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Melody Meyer



Melody and Dylan. Photo by Wendy Ballen

Organic Foods Distributor

Conducted by Ellen Farmer on June 8 and September 22, 2007, Melody Meyer's oral history documents the extraordinary transformation of the organic foods sector between the 1970s and the early 21st century. Meyer was born in Iowa in 1960; she was introduced to organic and natural foods at age sixteen, when she began working at a natural foods co-op in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She moved to Santa Cruz in the late 1970s and joined Community Foods, a collectively owned, collectively run natural foods store, where she stayed for six years. There she met many local organic growers who came to sell their produce in the store and through its affiliate, Santa Cruz Trucking.

After leaving Community Foods, Meyer became Watsonville Coast Produce's first woman buyer, developing an organic distribution program.

Later she was hired by Ocean Organics, an organic foods distribution company located in Moss Landing, California. She moved on to work for six years for Scott Hawkins of Hawkins Associates, where she pioneered transporting organic produce from California to distant markets such as Bread and Circus, Wellspring Grocery, Mrs. Gooch's, and other small natural food store chains in the Midwest and on the East Coast, many of which were eventually bought by Whole Foods. In 1995, Meyer left Hawkins to start her own distribution company, Source Organic. Her Jack Russell terrier, Dylan, became president of the company and had his own voice mail and e-mail account. Dylan settled under the table during the oral history, and his contented snores can be heard on the audio recording of this interview.

In 2000, Source Organic became a subsidiary of Albert's Organics, which in turn was bought by United Natural Foods International (UNFI)—a reflection of increasing consolidation in the organic foods industry. In 2006, New Hope Media awarded Melody Meyer the Spirit of Organic award, honoring organic leaders nominated by their peers in the industry.

Additional Resources:

Albert's Organics: <http://www.albertsorganics.com/>

United Natural Foods International (UNFI): <http://www.unfi.com/AboutUs.aspx>

See the oral history with Amigo Bob Cantisano in this series for the history of Mountain People's Warehouse, part of the genesis of UNFI.

Farmer: It's Friday, June 8th, 2007, and I'm here with Melody Meyer to talk about organic food distribution.

Meyer: In the Central Coast.

Early Influences

Farmer: Yes. So let's start with: where were you born and where did you grow up?

Meyer: I was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I came from a farming family. Didn't live on a farm, but my grandparents and my father were involved with farming. I developed an interest in natural foods at an early age, in my teens. I worked at a co-op there when I was sixteen. So I've been involved in natural foods for way over half my life, thirty years, thirty-one years. And in those days, there wasn't much organic produce, especially that reached Iowa. Of course, the definition of organic wasn't really even defined specifically, but we would get basic organic vegetables, like carrots and some oranges, and things like that, onions.

Farmer: They weren't coming from the local area?

Meyer: I don't remember a big consciousness about local. Maybe it was just that I was young and didn't know. We had a lot of organic grains, of course. I did everything at that co-op. I wrapped cheeses. I did the bulk herbs. I did checkout. Stocked produce, of course, which I loved. It was run like a collective or a co-op. And got my first taste in working in a collective there, too.

Farmer: What year were you sixteen?

Meyer: That was 1976. I had a real affinity for the people, and the idea that the food was clean, and helping our environment.

Farmer: Was it a fairly new co-op at that time, or had it been going for a while?

Meyer: It seems like it was new, and it was smaller. There was a university town next door, Iowa City, and they have a big co-op that lasts to this day: New Pioneer Co-op, a very successful co-op. Some of the people that were associated with the co-op in Cedar Rapids are still at that co-op in Iowa City, so it's kind of exciting to see those— I go back to Iowa City to visit my family, and some of those people are still stocking produce. But it's a different situation now. It's a much bigger store and more professional, and the marketing and merchandising is better, too.

Farmer: But it's still owned by the people that shop there?

Meyer: You can still be a member, and you still pay dues, and you get a discount, yes. And you can work there as well.

Community Foods and Santa Cruz Trucking

So I came out here in a hippie van and went to work at a place called Community Foods here in Santa Cruz. That was a collective, collectively owned. Everybody that worked there was an owner, and we had an equal vote. There was nobody that had any more power than the other person. There were a lot of radically different ideas about what our agenda was. Was it to have healthy food, or were we doing political things, or were we changing the environment? Were we giving work to minorities and women? All different agendas.

So I went to work there and gravitated towards the produce, which is where I met a lot of the growers in this area. At the time, we had what we called "the trucking company." It was Santa Cruz Trucking, and they were the distribution

portion of our company.¹ So we had the retail, which was Community Foods, and we had Santa Cruz Trucking, which would go and pick up from different farms in California and bring the product back here. I think they also probably delivered to the Food Bin, Staff of Life, and different, smaller stores in this area. They were a distribution company. I worked the retail portion, but we were pretty much side-by-side. We'd place orders together with growers all up and down the coast for leaf lettuce, citrus, the whole gamut of items.

We also had a very vigorous local group of growers. There was Jeff Larkey; Bruce [Dau]; Jeff Young, who worked with Bruce Dau, who went on to do Bliss Brands; Karen and Russel Wolter²; even Drew and Myra [Goodman] from Earthbound Farms.³ They were driving in to Community Foods with their little van and had maybe ten bags of their salads that they had grown and put in their little bags. That was the beginning of what is now this multimillion-dollar business. Coke Farms, of course, would come in and deliver their little baby vegetables and root items, also spring mix.⁴ I mentioned Jeff Larkey, Jeff and [his then business partner] "Steiny."⁵

There was a very vigorous community of young people that wanted to be farmers, and I think in tandem with the CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] folks that had been here, working on defining the law on what is organic over the years and that whole community, along with the [UCSC] Farm and Garden Project, there were a lot of resources for people to draw on. I gravitated towards the produce, and found myself interacting with all of these growers, these young, up-and-coming experimental growers like Jim Cochran.⁶

They would come and deliver to us locally. We were just kids, and we didn't have a forklift. We didn't even have a dock.

Farmer: But you were strong.

Meyer: We were strong. When somebody pulled up—the trucks would pull up, and they'd have carrots stacked on the back, and we would have a carrot chain. We'd go, "Carrot chain!" Everybody would come in from the store to the back. We'd line up and throw the carrots off the truck and down into the cooler, and then somebody would be standing there stacking them up, back up on a pallet of carrots. We did that with cherries from the Van Dykes [Van Dyke Ranch]. And [the] Van Dykes still deliver us cherries here, because they're good friends.⁷

Farmer: Oh, nice.

Meyer: So, yes, there was a huge, diverse group of local growers that we got to know and supported and would come deliver to the store.

Santa Cruz Trucking also made pick-ups all over California. There was the Central Coast, like the Santa Barbara area, and they would pick up from The Growing Concern.

Farmer: So they would drive all the way down there and pick up?

Meyer: Yes. It's still called The Growing Concern [today] and they have some land in Temecula, too. But that was our primary source of leaf lettuce, and that would be very seasonal. In the winter there would be no organic leaf lettuce, and in the winter there'd be no organic zucchini, things like that. There were big, big

gaps. You just didn't expect those kinds of things in the winter—certainly no plums or peaches or organic cherries. You just didn't see things like that in the winter.

Farmer: And at Community Foods, was it an issue whether or not you would have conventional food? How did you deal with that?

Meyer: We did carry some conventional food. That was accepted. As competition started to move in, we tried to grow and change with the times, and we'd have paper bags. I mean, we didn't even at one point provide paper bags; you had to bring your own. Things like that. We wouldn't sell coffee; we wouldn't sell any kind of sugar—you know, things like that. Certainly we wouldn't sell wine or beer. So, as we matured a little bit later on, we started to incorporate paper bags and conventional produce and those kinds of things. And at these meetings, because it was a collective, we would spend hours arguing about, should we provide paper bags and recycling and reusing bags and those kinds of things. It was a good education for me to learn about consensus, and how to run a meeting, and how to really get things happening with a group of people.

Farmer: Were you responsible for running meetings sometimes?

Meyer: I was. And in fact, the last year I acted as the acting president. I didn't have any more say than anybody else, but I did a lot of organizing for those meetings and trying to get people to reach consensus, or help the process go along.

Farmer: What do you remember as some of the really big issues?

Meyer: I guess which items we should carry were some of the big issues, because we had a lot of radical people that wanted to be very, very, very pure, and you have market conditions that are shaping what consumers want. Even to this day, I think that translates to how we define what is organic, what items are included on the list of organics and all those kinds of things. We're still dealing with those pressures of the marketplace in trying to hold true to our ideals, and yet we're all operating in this environment of commerce, in a way, to make it happen. One of the basic kind of premises that I came to, and I think a lot of others people did, was that we're not going to get anything done if we're not making money and we're not around. We need to figure out how to be healthy financially, and then we can do this other, social work. Let's be competitive, let's get the customers, and *then* we can do our social work.

Farmer: So was that a membership [co-op], Community Foods?

Meyer: It was worker-owned. You had to be a collective member to work there, and you had one share. When you were hired, you had one equal share of the business. So if there were twenty members, you were one-twentieth an owner. And then when you left, you were no longer an owner; you didn't get anything from it. There was no stock, really. You didn't have to put money in.

Now, there're people around that helped start Community Foods when it was over on Commercial Way. Carol Marcuse helped start that. I mean, that's going

way back. Commercial Way was part of General Feed and Seed almost. They were together. It was really just bulk bins and—

Farmer: General Feed still kind of looks like that, in a way.

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: I wonder what year that was.

