. Brians:** Oh, yes. That was an interesting one. That was actually in the later eighties. That was when the processing side started to take off. About the time

that (I want to say this was probably '84, '85) organics were starting to become seen as a little bit less out of the mainstream by a few more people, there were a number of companies, both big companies and small focused companies, that started looking at niche markets to use organics in. I got involved, and part of that was actually with the apricots that I was doing with Mother. [It was] mostly Mother's baby, but I was farming them and keeping the labor all organized and that kind of thing. We did that for Earth's Best, which is now part of Con-Agra.

In the '84, '85 time frame, there started to be more and more interest in processing. And not only was Earth's Best Baby Food expanding their sourcing, getting much of their product from here in California and having a contract process, but I actually ended up growing for Gerber, who was in San Jose at that time. They had not moved out of San Jose yet. There were three or four independent packers over in the Central Valley who were starting to aggressively contract for organic production. Then they had marketing agreements with Campbell and other giant food corporations to actually market into supermarket chains. The first time that was starting to take place was in the mid-eighties.

**Farmer:** And they wanted to call it organic?

**G. Brians:** They specifically wanted certified product, because they recognized that if they didn't go with certified product, they were leaving themselves open to all sorts of potential bad press.

## Organic Certification

**Farmer:** So the [certification] law passed in California when?

**G. Brians:** 1979.<sup>13</sup> Actually, one of the things that I found both interesting and challenging was being involved in the certification process. I was actually on the cert committee for well over ten years, and it was starting—

**J. Brians:** The chapter certification committee, you're saying?

**G. Brians:** Yes, and the state certification committee for part of that time as well. The enforcement actions that we had to take—in the early days it was really truly a chapter-by-chapter focus on—you know your neighbor, and if there's someone who isn't honest, isn't reliable, then just spread the word a little bit about it carefully so that it's not blackmailing or smearing. There were so few people actually involved in organics, that anybody who was doing it was in some way known to other growers within that area. There were a lot of places where the distances between were very, very large. So you might not know their day-to-day practices, but you'd get to know them, because there was only one certifier in California, which was CCOF.

What ended up happening as time went on, after the '79 law came in, somewhere in the early eighties (I couldn't tell you what year), you started having some of these other certifiers coming into existence. What typically happened during that time period was that operations would go to CCOF (these

were the ones that weren't certified by CCOF) and they would go ahead, they'd look at what was being done. They might show up for one of the chapter meetings. And one of two things would happen. Either they would they say, "Okay, yes. We're going to go that route where you get certified, because our markets are now starting to say this needs to happen." And they'd go through the process. Or what would happen, and this occurred in a number of cases that I was aware of both locally and statewide—they would go through the process; they would be inspected for the first time; and red flags would be raised in all sorts of directions. And rather than working through them, they would jump ship and go over to [one of the] other certifier[s], who never checked anything. And so what ended up happening is you basically had a dual system of the people who were claiming to be certified.

CCOF really did do due diligence. And every single complaint that went into the CDFA [California Department of Food and Agriculture] during the 1980s, after the law was put into place, every single complaint that came from a certification organization or an industry source, came from CCOF, every single one. There were a number of blatant, blatant violators who were caught by people in the industry. They knew that CCOF was willing to follow up on it, even when CDFA wasn't, because the first five or six years they did not have any inspectors who were assigned to any kind of organic duties. The attitude basically was, well, they're a stepchild. They're so small in the organic area. We'll just let CCOF deal with it. That was actually the reason why the 1991 provisions were pushed through. It was because even though there were legal criteria that were established, there was no mandate on the state to actually do any enforcement

whatsoever. That's why we wrote it, even though we knew that once that happened it would raise costs for the growers, and that it would make certain things harder to do. But this was a matter of consumer protection that had to take place as the industry was growing.

**Farmer:** And integrity.

**G. Brians:** Exactly. If one were to take a look also at the list of growers certified during the early years, you'd also see the shift in where land was available taking place. In the early, early days there were lots of small places that were situated around cities and towns that have now grown over those areas.