Meyer: I don't know. I was at Community Foods in '82, I think, or '81.

Farmer: It's interesting that you were in a co-op in Iowa, and those were popular for a time all over the place.

Meyer: All over the place.

Farmer: And this was more a worker-owned collective, not a cooperative.

Meyer: That's right. There's a difference, absolutely. But I was lucky enough to be exposed to the farmers. Some of those growers, like Drew and Myra, went on to be big agribusiness people. And also, the people that worked at Community Foods in the trucking company and at the store went on to do things in the bigger agricultural sense of the word.

Farmer: So it was definitely a nesting ground.

Meyer: It was a nesting ground. Bonnie Campbell worked for the trucking company and in the store. She now owns her own grower marketing company in Montana, represents growers all over the country. She's a very vital person in the

organic industry. Deborah Beebe [Kastor] is still here in town—she worked for the trucking company. She was a bookkeeper for a while. She has worked for [the] Del Cabo [Cooperative],⁸ and Todd Koons at TKO [Todd Koons Organics], who was instrumental in the salad business. She worked for Earthbound for a while, [was] very instrumental in developing a lot of different companies. And she now sells out of her house for a Baja grower that originally came from Del Cabo—it's called Vita Fresh. She sells that deal and makes a living just selling for that grower. Gail Ross was part of that. She's worked for Earthbound, for Jeff Larkey. Who else? Clarice Lusk worked for the trucking company and Community Foods. She went on to pair up with Albert Lusk, who has founded Albert's Organics.

Farmer: Where you are now.

Meyer: Albert's used to sell to this area. They were in L.A., and that's where she met Albert. And she went on, then, to really help Albert grow that business and work instrumentally with Albert's to open up an East Coast division. She was very active in the organic community for a long time.

Farmer: Well, let me ask this: With Veritable Vegetable well known—and they were around at the beginning—how did they interrelate with Community Foods and Santa Cruz Trucking and you?

Meyer: Well, my first job in Santa Cruz was with produce. Actually, I worked at the flower stand outside of Community Foods. The VV driver [would pull] up, and I'm outside selling flowers. "Do you want to help us unload the truck? Do

you want to be part of the carrot chain?" So I was a lumper for VV. That was my first job in produce in Santa Cruz. I was young, twenty-some years old, and unloaded trucks for them. As far as the relationship, I think that Santa Cruz Trucking and Veritable Vegetable may have been friendly competitors, but I know that they worked together. VV had a bigger range of where they picked up and the growers that they bought from. Santa Cruz Trucking bought from them, from those growers outside of our geographical region, so they were a primary source of produce items from the Greater California growing community, certainly the Sacramento Valley. And if they weren't selling it to us, they were at least providing the transportation.

Farmer: If you had an order you could get them to bring it?

Meyer: Yes. And I'm forgetting to mention all of the growers that were in the Sacramento Valley. Whew, my memory banks!

Farmer: YoCal, I think was their name.⁹ From Yolo County?

Meyer: Yes. And Full Belly Farms, and there're different farms there now that were part of that. A lot of those growers were sold from YoCal, and then VV. So we'd buy from that area, because that was a very rich and diverse area, probably from UC Davis being so close. Veritable Vegetable would bring the product down. I think it was a pretty symbiotic and good relationship. My experience with the distribution was mostly just ordering from Santa Cruz Trucking, because I was the produce buyer, ordering from different growers in Santa

Barbara, maybe in San Diego County, and having Santa Cruz Trucking or VV pick that up for me.

Farmer: So you must have had your finger on the pulse of the demand from consumers around here and what would sell.

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: And so what was your experience of the awareness of organic and natural food—I'm thinking more natural at that time, since organic wasn't so defined—among the people you dealt with in retail, and the consumers?

Meyer: I think that because we live in an area where there was so much organic agriculture happening, that certainly the awareness is bigger than in other parts of the country. [I saw] it develop and change and become more sophisticated over the years, people wanting different products, more mainstream products, wanting things to look as pretty and as nice as conventional, or having higher standards around that.

Farmer: Would they complain? Is that how you knew that?

Meyer: No, not the diehard people. But if you could bring in a consumer that wasn't your diehard, always organic, and they'd come in and say, "Wow, this looks as good as conventional," you'd kind of hook them, and you'd know that's the standard that you needed to provide for them.

Farmer: Did you notice at the time, yourself, that organic food tasted better, that the quality was better? Could you tell?

Meyer: Yes, I've always felt that, absolutely, absolutely. And I've always—and it's maybe just my upbringing, is that that's what I want to put in my body, and that's what I want to support in the agricultural realm. So I eat, and always have eaten, mostly organic food, if I can. I think it was early teenage training from people I hung out with at the co-op, I really do, and that cultural ideal of being a little bit non-mainstream, and also wanting to be stewards of the land and wanting to do something alternative rather than just what's been always done.

Farmer: So were your grandparents conventional farmers, then, at that time?

Meyer: I suppose you could call them that. But they were in an era (they farmed pre-World War II) because they were older and my parents were older when they had me, so they probably didn't have access to a lot of pesticides and petroleum-based products. They had to rely on what was at hand and how they'd been farming for hundreds of years.

Farmer: What kind of farm did they have?

Meyer: As I remember, they did grow corn and soybeans, but it was much more diverse. On the farm they had cows and pigs and chickens and cherries and apples and a lot of different vegetables. Big, big victory gardens, and they would can and preserve things. I go back there now and it looks like a wasteland of corn and soybeans.

Farmer: Monocropping.

Meyer: There are just miles and miles of farms and maybe an old fallen-down house, but there are no communities there, and no one really lives there because one farmer can manage thousands of acres with his machinery.

Farmer: (sighs)

Meyer: It is kind of a food wasteland. It's like "water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink."

So back to this area. A lot of people that worked at Community Foods went on to do bigger things in the organic industry. Jim Cochran is an example. I have Driscoll people quoting him, or talking about him and how he was one of the breakthrough people with learning how to grow organic strawberries and things like that. He may not be this big agribusiness guy, but he's definitely made his place in the Bay Area, and he has done a lot for organic strawberry production.

Farmer: Because he was willing to experiment with it.

Meyer: Right. You have a lot of growers that were instrumental in developing those stepping stones, along with CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] and the [UCSC] Farm and Garden Project.

Farmer: So can you talk about how you went from the worker-owned cooperative into more business?

Watsonville Coast Produce

Meyer: Yes. I was at Community Foods for six years. Got married, went to work for Watsonville Coast Produce. We had the Alar scare.¹⁰ All these things that have happened in the food chain have kind of helped me in my career, pushed me forward. Of course, then all of a sudden everybody wanted an organic apple. So Watsonville Coast Produce, which is a fine, fine local distribution company, decided they wanted an organic program, and they hired me to be an organic buyer. I was the first woman buyer in their office, and they were all flummoxed and flabbergasted that this young woman was in their office. They had, I don't know, eight or nine guys that were steadfast, staunch in their positions, and they'd always been there. And there was this woman upstairs. It was literally—you know, the "girls" were downstairs, and they took orders and they did this and that, and the "buyers" were upstairs. So it was a big deal. I helped them set up their program. Lovely people, lovely people, lovely company to work for. And I remember Sue Heger, Joe Heger Farms down in El Centro—was just starting up. Cal Organic [Farms], Danny Duncan, was just starting up. So buying from those guys was like, wow, this thing is kinda coming alive! Things were getting bigger. A hundred acres, two hundred acres—wow!

I was their organic buyer for everything. They had a full program. I was only there for nine months. My friend Bonnie Campbell from Community Foods (and this was when the migration of people from Community Foods and Santa Cruz Trucking started) went to work for a company called S&S Produce, owned by John and Tony [Scheer]. Tony Scheer lived in this area and was involved with some agricultural endeavors. When I met him, he was the brainchild of setting

up this brokerage company where we brokered produce, and also a grower representative company. S&S Produce was the brokerage portion, and they had an L.A. division. And then they formed the grower portion, which was Ocean Organics. They did that with Bud [Capurro]. I think he'd put some money into it. So they formed these two companies side by side.

Farmer: And about when was this? Late eighties?

Meyer: Yes, '87. There was a migration of people that came from Community Foods and Santa Cruz Trucking to work there. They also brought a guy named Greg McAllister from Whole Foods in Austin, Texas, when Whole Foods was just a couple of stores. They brought him in to work. They brought a man named Scott Hawkins up from their L.A. office, and he was kind of the brainchild of the brokerage company. They brought him to work up here.

So they formed this company, and they were loading full truckloads of organic produce. And that excited me like crazy. At Watsonville Coast, I was buying twenty of this and ten of that, and then I had to get trucking for that stuff, and putting it all together, and that was cool, but, like, wow, if I could fill a full truckload of organic produce, *that's* what I wanted to do!

Farmer: (laughs)

Ocean Organics

Meyer: So my friend Bonnie Campbell at the time, who I mentioned, who is in Montana now—she said, “You should come work here.” So I left Watsonville

Coast Produce for less money, less benefits to go work there because it's what I wanted to do. All kinds of people worked there that either work at Whole Foods now—Mary Young—just a whole slew of people, my friend Carol Marcuse that I mentioned, who was in the old Community Foods.

Farmer: And where was this located?

Meyer: This was in a cabbage shed—

Farmer: (laughs)

Meyer: —in Moss Landing. You can see it when you're going down Highway 1. It's really close to [Zmudowski] Lane. It's right behind Capurro's. There's a gas station and an army supply place, and you turn and it's right back in there. We were in a cabbage shed, literally, and it's still there. And so Ocean Organics represented a lot of growers around here. And then S&S Produce put together full truckloads of product, and we would buy from Ocean Organics. And we'd also buy from the citrus people in San Diego, and the apple people in Washington, and the carrot people in Colorado. I think we were one of the first people, under the guidance of Scott Hawkins, with his guidance and his knowledge, to put together full truckloads of organic product, making stops all over the country, or all over California, FOB pickups, and picking up all organics, filling the truck and getting it back to Bread and Circus in Boston, which is now a Whole Foods store, Wellspring Grocery in North Carolina, and many others across the country.

Farmer: So the trucks were driving across the country.

Meyer: Yes, we would make multiple pickups. We developed these relationships with the growers. We found out what they had, we got orders from these retailers, and we'd send the trucks. We'd hire the trucks, send them to the different locations to pick up and fill the trucks completely with organic produce, and send them back to the locations. We'd send them back to Whole Foods in Austin. Roots and Fruits, another old distribution company in Minnesota, who's now an Albert's company. Those retailers—Bread and Circus in Boston, they had pretty high standards. David Doctorow, I don't know what his title is now, but he's in charge of a big portion of the Whole Foods produce deal. He was the produce director at Bread and Circus, and he had pretty high standards of what was acceptable. They got voted best produce in Boston for a couple of years while we were doing their produce.

Farmer: Of all stores, not just organic?

Meyer: Of all stores. We were mimicking what conventional people do in buying FOB, meaning buying from the farmers, picking up at the farm location, going to different places, filling that truck, and then sending it back to the retailer or distribution company.

Farmer: Who's responsible for the refrigeration, keeping it cold?

Meyer: The transportation company.

Farmer: So that isn't the company you worked for? It's who you hire?

Meyer: Yes, because they have a refrigerated unit on the back of their truck, and the bills of lading state what you should hold the temperature of the produce at. The driver signs for it in good condition, and it's like a legal document. He's signing that bill of lading saying, "I'm going to keep this at thirty-five degrees and keep it in good condition." If he gets there and it's at fifty degrees, he's broken the contract and essentially he owns that fifty-degree product. It's the source of much tribulation in this world.

Farmer: I'm sure.

Meyer: But you put a recording device on the truck to make sure that it keeps the right temperature.

Farmer: So if he's having any problem with refrigeration, he knows pretty fast and he can deal with it.

Meyer: And they have insurance for those kinds of things, too, because it does happen. But the technology has gotten a lot better. You can actually, now, even track what the temperature of your load is at any time, on the Internet, with a lot of the companies. But, yes, in the old days it was crazy. In "the old days."

Farmer: Yes, twenty years ago. (laughs)

Meyer: So that company really did a lot of things, S&S Produce. It revolutionized the idea of getting organic produce cross-country, and filling trucks. Nobody else was doing that at the time, getting produce to New York City, to Boston, to Miami, to Minnesota, to all these different places.

Farmer: It sounds like it allowed the stores like Whole Foods to have branches.

Meyer: Absolutely.

Farmer: Yes.

Meyer: Well, Whole Foods bought all of those stores that we serviced, that we helped grow. And then likewise, Albert's, who I work for now, bought all the distribution companies that we were servicing. This is interesting. We were servicing Northeast Co-op, and they were off the Chelsea Market in Boston. They were the local distribution company. They're called a co-op, but I'm not sure really about their internal structure. But we serviced them and provided them with their produce. Same with Roots and Fruits; they were a distribution company. We serviced them and helped them provide from A to Z and year 'round as much as we could, those items. All of a sudden, zucchini was available in the winter.

So those distribution companies were bought up by Albert's Organics-United Natural Foods. And then Whole Foods bought the retailers.

Farmer: So that's pretty much who there is now, is those two.

Meyer: Pretty much.

So back to S&S. Ocean Organics actually hired—well, he was just a young buck then—Todd Linsky, and he met his wife, Jeannine, in this office. He was brought out, I think, to handle Danny Duncan's deal. And for a while, we were selling the Cal Organic label, or Ocean Organics was, which is now part of Grimmway

[Farms]. And they're really the premier, elite vegetable label on a bigger scale—you know, non-local. They're a recognized brand, and their quality is always very, very good, and they own a big portion of the market right now.

Farmer: And is that across-the-board vegetables, or is it fruits and vegetables?

Meyer: Just vegetables. They're vegetable growers. Their main thing was carrots, but they expanded into leaf lettuce and kales and chards.

Farmer: Were they the first ones to do those little [baby] carrots?

Meyer: Absolutely.

Farmer: That was a revolution.

Meyer: Absolutely. So Ocean Organics was selling the Cal Organic label for about a year before Danny took two of the salespeople, Todd Linsky and Greg McAllister, who I mentioned came from Whole Foods in Austin. He took them to Lamont or Bakersfield and made them his employees, and they sold the deal after that.

Farmer: And then it became Grimmway.

Meyer: Then he sold his whole thing to Grimmway. He still owns the land, though. It's kind of good.

Farmer: Yes. Where's the land?

Meyer: The land is right around Bakersfield. It's called Weed Patch.

Farmer: Oh. [Laughter.] So the cabbage shed that you talked about working in—is that still there?

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: Is his company still there?

Meyer: No. I forget the name of the family that owns the actual shed. Nice Italian name. They sell artichokes. They have a little produce deal happening there, still.

Farmer: Okay. So what was the reaction of people like the local people that had an artichoke stand?

Meyer: I think they were happy that we were paying the rent. They were renting out their cabbage shed, which had been empty for a while.

Farmer: But was there [a division between] the locals and the hippies? Or were they welcoming?

Meyer: I don't remember that. I don't remember seeing that [division]. It may have been going on, and I was just oblivious to it.

Farmer: Or were you not hippies anymore at that point?

Meyer: That's a good question. (laughs)

Farmer: This is the late eighties. Things had changed.

Meyer: We were definitely turning into businesspeople. Community Foods was a little springing-off point, but S&S and Ocean Organics was another place where

a lot of growers got developed and a lot of sales and marketing people got developed, and then people like myself, with logistics and selling organic produce all over the country. If that phenomenon hadn't happened, we would be behind in our development. Maybe somebody would have done it, but it did happen there, and I think your observation is right that it allowed people like Whole Foods to blossom, and Albert's Organics, and then, UNFI.

Farmer: Yes. So you were excited to fill one big truck.

Meyer: Yes, that was a big deal, a truckload. And then it was a big deal to sell a straight load of something. That was a big deal, a straight load of carrots or a straight load of potatoes. That was so incredible to do that! Now we do seventy, eighty loads a week out of here. And I think Whole Foods does a phenomenal amount. Total, we send from all regions seventy, eighty loads a week to our various distribution centers.

Farmer: And how many distribution centers do you have?

Meyer: Six. In different parts of the U.S. So at that time, we were developing local growers, but we were also really expanding the whole organic network of growers to California, and then, certainly, Washington, Oregon, Colorado and a little bit out of Florida (Florida, I think, for me came later, developing that area), and getting the local product here to all the different places all over the U.S.

Farmer: So how exactly would you define "developing a grower"?

Meyer: I would define that as giving them technical assistance in how to pack; how to post-harvest cool so that product can be shipped and have a good shelf life; giving them resources for technical assistance for growing. I wouldn't be able to give them that myself, but I would know which direction to point them. Giving them guidance in what to grow, and data— You know, you grow red cabbage and it comes off in April and May, and here's the price data from that historical period—so does that make sense for you, to grow red cabbage? Those kinds of things. And then planning with them to grow five hundred red cabbages a week for the needs of the market. Giving them a plan; giving them technical assistance; post-harvest handling—Ocean Organics did that. It's a common theme. It's a place for smaller growers to come and get their product cooled and sold. That happens in the conventional world as well, but I know that it was not happening specifically so much for organic growers at that time. It was hard if you were a small organic grower to find a place like that. Who's going to cool it? Who's going to hold it and then ship it and sell it?

Farmer: Yes, because it wasn't really established yet. So this was the beginning of that.

Meyer: Yes. This was the beginning.

Farmer: So if they needed technical assistance for their actual growing, like what to do with their soil and that sort of thing, where would you send them at that time?

Meyer: There were different people out there working that we knew.

Farmer: Oh, like ag advisers?

Meyer: Yes, or CCOF. That was their work. They could give them technical assistance.

Farmer: Yes, because you couldn't get it from the government extension.

Meyer: No. You still can't. That's one of the things we're trying to fight for in the farm bill, is money for technical assistance. And data. The same things that we were providing those growers then, we still need today. We're fighting for money in the farm bill for those very things. We have no price data out there for organics. So if a grower loses his crop, not only does he pay more for insurance because he's organic, but he gets paid back, reimbursed, based on a conventional price, not an organic price, because there's no data out there. There's no technical assistance for growers now. It's people like Albert's, or Whole Foods, or the marketers that still have to help with technical assistance.

The [organic] industry [is] growing and blossoming at double-digit figures compared to the rest of the ag industry or the food industry that's really stagnant. The wealth could provide to our rural community and invigorate rural communities. Of course, now with the phenomena that we have with biofuels and everything, that's kind of usurping any— They think that's the great holy grail for rural invigoration, so we'll see how that all pans out.

Farmer: Yes, with GMO [genetically modified organism] corn, right?

Meyer: Yes, yes. I just saw a report on my e-mail that some study said that in some instances, GMO products can be better for the environment. I mean, who paid for that study, Monsanto? (chuckles) But it was on my sustainable news thing.