**Farmer:** They sold out to development.

**G. Brians:** Exactly. And the biggest reason why that was true was that these were areas where the big conventional farmers had given up on farming because they were too small for them to economically farm the way that they were farming, and those areas had typically lost their infrastructure for farming, in one way or another.

**Farmer:** What would be part of that infrastructure?

**G. Brians:** Tractor dealers, fertilizer suppliers. Box suppliers. I sort of compete with a grower up in Sonoma County on a couple of crops. He has to come to Salinas to get many of his supplies, because there is not a supplier of these

supplies in Marin or Sonoma County. There's no supplier of these kinds of supplies in the actual Bay Area, so for his commercial shipments he has to go through Salinas. That's one hundred and fifty miles. I mean, that's just the reality of what happens with urban areas. You eat the agricultural infrastructure. One of the people who I got to know very well during the 1980s was farming in Union City. She had taken on this parcel. An old retired farmer [had] owned it. All of the land around it had either been sold for development into industrial parks and subdivisions, or the one part which ended up going into the East Bay Regional Park system (Ardenwood Park is what I'm talking about) even though it had gone into that arena, you still didn't have any farming infrastructure remaining around there. For parts for her tractor she had to either go to Stockton or Salinas. Now, we know how far that is. That's a long ways.

I personally inspected farming operations of various sorts—everything from mushroom producers to flowers to orchards, vegetables, berries—in San Mateo County, Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito counties. I actually did one or two that were out of the chapter area too, over in the [Central] Valley. And I did one or two up on the North Coast as kind of an exchange when I was up there doing CCOF meetings. An interesting, interesting, cross-section of everybody—from the backyard gardeners who just got too big to call themselves backyard gardeners, to large corporate farms that wanted to take a look at organics.

**Farmer:** So was this before there was actually an office and a staff for CCOF?

**G. Brians:** Well, that's a tricky question. Because Barney Bricmont *was* the office and the staff from the time that Rodale started their version of CCOF. He was hired by them between part and full-time person. And we got a larger staff — I want to say it was the '83 timeframe, something like that. Prior to that point, the office was in Barney's house.

**Farmer:** That was the first interview I did: it was at his kitchen table. Because people said, "This is where it started."

**G. Brians:** Exactly. And it was interesting, because he was actually growing honest-to-goodness crops there, and selling them. Potted plants, starts, and he also was growing some kinds of vegetables. I cannot remember right now. I remember seeing them. Oh, and he grew flowers, too. The only person who came from that original Rodale-sponsored certification time period, was Russel Wolter in Carmel Valley. And his land is now farmed by Earthbound, unsurprisingly.<sup>14</sup> And, oh, interesting enough also (and this is a part of the continuity), Russel had leased a hundred-acre parcel that had basically been farmed out in artichokes and other conventional crops that was down by Highway One near the mouth of the Carmel River. He had that for a number of years. Then it went back into conventional agriculture once he had improved things well enough that it was now feasible to make a profit there again. And now today, that land is actually owned by—it's not Monterey County, but it's the park system there. And there is a CCOF grower who is now farming that again.

So it in a sense shows how true it has been that when you are farming in and around population centers, the only way that you can be a neighbor to housing and shopping centers and all of these sorts of things, is organically. Because you can't be going and releasing methyl bromide, and phosdrin, and all of these nasty chemicals around people. It doesn't work. So that's just *one* of the examples of where land has been preserved—that either it's been preserved *because* of organic farming, or it's been preserved because once it was preserved, organic farming was the only way to actually preserve it.

**Farmer:** And restore it. That's great. So do you ever stop working during the winter?

**G. Brians:** Actually, no. It's a twelve-month harvest, and planting continually, more or less.

**Farmer:** That's how you make it in this business, is that it?

**G. Brians:** Well, that's how *we* are doing it. Now, not everybody takes that approach. I know a number of people, even ones who do semi-year round farmers' markets, that actually go ahead and shut down most of their production in the wintertime. It just depends on what the crop mix is, and what you're trying to do with your production philosophy. In my case, a big part of it is that when you don't have much in the way of financing, you need to have cash flow. If you don't have cash flow coming in, it can't go out. [laughs] So that's another factor.