So, yes, we had quite the little thing going for a while there. I'm not sure what led to the demise of Ocean Organics. That was the grower-marketing end of things. Certainly when Danny Duncan pulled out and became Cal Organic sales and pulled his salespeople, that led to some erosion of growers. And maybe some other growers decided, "Oh, I can sell my own deal now. I'm sophisticated enough. I know what to do." Probably around that time, Drew and Myra [Goodman, of Earthbound Farm] were doing their thing, and they were getting growers. I think Jeff Larkey and people like that were starting to grow for them. Karen and Russel [Wolter], probably, as well.

Farmer: Oh, yes. They're right next door.

Meyer: So there were other, bigger things happening out there. Nothing stays the same. So there was an erosion of growers from that grower-marketing group called Ocean Organics. I think at one point, then, Bud Capurro decided, "Well, I'll just take it in-house," and he did some growing on his own under the auspices of Capurro & Son. They were ahead of their time. This [is] now '90, '92, and they over-produced organics in a time when the market couldn't sustain it. They had a really rough couple of years, where they'd grow all this broccoli and it would be five dollars, and the box cost one dollar. Just on and on and on like

that, not sustainable. They jumped into it really (Bud did) and planted and committed ground to it before there was a real market for it.

Higher Costs of Organic Food

Farmer: Can you explain what makes organic farming more expensive, what makes it harder, from the farmer's point of view? Like, what do they have to do that costs more?

Meyer: Certainly, they have to do a lot more manual labor in weeding. They have to go in there several times. They can't just spray once and the weeds are gone. They have to go in there many, many times. Sometimes they put plastic on the soil. I don't know if you've seen that, but that's a way of controlling weeds. But that's a very, very expensive thing to do. It's a riskier business, because we don't have the common knowledge and the best practices necessarily laid out. So you could put an application of a product on that is allowed—you put a little too much or you don't put enough, and you can lose your crop. So it's definitely riskier.

Farmer: And you said the insurance costs more.

Meyer: Insurance costs, I think (this is from the USDA) it costs five percent more, and you get paid less than what your crop is worth. So we're fighting for that in the farm bill.

Working on Organic Food Policy

Farmer: So you're involved in policy, then.

Meyer: A little bit. I'd like to be more. I've done a little bit of work lobbying on the Hill with the OTA [Organic Trade Association] and some advocacy work with the representatives—trying to get farmers to meet with their representatives, give them the message that they can be aligned with, give them a clear message of language that they can deliver. Some real big influential growers have known these guys for a long time.

Farmer: And supported them, probably.

Meyer: Right. So it's a good instrument to get in there and say, "This is your constituent. Here's what they're saying. You've known him for twenty years. Let's get some things done."

Farmer: Yes. How did you get into doing that work?

Meyer: Just a natural progression. I feel that because my roots are from basic organic as a philosophy and a way of life, and then also being immersed in big business, that I could perhaps provide a good, helpful balance in some things, in some decisions. I'm interested in playing a role in that. I'd like to do more. I sit on the California Organic Advisory Board for the Department of Food and Agriculture, CDFA. So that's been good as well, to hear what's happening and then comment on it.

Farmer: How much time does that take?

Meyer: Not very long—three, four hours every quarter. It's no big deal.

Farmer: Is it a phone conversation?

Meyer: No, we meet in person.

Farmer: In Sacramento?

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: So you have to go up there.

Meyer: Yes, and the company supports me in that.

Farmer: Oh, that's great.

Meyer: And I would like to sit on the Organic Trade Association board sometime.

Farmer: Where do they meet?

Meyer: They meet quarterly at different industry events, just where everybody is congregating usually. I would actually love to do something like that for a living someday, but I don't think there's a lot of money in it unless you're actually a lobbyist. I'd be really good at it. There could be a lot of work to be done, trying to bring a balance of our industry, the marketplace and our ideals. But with the farm bill, there's definitely a lot of work to be done right now, in writing the reps, being aware of what they're voting on, what they're marking up, giving them information. Then once we get the bill written, there's a lot of appropriations that need to happen as well.

Farmer: So are you traveling to D.C. right now doing that work?

Meyer: I've only traveled once.

Farmer: But do you have a strategy for getting beyond sort of preaching to the choir? Is there a way to expand people's awareness?

Meyer: My idea, that hasn't actualized, is to get some op-eds written and to get some of my grower friends that are kind of big growers to sign on to them and put them in the *Sacramento Bee*, and get that out there in the community: "Gosh, Don Devine that I've known for thirty-some years is writing that? Wow! I better— Let me pay attention to that."

Farmer: Yes, so get it out into the general public.

Meyer: Yes, especially the grower community. Those are the people that care about that stuff.

Farmer: What has been your experience with people transitioning to organic? Farmers?

Meyer: A lot of uncertainty. You have to have a gambling nature. In the past, we've tried to help them by selling as transitional. When the law went through, you couldn't legally say "transitional organic."

Farmer: That was in 2002, right?

Meyer: Yes. So that kind of put the kibosh on everything. I think we moved backwards a little bit. Because suddenly it was, "Oh, you can't do that," "Sorry, we can't do that." We're coming back around now, at least in my company, with

a little bit of pushing, to call it “sustainably grown” or “earth friendly,” things like that, and then have a little story about—you know, this is transitioning. We can’t say the word “organic” on the marketing. In some regions of the country, it’s going over well. In other regions, it’s not. California is one of those regions it’s very tough to get a transitional piece of fruit or veg sold. Veg, forget it.

Farmer: Would the price be higher?

Meyer: That’s the key. The price is higher than conventional but not as high as organic. So that’s the little niche you can fill, and it helps with the risks of transitioning for a grower. If a grower is going to transition, they may lose half their crop because they made a mistake. Or they may not get the productivity because the trees are used to getting all this nitrogen injected straight into their bloodstream, and instead they have to work out and get balanced and get it from natural sources. So a lot of times there’s a lot less production the first few years until you build the soil up. Like with pears: The grades go down for a while because of that same phenomena, the health of the soil.

Farmer: So the pears are smaller?

Meyer: Smaller, and they have more defects. They don’t grade out as fancy. You don’t get as high of a price.

Farmer: Who grades them?

Meyer: There are different inspectors, government inspectors, and there’re different standards.

Farmer: So there're some from the state and some from the federal?

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: Are they required to have it inspected?

Meyer: Yes, and there's the kiwi board and there's the apple board; there's a rutabaga board. They decide what the standards are and what you can sell and what you can't. Some things can be sold at a local farmers' market, like a double kiwi. You can't send that out in a box, even though they're wonderful and there're lots of them sometimes. So there're things like that that are decided: this is the standard for this item, whatever it is, and if it's outside of that—[makes noise indicating negative]—it cannot be packed. You can't sell it commercially. I don't know if someone would come in and bust you for a double kiwi at Staff of Life, but have you ever seen one?

Farmer: I don't think so.

Meyer: No. There're lots of them, but the inspectors at the farm level would never let that in the box. You'd get fined for that. And in fact, if there's decay in something at arrival and we call a federal inspector to come in to look at the decay or whatever it is in a product, and they see that something isn't graded right, and it's marked this and it's packed like that, they'll fine 'em back at the farm. You get the farmer in trouble and you didn't even mean to. (chuckles wryly)

Food Safety Issues

Farmer: Hmm. Well, we could talk for hours about food safety.

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: People do want to be able to trust their food.

Meyer: Yes, that's a huge issue. We are looking at having our growers—well, we encourage them to be part of the leafy greens agreement, but there's all kinds of legislation out there right now for federal and state to put some things into place.¹¹ I think Senator Tom Harkin has a bill on the floor that they're debating, and I think the Senate—the California Senate or legislative people—just passed something last night, putting some fines in place if they didn't follow these standards. So things are getting legislated that may change the whole food-safety landscape again.

Farmer: Yes. Tell me what you know about farming with hedgerows.¹²

Meyer: Well, I know that as far as biodiversity and putting in hedgerows and putting in things that attract pests that are good for keeping the bad pests away, a lot of work has been done in that area up till now. Some of the food-safety stuff is going to set us back there, to a big extent. Because everybody (my company included, and I'm sure Whole Foods) is so concerned about liability, we'll be requiring people [whose items we] distribute to be part of the leafy greens or whatever legislative things happen. It does beg the question, though. We have a big local-grower initiative happening right now, not just here but the local

growers in Vermont, the local growers in Pennsylvania, the local growers in Denver, Colorado. And they're not going to comply, a lot of them. They're small.

Farmer: They can sell at the farmers' market.

Meyer: They can sell at the farmers' market, and they do.

Farmer: And CSAs [community supported agriculture].

Meyer: I don't think there's going to be a fight over it; I just think we're just not going to buy from those people.

Farmer: Yes, there'll be a differentiation in the market.

Meyer: Yes, absolutely.

Farmer: Do you think some people might change what they grow if there's a leafy greens agreement here?

Meyer: I don't know.

Farmer: Because there is a list of exactly what that means.

Meyer: Yes, I know. Maybe. It might influence them, especially if they want to sell to a certain market. It would be part of the consideration. But also: What do I grow well? What does my market want? All those things are part of that decision. So, yes, the leafy greens thing— You know, my company is definitely supporting it and for it, but I definitely see that there's a place where it's not going to fit for everybody, and we still need to support those growers.

Farmer: Yes, so a little diversification of the grower market.

Meyer: Absolutely.

Meyer: Let's see. What didn't I talk about? I got to S&S and Ocean Organics. Didn't talk about Hawkins Associates, where we did kind of the same thing. Then I started Source [Organic]. So there's Hawkins, there's Source. I'd like to talk a little bit about Albert and his contribution to Central Coast growers and all of California, and then him building his empire. Yes, and then how Hawkins Associates also contributed even more to those stores that eventually became Whole Foods. This is convoluted. We actually bought for Whole Foods. We were their buyer for a while at Hawkins, and then I left Hawkins and started Source, and I bought for some of Whole Foods and they bought for some.

Albert's Organics

Then eventually I became part of Albert's. Yes, there's this whole confluence of people in and out, back and forth. Like I said, Clarice [Lusk]— I worked with her at Community Foods, and then Albert's started to sell, encroach on VV's territory, and they met on the phone, and pretty soon they get married, and she helps him to build up Albert's for twenty years, and then it becomes an empire; UNFI buys it; I start my business; I become part of Albert's. It's like this whole consolidation of business.

Farmer: And since you were all passionate about it, it kept growing.

Meyer: That's right, yes. It's been quite a ride.

I wonder if Don Newey is still alive. Now, there's somebody—

Farmer: What was his part in it?

Meyer: Don Newey—he was a local character who would bring lots of different local, mostly orchard stuff together and sell it, sell it to the different stores. Like, he would be up on Happy Valley, which is now farmed by Bill Denevan. Maybe he's still up there, has land. He'd have pears and sell them or grow apples and sell them. Then he was involved in starting that little store downtown [Miller's Harvest] on the far end of the Pacific Garden Mall. How long have you been here?

Farmer: Late seventies.

Meyer: Okay, so it was a little health food store, and it was right next to the [Santa Cruz Community] Credit Union, where the credit union used to be. It's a used clothing store now. There was a health food store there. Do you remember that?

Farmer: No, I never went there.

Meyer: And Don Newey was the owner. I have gone to Minnesota and talked to Gardens of Eden, these great growers outside of Minneapolis. And she's, like, "I used to pack with Don Newey, and he'd want all the girls to be au naturale and pack pears."

Farmer: (laughs)

Meyer: Seriously. But Don is this old little wizened old man—you know, old back then! I saw him maybe a few years ago. He's still around. He would have a lot of history, like *old* history.

Farmer: I'd love to know why people got into it, what their passion for it was. Because it has sustained. People are still doing this.

Meyer: Yes, absolutely. It's been good to me, and it's been the kind of business that has taken good care of me. I've been able then to give back to a lot of people, and provide a lot of employment and opportunity for people and growth for people. That's been really exciting for me, too. That's what I really get off on.

When I worked for Scott Hawkins, we were innovators, in that we were one of the first [companies] to bring mixer loads of all-organic produce to the East Coast. We mimicked how conventional people pick up product all over California or Washington or Colorado, making several pickups, filling the trucks, getting them back to various locations on the East Coast. He made it possible for [stores] like Bread and Circus [in Boston, Massachusetts], Wellspring Grocery [in North Carolina], even Whole Foods in Texas to have organic produce on a year-round basis from California.

I was at Coast Produce and went to work for Scott for less money, because my dream was to load full loads of organic produce (just like *one*)—that would be so exciting to me. I worked with Scott for six years, and over the course of that time (I mentioned various retailers that we dealt with), they were purchased by Whole Foods. Bread and Circus became a Whole Foods company. We bought for a

company called Fresh Fields when they had one store. I think now they have seventy stores. They became eventually part of Whole Foods as well. Wellspring Grocery was bought by Whole Foods. What's the company in L.A. that was bought by Whole Foods? Mrs. Gooch's. There was a consolidation. Through purchases and acquisitions, many of those companies that we bought for, all the retailers became Whole Foods companies.

The other sector of the industry that we bought for was co-ops. Northeast Co-op in Boston was a big customer. Roots and Fruits in Minneapolis—they're an old-time distribution company. They're not really a co-op, or they weren't. But they were worker-owned, consensus, so they were close to the co-op philosophy and mentality. The co-op movement in the Midwest is really very large and strong. It still is to this day.

So over the course of six years, we helped develop those retailers and those wholesalers, and make them robust and getting them lots of produce. We also helped develop the growers on this end, because we gave them an increased outlet for their product. People like Danny Duncan with Cal Organic [Farms] really got to grow, and we were very close to him. He also created an alliance with Whole Foods over time.

Farmer: Would that be contracts?

Meyer: Yes, contracts and really trying to be their primary supplier of vegetables. I think to this day they have a very strong alliance. So Cal Organic was eventually bought by Grimmway Farms. Grimmway's has thousands of organic

acres, because they had some organic acreage before, and then they bought the Cal Organic label and Danny Duncan's expertise. That development of growers happened everywhere—not just here in California, but in Washington, apple growers; in Colorado there were vegetable growers and peach growers. We took a lot of famous, western-slope Colorado peaches back to the East Coast. Their cherries are very famous. So it was a symbiotic relationship that we developed [between] these retailers and wholesalers and also the growers. They were exciting times.

A lot of the people that were growers or salespeople for Cal Organic, or salespeople for Jacobs Farm—they were all kind of friends and cohorts from the old days at Community Foods.¹³ They all moved on to these positions.

Source Organic

So at a certain point at Hawkins Associates, I, for various reasons, wasn't happy with the management and my position there, and broke away and started my own business called Source Organic.

Farmer: With Dylan.

Meyer: With Dylan, yes. It was a big risk. I was making really good money at that time, and I was separating from my first husband, who you passed up the road. I quit my job and didn't really have anyplace to go. Earthbound Farms wanted to hire me, and different people wanted to hire me. I said, "No, I have to do this thing. I really know I can do this." So with one computer and two phone lines, Dylan at my side—

It was twelve years ago. This fall, twelve years. So, no customers, but two phone lines, a computer, and I set up shop in the little building that you passed at the top. I rented that from Kevin Spitzer, my ex. I had friends that helped me with the books and different things, that supported me and told me which licenses I needed to get. I was almost immediately very successful. There was a need out there for somebody who knew how to get organic produce back to the East Coast or the Midwest.

Farmer: So you went into competition with them?

Meyer: I did. When I left, there was a lot of turmoil at his company, so some of those customers came with me eventually, just because their service levels were dropping. So I immediately did very well. The way I set up business was with no contracts with my customers, but I would come to you and I would say, "Mr. Retailer or Mr. Co-op, I can order all of your organic produce; I can get it there; and I can buy it at a better price and know that there's good quality, because I hired inspectors to go look at the product, as outside contractors. And I'll charge you thirty-five cents a case for every case you buy, but I'll have the grower bill you directly, so it's very transparent. I'm only making thirty-five cents. I'm not taking a ten-dollar box and marking it up forty percent. I'm just making thirty-five cents, not four dollars," or whatever. (laughs)

And amazingly enough, on thirty-five cents a case, I made enough money to support myself and very quickly, about three or four other employees that worked up here at the top. We had seventeen phone lines because there were fax lines and all these—

Farmer: Out in the middle of the countryside.

Meyer: I know! The neighbors were, like, “Okay.” And the guy who was hooking up the phone was, like, “Well, how can you have so many lines? He goes, “There’re no more lines up here.” At one point it was, like, “I can’t get any more lines up this road. You’ve taken seventeen of them.” So eventually we had to move off the hill, but—

Farmer: And what was Dylan’s role?

Meyer: Dylan was the president of the company. He was listed as the president: Dylan@sourceorganic.com. The website has been neglected, and he’s still there on the website. His e-mail would get forwarded to me. No one knew he was a dog.

Farmer: (chuckles)

Meyer: He got e-mails from all over the world.

Farmer: Ohh!

Meyer: “I’m in South Africa, and I grow navels,” and so it would come to me, and I would answer as if I was his secretary or the director of purchasing or something.

Farmer: Oh, how perfect. So that’s why you hand-feed him today.

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: Because he's a very good friend.

Meyer: Yes, he's a revered old man. He was well-known in the industry. Everybody knew Dylan. He's a Jack Russell, so he was kind of [makes noises signifying the frantic, growling nature of the breed], and that's how kind of how I had to be in business. He was like, (growls) "Go get it! Go get it!" you know?

Farmer: Yes.

Meyer: So he provided that energy level that I needed—

Farmer: How perfect.

Meyer: —for that, yes. So the funny thing is, when I eventually sold Source Organic to UNFI [United Natural Foods, Inc.] (which I haven't gotten to yet) they didn't know he was a dog.

Farmer: Oh. (laughs)

Meyer: And they set up his voice mail and his e-mail just like he was a member of the company now. He never got a paycheck; we didn't go that far, but I remember when the CFO of the company came and was just flabbergasted and flummoxed when he looked under my desk and he said, "That's Dylan??"

Farmer: (laughs)

Meyer: And I was, like, "Yes, he's a dog." But most of the people at UNFI, for about three years, didn't know he was a dog.

Farmer: Oh, my God! That's great.

Meyer: So anyway, I'm ahead of myself a little bit there. But he's had quite the history, and everybody in the industry, or many people in the industry now still ask about him, because he was part of the beginnings of Source, for sure. Kind of my mascot.

Farmer: Yes.

Meyer: So yes. Source was very, very successful.

Farmer: Very quickly.