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## The Growth of the Organic Market

I remember looking at the lists of crops that people were growing back in 1978, 1979, and looking at the numbers of things that there was nobody producing organically. But this also holds true to a large degree on the conventional side. Or that it was only a few people who supplied maybe a specialty produce market. They would have half a row of rutabagas, or a few plants of heirloom tomatoes of sorts that nobody else has. And of course also the heirloom seed-saving activities. Without organics, that probably would not have kept going.

I look at my production today of a number of the things that I wanted to try to make money with back in the 1970s, but not only was there no organic market for it, there was no *conventional* market for it. And the difference between, let's say, 1979, and getting into 2000-plus, as far as the number of different crops which are now back into production, which basically were not produced for thirty, forty, fifty years in any commercial volumes—there's no question in my mind but that the connections between farmers and restaurants, and the creative people—everybody from Alice Waters, and Michael Mina, and Thomas Keller, and the TV chefs, and you name it—how many of those people have gone back and said, “Gosh, you know in our French cookbooks that we've come across dishes which were popular in rural France—gee, they used lots of different kinds of turnips.” Or in Eastern European cooking that sorrel was a huge, huge item. Nettles still is nowhere near a mainstream crop, but I market nettles and there is a small demand for it. There was *no* demand for any of these things thirty to thirty-five years ago, because nobody had a clue that there should be a demand

for it. I remember planting turnips in the 1970s, and then trying to flog them, as it were, to all of the produce brokers who I was either dealing with or I knew of in South San Francisco and Salinas. I made some connections in LA. Nobody would buy them. I planted a quarter-acre of turnips to try to make something happen there, because I had grown them as a market garden item here on this place. I also grew turnips in Los Altos in the garden there, because I liked them. And okay, yes. Starting in the mid-1980s you could buy purple-topped turnips in some supermarkets during a certain part of the year, but the volume was absolutely miniscule. The number of pounds of turnips at Safeway moved (and of course Safeway was huge at that point), versus the number one move to Whole Foods today—I think I'm moving more than Safeway bought in a whole year, and I'm just one small grower. So that's one of the things which I believe is inextricably tied to the phenomenon of organics that would not have played out the way that it did without CCOF's existence, and the connections that got made because CCOF was the kind of a grower-sponsored group that it was.

**Farmer:** That speaks to the importance of biodiversity.

**G. Brians:** Well, it is one component of biodiversity. It's one component of cultural diversity, and it's one component of trying to start [food popularity] cycles instead of having cycles drive you. One of the things that is absolutely true (and this is sort of preaching here), that is absolutely true about agriculture, is that agriculture is viewed by many people as unchanging: People have always grown grain. People have always grown citrus. People have always grown plums. People have always grown vegetables. But what that ignores is that even

in the biggest parts of the industry—take what’s now the corporate agriculture of the Salinas Valley—take a look at what crops were grown in what volumes during what time periods. If Robert Mann had not loved the broccoli that his Italian neighbors were eating for themselves, and been absolutely convinced of the health benefits and the taste benefits, and had he not built a company around promoting broccoli starting around the 1950s, maybe broccoli would never have been a staple on American plates. Because broccoli was not commonly eaten in America until the 1970s. You always had a little bit of production in New Jersey with the Italians. You always had a little bit of production with the Italians here in California. But it wasn’t until he became absolutely convinced that that was a crop that everybody should eat —

**Farmer:** It does have some kind of medicinal value. That’s interesting.

**G. Brians:** Oh, absolutely. In any given time period, you’re going to have ebbing and flowing of individual crops. You’re going to have ebbing and flowing of flavor styles within those crops. You’re going to have ebbing and flowing of the mixture of the crops that people actually eat. Sometimes it’s driven by technology. Canning developed and [took] off in the nineteenth century in the Santa Clara Valley. That was really where canning of fruit took off, where it started. That is what drove the Santa Clara Valley’s agricultural production in the nineteenth century. There were all these little tiny canneries that sprang up as the technology became diversifiable. You don’t have constancy, at least in our society, where it’s only one particular pattern. It’s only one particular amount of certain crops that are out there. The point that I’m making is that you now have

faster change of what people are willing to eat, because you get into food fads now, whereas forty years ago it was more of a: "What does our family eat? What did my parents give me to eat? Well, I'm going to eat something similar to that." Sixty years ago, a hundred years ago, a hundred and fifty years ago, it was more of a tradition. Now, it is communication, it is styles, it's fads, etc. That's a challenge that agriculture has to deal with. Even though it's always had to deal with it, now it's more obvious.