Meyer: Very quickly. And then I got a bookkeeper, and she had worked in the industry. She would come to me every month and go, "Look, you're making this money," and I'd be, like, "Wow! On thirty-five cents!" It was really nice, because we would negotiate a price that was fair to the grower. We'd get a good price for the customer, the buyer. And then we'd just put them together so they knew who they were buying from. There was no smoke and mirrors. Some brokers, they don't want you to know who the people are. So it was a very honest business, in a way, very transparent. Also, there was no real risk for me because I didn't take title to anything. Source had no real liability, which was good. And it went really well, and eventually we had six employees, and everybody made a good salary, and we had a great retirement plan, too, which was nice.

Farmer: So where do the truck drivers come from?

Meyer: We would hire them as outside contractors, either LTL [less than truckload], which means partial loads, or full loads, and just like the grower, they would bill the receiver for the freight. We wouldn't mark up the freight, either. Now, some people do that. Some people will quote you a delivered price on a tomato. It's twenty-two dollars delivered in Boston. We would say, "It's ten dollars FOB plus my thirty-five cents, and then the freight to get it out there." We didn't mark anything up. So we were, in my mind, supplying— And we'd have our contracted inspectors looking at it to make sure it's going to get there in good condition.

Farmer: Now, were these organic inspectors?

Meyer: No, they were just regular inspectors. But I came to them and met with them. I said, "I don't know you, but you're going to be a big part of my business plan." (laughs) "I'm going to advertise that I have inspectors on staff, and it's you." Kevin with FBI, Fresh Buyers Inspectors, he was young and starting his business, or had been doing it for a while, but this became a niche for him. I would tell him where to go and who to look at, the different coolers. He would have had no idea. So then all of a sudden, he could offer organics to other people. And that was another niche source of income for him, where he would have an organic page, and I'd tell him where to go, and he could offer inspections to other people. Because I helped him found that, to this day I think I still pay the same rate. For nine guys to run around all over California, I pay two hundred dollars a month.

Farmer: Oh, my gosh.

Meyer: Which is nothing, really, for the service.

Farmer: That's loyalty, though.

Meyer: Yes, yes. So I helped him get that niche part of his business going, and he's since split and created other businesses. It was a real honest way to grow the industry and get that produce back there at good prices so that the public could buy more organics, and the farmers weren't getting taken by the middleman.

Source was very successful. I was able to actually pay off this property which I bought in 1990 after the earthquake.¹⁴ I've been very fortunate and blessed. I've lived in a 700-square-foot house, though, for twenty-one years.

So four or five years went by, and then the way the industry was developing, there was a lot of consolidation, which you saw with Whole Foods. I took some of the Whole Foods divisions with me and bought for them. I took Texas and Chicago divisions of Whole Foods Market, and I did their produce buying under Source Organic for two years. They made feeble attempts to buy my business and make me the procurement office. I wasn't ready to sell, and their offers were never anything I was interested in. Very feeble. I think Edmund LaMacchia [of Whole Foods Market] wanted the position, himself. And he eventually got it, because they told him, "Go try to buy Source," and he wasn't motivated to do that.

Farmer: Oh, I see.

Meyer: He lives one ridge over. He was in the Whole Foods Bay Area, that development, and then helped develop the buying office here in Watsonville. When I left Source, I took some of the Whole Foods, bought for them. Hawkins kept some of the Whole Foods. Eventually, Whole Foods did buy Hawkins Associates and made them the buying office, which is now in Watsonville. And some of those same people that I worked with at Community Foods and then Hawkins are now at the Watsonville Whole Foods buying office. We probably have evolved in many different ways, but we came from the same little nucleus of doing things the way we did at Hawkins.

Two years went by. I lost Whole Foods to their buying office. They said, "Okay, now we have a buying office. We're going to buy." That was forty percent of my income at the time. Things got interesting. I hit the road and got different customers, like Giant Foods and Four Seasons, and kept the business going, replaced that income. But as I was replacing it with new business and people were interested, because I was putting the grower direct with the receiver, eventually you'd get somebody new in there, somebody trying to make their name, or the companies were bought up and they'd just say, "Well, we know where to buy our tomatoes now, thank you very much. We'll just do it ourselves." So it was increasingly difficult because people were consolidating, the whole industry. Big supermarkets were buying other people up, and then people were doing their own buying. So in, I think, 2001, 2002, I went back to Expo East to get customers, talk with customers, and I went to a party for Clarice Lusk, who worked at Community Foods and then married Albert Lusk of Albert's Organics. He was giving her a big birthday party, and many friends in

the industry were there, and I met this man named Barclay Hope. He was the president of Albert's Organics at the time. That's when we started to have discussions about [Albert's] buying Source Organic.

Albert's Organics/United Natural Foods Incorporated [UNFI]

It just seemed at that point, after five and a half years or five years, that [selling] was the right thing to do because of how difficult it was getting to keep that business going. So I did sell to Albert's Organics/UNFI, and then we became the buying office for Albert's Organics. We were doing essentially the same thing that we had been doing: making purchases, looking at product, putting things on trucks, routing the trucks to different stops, and fostering organics. But we were doing it with a guaranteed, a captive audience. We didn't have to go tell them, "Go get that customer." They were there.

So then, after that, it allowed Barclay, because he had a centralized buying office, to go purchase other companies. He went out and purchased all of the rest of my customers that Whole Foods hadn't purchased. So it's a good thing I did sell, because he went out and bought Northeast Co-op; he went out and bought Roots and Fruits; he went out and bought Boulder Fruit Express. Whole Foods was buying all the retailers, and UNFI started to buy all the wholesale distributors. It's a good thing that I aligned with somebody big and was able to keep going and doing what I love doing. So that's the Source story.

In tandem with that, Albert Lusk was starting his wholesale distribution company back in the eighties, when I was at Community Foods. And he was very successful in bringing the growers' product, had great relationships with

little growers, especially in Southern California, bringing that product to the different retailers in Southern California. Even reached up here and competed with VV for a while, sold to Community Foods. That's where he met his wife, Clarice. Then he opened up a distribution center in Pennsylvania. That was wildly successful. There had never been an organic distributor on the East Coast for produce, and his business flourished. I don't know what year that was, maybe '86 or '88.

Farmer: So it was at the same time you were at Hawkins, then?

Meyer: Yes.

Farmer: So that was parallel, happening on the East Coast.

Meyer: Yes. In fact, Scott and Albert were kind of in this space race, I'd call it, to develop software— There was Albert's, and then there were all these other distributors that Hawkins was supplying. So we were kind of doing the same thing, but we were separate. There was Albert's, and then all these others. I think that's why Barclay bought me, because I was buying for all the competition. So not only could he get a buying office, but he could weaken his competition and then go in and buy them. It's kind of the way business is.

(chuckles) Yes. So we enter big business all of a sudden, you know? (laughs) Organic corporate business. You know, I read those books about, have we gone astray, and I'm like, was I part of that? I think I was a little bit. (laughs) But it's the natural evolution, I guess, of what's happening in business.

So then Albert eventually hired this young, brilliant man out of Harvard to help him develop his business in order to sell it. Mickey Roy came on board, [a] Harvard grad. I think in the meantime, Albert opened up a distribution center in Florida, so he had three distribution centers. Mickey Roy helped him bring the books and everything up to a place where UNFI eventually purchased Albert's.

Farmer: And how long has UNFI been in existence?

Meyer: I don't know the history exactly. Probably twelve years.

Farmer: So they were also kind of an up-and-coming, new—

Meyer: Yes, they have a really great history. Rick Antonelli is president of the eastern region. He has been in the business, like me, for twenty-five years on the grocery side. He was working selling grocery items on the East Coast. But they eventually said, "Let's get together our competition and create this company," and eventually brought Michael Funk on board from the West, and they called it United Natural Foods. I wish I could remember the name of Rick Antonelli's company, but that's a beautiful history of the organic industry that's more on the grocery side, that's well worth looking into. That phenomenon and development of those small, grassroots companies coming together to form UNFI, that was a big part of the development of the organic industry non-produce side.

UNFI bought Albert's. So now they have a fresh or perishables department, and that's Albert's. And Albert's starts to get cheese and milk and those things, because we have refrigerated trucks. Barclay Hope became president when Albert's sold, and bought Source and then proceeded to buy Roots and Fruits,

like I said, Northeast Co-op, Boulder Fruit Express. UNFI became a publicly-traded company maybe eight years ago, and they're traded on NASDAQ. So, yes, I've been part of the—the corporatization of the organic industry, in a way. Albert Lusk is dealing with small cheese producers, creating labels and helping them market their small, family-farm dairies.

Farmer: As a small business consultant.

Meyer: I think for the love of organics rather than for money, because he has plenty of money, I'm sure.

Farmer: Yes. Where does he live now?

Meyer: He lives in Delaware.

Farmer: I saw an Albert's truck when I was back East a couple of weeks ago, a medium-sized truck.

Meyer: Yes, yes. We're based out of Bridgeport, New Jersey. That's the corporate headquarters. We do have a distribution center in Florida, and we're going to be moving to Sarasota and be in the UNFI facility, which will be a very green facility. That's a really great initiative that UNFI is embarking upon: becoming totally green in our energy use, offsetting our carbon footprint. The Rockland facility is going to be, I think, the fourth largest producer of solar energy in the country.

Farmer: From the roofs of the warehouse?

Meyer: Yes. It's huge. They're going to have a big press release and a big celebration, I believe on October third and fourth up there. UNFI is doing a lot to be a sustainable company.

Farmer: Carrying on the values.

Meyer: And do the right thing, yes. Michael Funk is at the helm. He's an old-time hippie, grassroots guy that is leading the country in a really righteous way, which is nice.

Farmer: And where is he headquartered?

Meyer: He lives outside of Grass Valley right on the Yuba River. He has a little beach. He would have just a wealth of information about how things developed here in California, and then the Rick Antonelli story he would know, as well.

Farmer: Okay. Well, another thing I wanted to ask you about was your service on these different boards.

California Department of Food and Agriculture

Advisory Board for Organics

Meyer: I have turned my attention a little bit towards advocacy and helping the industry to grow in a lot of different ways. I want to do something more than just be in the marketplace, although that's where we make our money to do what we need to do. I sit on the advisory board for the California Department of Food and Ag, their organic program. I think it's important for somebody like me who has the history and has a connection with the growers, to be there and bring a certain

aspect of where we came from to the decisions that happen. There are people on that board from Campbell Soup [Company], different corporations. Trader Joe's actually has a really great woman on the board, but some [board members] come from a real corporate business background, and they're just thinking about the dollar and how it affects their business, not about how it affects our standards, or the spirit of organics and where we came from and what we need to do.

Farmer: Is there anybody with an environmental emphasis?

Meyer: There're different seats on the board. There're some people from Davis that are professors, and they have lots of data, and there're some environmental people; there're people that represent retailers, manufacturers or ingredients people. They have a good, broad range. I sit there as a distributor, a wholesale distributor. But you see people on the board that I feel are just there because their companies told them they need to influence to help their business, rather than really caring.

The Organic Trade Association and the National Organic Standards Board

That's the only board that I sit on right now. I would like to be a part of the OTA board, and maybe even the NOSB [National Organic Standards Board] board. [OTA is] based out of Massachusetts. It's a little controversial in the industry. They're supposed to represent the entire industry, but a lot of people would say they're very heavy on the manufacturers' side.

Farmer: Oh, you mean packaged products?

Meyer: Yes, and that they represent that industry sector, and they're looking out for their needs and wants in the industry. I could critique them and say they need to do more of this or that. But it's important that we have a trade association that represents our industry with a united voice. Right now one of the issues out there is that we have people that put out negative press about organics. You know, "the thirty-eight ingredients" or whatever it is, that may cast a doubt on our industry.¹⁵ There's not enough positive press or true information out there for the public of what's going on.

Farmer: There's kind of competing information.

Meyer: It's splintering us as an industry, so as far as my aspirations, I would like to bring together different parts of the industry. So we have one voice for the media and for the consumer, and we do more education. I've done a little lobbying work, [been] very active in getting people involved with the current farm bill. Mark Lipson¹⁶ gives me a call, or OTA gives me a call, and I could call a group of growers in any area of the country (because I know all these growers in Massachusetts or Iowa or Vermont, or California), and say, "Okay, here's the deal. They're trying to take a million dollars away from organics to support the honeybee thing."¹⁷ And the honeybee thing—that's important. We need that, but the money doesn't need to come from organics. "Call your representative, and have your brother call, and your aunt call, and the secretary and everybody call, right now." So there's been a certain amount of that that I can do, because I know all these people all over. I think I've made a little bit of change. The phone calls

are really important, especially if there's a bill on the floor. If they're getting a lot of calls from their constituents on that day, they take note.

Farmer: That's exciting.

Meyer: I want to do more work like that. I think I could be an instrument for the industry. The OTA knows that I'm active, but they haven't reached out. I think they're just busy doing their own thing.

Farmer: And they don't focus that much on produce? Is that what you think?

Meyer: Yes. Well, I think they do, but they represent more of the manufacturers, and that sector of the business and whatever their needs are. When they're out there lobbying, they're lobbying for things that will help the manufacturing. And that's probably a bigger sector of the organic industry than produce is.

There are a lot of different needs that those manufacturers have. Like, they really need the stabilizer, or they really need some research on this type of chemical reaction or whatever it is, so those needs are more than somebody just growing beets. Or there's more money in that sector, so the Organic Trade Association is going after more of those issues for those manufacturers of ingredients. I think just sales-wise, there's growth in that sector. I mean, there's organic Twinkies, for God's sakes, and everything else.

Farmer: Yes. (laughs)

Meyer: It just keeps booming. There's organic lipstick. You know, all these different things.

Farmer: Yes, so when you said the “thirty-eight ingredients” and how [some people in the media] criticized that, can you talk about that a little bit? That’s the NOSB piece, right?

Meyer: Right. The NOSB actually recommended— Those ingredients were originally approved, but they had to come up for review every five years. And there’re ingredients such as hops that if— The rule reads: If it’s not available commercially organic and you need to use it for five percent or less, it’s allowable. Still, you can’t call your product one hundred percent organic, and they’re kind of innocuous ingredients; they’re not horrible things, and it’s five percent or less, and they’ve been allowed this whole time. The NOSB looked at them and reviewed them and said these aren’t really harmful ingredients. And you have to prove, with your certifier (because it comes down to your certification agency), you have to prove that, “I tried to get organic hops, and I don’t have enough.” You have to prove that. [Then,] yes, you may use this ingredient, five percent or less.

So they looked at it. The NOSB recommended that they get another five years. They’ve been in there the whole time. It’s not like we’re saying we want to introduce thirty-eight evil ingredients [wicked witch voice] and loosen the standards. And then this group out of Wisconsin blew it up into this big thing. *The New York Times* got a lot of people to write in to the USDA and say, “This is a bad thing.”

The NOP [National Organic Program] was ready to just [say], “Okay, this is fine. Our experts on the NOSB have said, ‘Yes, these are fine,’ under these

circumstances.” But because the media out there was saying they’re introducing thirty-eight ingredients that aren’t organic and that won’t make it organic, and none of the information about five percent or less, only if it’s not commercially available. They’ve always been there anyway. It was just this big scare campaign. That’s how this group gets money.

So because they were able to get so many comments, the NOP had to put it on review again and put it up for public commentary. So that was a period of time. The people that really knew what was going on had to muster enough comments to get up there so that we could allow these. Because there would have been whole sections of the industry that wouldn’t be able to—we wouldn’t have a lot of things, a lot of basic things. I think even there’s an ingredient that’s used sometimes to feed chickens. We might not even have organic chicken. I don’t know that much about the specifics, but I do know that that’s a case where we have our industry splintered. There’s a lot of scary stuff being said to get media attention and money that’s hindering our industry, I feel.

Farmer: So it keeps the advocacy organization funded, because people send contributions because they trust them to be the watchdogs, or something like that?

Meyer: Correct. And they’re doing this whole thing now with Aurora Dairy. There’s this whole controversy about the number of days of pasture and when you can call an animal organic, how many days of organic feed and production. That’s another area I’m not an expert in. But they’re doing a lot of slandering,

that Aurora Dairy's been decertified and yada, yada. No, they haven't. It's just a big mess out there on that deal as well.

The Future of the Organic Food Industry

So anyway, my future direction (and I've told Michael [Funk] this) is that I would really like to do more of this kind of work. There's a lot needed out there. With the farm bill alone—it's a \$350 billion bill, second only to the defense bill. Billions and billions of that get given for subsidies, for cotton and corn, which we don't need anymore; corn's at an all-time high per bushel. And soybeans. We need money for conservation; we need money for organic research, organic data. A couple of million, more million—several million to the organics would not put a dent in this budget, in this bill, and [would] make a huge difference for our industry, which is growing in double digits.

Farmer: Yes, and also the subsidies mess up our international relations.

Meyer: Absolutely. Oh, yes. But that's a whole other kettle of worms. There's a lot of money behind that. It's going to take a revolution to change some of that.

Farmer: Yes. So I wanted to ask you, when organic is on the right track, what are the elements that make it strong?

Meyer: I think that the answer for me would be that you are taking a holistic approach, and you are serving the needs of the land, the grower, the consumer and really considering everybody there. And then the businessperson as well. The business is obviously what drives it. But you have to remember what's the

right thing for all those other pieces, people that are part of that chain. And a big part of that is the environment, and then the grower, the consumer, the businessman.

Farmer: So when you're supporting the growers by finding purchasers for their products, do you feel like part of what you're doing is helping them to expand the amount of organic property that they farm and transition?

Meyer: Absolutely. In the past, Albert's had well-paid buyers that would just go out there and try to get the lowest price they could. Three-dollar broccoli! Growers went out of business left and right. What I did was I set up contracts with growers so that we would have a steady supply of product. We knew we wouldn't have broccoli and then not have broccoli, you know, up and down. We wouldn't have three-dollar broccoli and then twenty-nine-dollar broccoli, because that's hard on the market and consumers.

I went out to the different growers and said, "I want to buy so much broccoli," (not one hundred percent of what we needed, but a portion of it) "at this price, twelve dollars or between twelve dollars and fifteen dollars, or whatever—what's sustainable to you, but also what we can sell to our retailers at a great price so that they can sell it to the consumer. You are guaranteed you're going to get that sale, and it's a price that's going to make you money. You're not going to get rich, but you're going to be able to put in a little more acreage next year and the year after that and the year after that, and you don't have to worry, 'am I going to sell my broccoli this year?'"