The roots of organics go back to England in the 1920s. And before that they go back to the practices that the Victorian kitchen gardeners were using. They were constantly looking for ways to stretch what they could do in their climate. So they developed lots of techniques of using organic materials of various sorts to both modify the soil and modify the environment that they were growing things in, to try to get things growing that would not otherwise grow. They developed a tradition that then was lost during the rise of chemical agriculture in the 1920s through 1950s. And that's where the inspiration came from for the Rodales.

**Farmer:** Did you have any connection ever with Alan Chadwick at UCSC?

**G. Brians:** Certainly I talked with him at several points. He came to a few CCOF meetings in the late 1970s or early 1980s, but it was only a couple of times.<sup>15</sup> We had some meetings, actually up there. But he did not really have any particular connection with CCOF, in my view. He was more focused on training people, and to a degree, sort of a Third World agriculture focus. He did not really have any interest, at that time anyway, in evangelizing to California agriculture. He

was focused on people going through that project. From what I can tell, certainly from the chapter level, there was no real connection there. I do remember Richard Merrill from Cabrillo College coming to a few meetings.<sup>16</sup>

[The interview with Grant Brians ended rather abruptly because Grant needed to get back to work in the fields—Editor.]

<sup>1</sup> See the oral history with Russel and Karen Wolter in this series.

<sup>2</sup> See the oral history with Barney Bricmont in this series.

<sup>3</sup> See the oral history with Dale Coke in this series.

<sup>4</sup> The Loma Prieta Earthquake of 6.9 magnitude was centered in Aptos, California (between Santa Cruz and Watsonville). See Mark Lipson's oral history in this series for more on what happened to the CCOF office during the quake.

<sup>5</sup> As of spring 2010, Mark Lipson has many of these records, which were saved from the CCOF offices during the Loma Prieta Earthquake by Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson—Editor.

<sup>6</sup> See the oral history with Larry Jacobs in this series.

<sup>7</sup> See the oral history with Betty Van Dyke in this series.

<sup>8</sup> Farmer is referring to the fall 2006 *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks in processed, bagged salad, which led the leafy greens industry to form a Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement. One of the outcomes of this agreement has been the widespread destruction of wildlife habitat and wildlife itself in the Salinas Valley. See <http://www.caff.org/foodsafety/issue.shtml#agreement>. See also the oral history with Sam Earnshaw and Jo Ann Baumgartner in this series.

<sup>9</sup> According to Keith Proctor, writing in "CCOF History 1973-1979," Sy Weisman was an active member of Farmers Organic Group (FOG) a marketing co-op in the Santa Rosa, California area. In 1979, Barney Bricmont, then the president of CCOF, approached Sy Weisman and invited FOG to join CCOF. "Together Bricmont and Weisman drafted bylaws for the North Coast Chapter and revised those of CCOF to reflect a decentralized federation model, giving chapters a large measure of autonomy for marketing and certification while still remaining connected to the parent organization . . . According to Stuart Fishman, an organic wholesaler with Veritable Vegetable in San Francisco, 'CCOF would have died without Barney Bricmont and Sy Weisman.'" Sy Weisman died May 13, 1996. See *CCOF Magazine*, Volume XX Number 1, Spring 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See the oral history with Congressman Sam Farr in this series.

<sup>11</sup> See the oral history with Amigo Bob Cantisano in this series.

<sup>12</sup> According to the USDA, specialty crops are defined as "fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture." <http://www.ams.usda.gov/>

<sup>13</sup> See the oral histories with Mark Lipson, Bob Scowcroft, and Congressman Sam Farr for more about the battle to pass the first organic certification law in California.

<sup>14</sup> See the oral history with Drew Goodman of Earthbound Farms.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Chadwick died on May 25, 1980.

<sup>16</sup> See the oral history with Richard Merrill in this series.