We did that with many commodities, and we helped to stabilize a lot of growers. We have a lot of grower loyalty now because of that. People do depend on us and have been able to have stable businesses and increase their acreage because we've been partners with them. We've had a lot of weather incidents lately, huge hurricanes and freezes, but during the freeze that we had in January [2007]— We had these normal prices set up. Oranges were going to be between twelve and eighteen dollars, and we'll buy a thousand a month or whatever it is. The freeze happened, and people lost huge portions of their crops. And if they didn't lose them, the market was thirty-eight dollars now. So, of course, during times like that, we just threw those contracts out, the pricing—well, sometimes the volume, too, because if a portion of their crop got frozen, the volume wasn't there, it was horrendous for the industry, just for our growers. So we said, "Forget the pricing. It's going to be thirty-eight dollars because you need it now." We had such loyalty during that time. Albert's had all this product at thirty-eight dollars, but we had all this product that our competition couldn't even get, because we had done the partnership deal with them, and then we had contracts in place, legal documents that said "this is the price," and we just said, "Wheessht. That's out the window." So it's really been a great partnership with the growers in helping them through all these times as well.

Farmer: Yes, so that's saying that the business—industry, or whatever you want to call it—realm is going to take care of crises; it doesn't have to be a government subsidy.

Meyer: That's right.

Farmer: Were they also getting disaster relief, do you think?

Meyer: I don't know. I would hope that some of them did. I would think so. But, you know, one of the things with organics, one of the things we're trying to change in the farm bill, is that the USDA has crop insurance that they offer everybody, and if you're an organic grower, you pay five percent more. Then if your crop fails or you have a problem, you actually don't get the return of your crop on an organic price, because there is no data; you get conventional prices.

Farmer: So you need the research for the data to be there.

Meyer: Right. So not only do you pay more, but you get less than what your crop is really worth from this insurance.

Farmer: So somebody needs to advocate.

Meyer: Well, we are. The OTA is saying we should have studies. We need the data right now, and we should have studies to see if organic growers are really more of a risk and they should pay five percent more. And OFRF [Organic Farming Research Foundation] is saying, "Let's get rid of that rule right now. We'll do the studies and figure it out and implement the five percent more if we need to, but let's get rid of that now."¹⁸ So, yes, that's part of the whole farm bill thing. There's a lot of work out there to be done for this industry. I'm hoping I get the opportunity to do that. Michael Funk and I talked about a role for me and how important that would be for our company and the industry. Right now, I'm so entrenched in what I do that it's not going to be something that happens next month.

The Farm Bill of 2007

Farmer: Well, this farm bill will be passing pretty soon, in whatever form it takes.

Meyer: I've heard different things. The latest—it's in the Senate now, and the rumor was they were dealing with Iraq and different things, that it wouldn't be till December. But now I think [Vermont Senator Patrick] Leahy is saying he wants to get it out before Columbus Day, which is just around the corner. So things could happen really swiftly in the next couple of weeks. The worst thing that could happen is that we could just get an extension of the old farm bill.

Farmer: Can they do that?

Meyer: Yes, they can do that. And whatever the Senate passes, then the House and the Senate have to come together, and then ultimately [President George W.] Bush could veto it anyway, in which case we would have an extension. Now, they could do an extension for five years or they can do it for six months or one year, too.

It's an ongoing kind of theater drama as to what's happening there. A couple of weeks ago I went up and met with [California Senator Dianne] Feinstein's staff. She had one of her staffers meet with us, just trying to do as much as we can to bring our agenda to our representatives in the forefront. Because organics, as we know, can revitalize the rural communities, and make somebody profitable again that wasn't, and do so much for conservation and the health of our streams and rivers. There's so much out there that organics can provide. A little bit of money would go a long way. So the Environmental Working Group, EWG—they're

based out of D.C., and I've been having some dialogue with them. They're trying to muster a big campaign to bring this to light. Money for organics is their general message, and they're trying to muster support to put an ad in *The New York Times*. Some people don't like it. It's the back end of a cow with the udders hanging down, and it says, "Congress, don't leave organics behind."

Farmer: (laughs)

Meyer: And then it tells you who to contact. Some people don't like it. But advertising in *The New York Times* is, like a half a million dollars for a big-color full page in the Sunday edition. So I don't know what they're going to do, but I'm trying to get UNFI and Albert's to maybe contribute some money to them for that. Because really what we need is for people to reach out to their representatives. If you're buying organic, you need to at least pick up the phone and get involved, or know what's happening. Reaching out to the consumer is important. Because there're people like me that know and care, and people like you. But the general consumer is mostly listening to this group out of Wisconsin and being afraid that things aren't quite right with organics, and not knowing. We had an organic summit in Boulder. This group in Wisconsin made it be a big evil thing.

Farmer: Really?

Meyer: That it was only for the elite. It was just, like—the public doesn't need to hear that stuff. They just think there's something wrong. I mean, other industries don't in-fight. They in-fight, but they don't wave it around in the media. The

sugar industry, the cotton industry, I'm sure they have bitter fights, but they don't whip their dirty laundry out into the media all the time. They keep it to themselves, you know? [Both chuckle.]

Farmer: Yes.

Meyer: Seriously. It's just the wrong approach.

Farmer: I'm just wondering if it has something to do with the grassroots nature of organics and that it's such a young—

Meyer: Yes. We were brought up as radicals, and we were doing a new lifestyle kind of thing. It was grow your own food and be close to the land. It was part of that counterculture. So, yes, that's kind of who we are, in a certain aspect, or we have that aspect to us. We're a little bit radical.

Farmer: And the big shift of having it become popular and then corporate, very profitable. That feels funny because it's not how it started. But things grow and change.

Meyer: Right. Yes. Have you read the book, *Organic, Inc.*?¹⁹

Farmer: Yes.

Meyer: Reading that, I was, like, oh, my God, I think I was part of this whole phenomenon! I mean, I *was*. But—you know, it's just the evolution of what happens. I've been blessed to be in the industry. It's offered me a lot of material and right livelihood. I feel good about what I'm doing. I have juice around it. I've

definitely dedicated the first part of my life to it. I look and I go, well, okay, I don't have kids. (laughs) I've really put my heart and soul into the industry and the business.

Farmer: And kept the contacts, kept the networks that you have.

Meyer: Absolutely, absolutely.

Farmer: Yes, which is how it comes out of the Central Coast, I think.

Meyer: Yes. Yes, it's true. A lot of it was born right here, right here. And it's because of UCSC and CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] and then the growers, of course, that were here, that developed here. But what sprang out of here were a lot of organizations, a lot of people, a lot of growing techniques. People could learn how to grow strawberries—you know, all the different examples that really made this thing become an international phenomena. I mean, it happened right here, in this area. I was somehow lucky enough to be part of it.

Farmer: You were pulled here.

Meyer: I'm a smart person, but I was never brilliant, or said, "I want to create an empire, or have my own business," when I was younger. I just became part of this thing that was unstoppable. It was just like: this is what I'm doing.

Farmer: You're on the train.

Meyer: Yes, I'm on the train. When you're little, you don't go, "I want to be in the produce business when I grow up."

Farmer: (laughs)

Meyer: You know, I wanted to be an underwater ballet star at Wikiwatchi or something. [Laughter.] So it's been good. And it's not over yet. I have a lot to do.

So, yes, there's a lot of that big-business aspect that we need to be mindful of and careful of how we move forward. I'm totally for business, but I also want to bring the spirit of organics to our growth and unify our industry and make it stronger. It's okay to be successful, because that's how we have the money to make social change. That's proven by Michael Funk and UNFI and the things that we're doing there. We have several people on staff that are into green building, reducing carbon footprint, tracking our carbon footprint. There aren't many companies that are doing that.

Farmer: Are you advertising that? Are you letting people know that's part of your mission?

Meyer: A little bit. I know there's going to be a big media blitz on this solar thing that they're going to do.

Farmer: What about the fuel? What kind of fuel?

Meyer: We do some biodiesel. And then the Albert's trucks on the East Coast run off of vegetable oil. So little by little, we're trying to make a change, a difference.

Farmer: Well, thank you, Melody.

¹See the oral histories with Heidi Skolnik and with Ken Kimes, who both worked for Santa Cruz Trucking.

²See the oral history with Russel and Karen Wolter that is part of this series.

³See the oral history with Drew Goodman that is part of this series.

⁴See the oral history with Dale Coke that is part of this series.

⁵See the oral history with Jeff Larkey that is part of this series.

⁶See the oral history with Jim Cochran that is part of this series.

⁷See the oral history with Betty Van Dyke that is part of this series.

⁸See the oral history with Larry Jacobs of Jacobs Farm/Del Cabo, which is part of this series.

⁹YoCal was an organic food marketing co-op that grew over fifty varieties of vegetables and fruits. See: <http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0404/davis/index.shtml>

¹⁰“A watershed event in the consumer food safety crisis was the release of *Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in our Children’s Food* by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) (Sewell *et al.*, 1989). The report attacked procedures used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to estimate health risks from pesticide residues and the time taken to discontinue a pesticide’s use once it is found harmful. At issue was a breakdown product of the growth regulator daminozide (trade name: Alar), which is sprayed on apples to prevent preharvest fruit drop and to delay fruit maturity and internal decay. Studies have shown that a component and degradation product of Alar, (unsymmetrical) 1,1-dimethyl- hydrazine (UDMH), may be carcinogenic. By NRDC estimates, Alar posed a particular risk to infants and children, who because of their low body weights absorb disproportionate amounts of residues from apples and apple products. A *60 Minutes* broadcast and other media coverage about the report created nationwide panic. Numerous school systems banned the sale of apples, parents poured apple juice down the drain and super-markets began independent testing of their produce for pesticide residues (Aidala, 1989). A new special interest group, ‘Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits’, was launched to arouse citizen action for legislative reforms and increased availability of organically grown produce. Farmers were unable to meet supermarket demands for pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, while apple growers lost more than \$100 million in reduced sales and prices. Although government and other scientific experts refuted NRDC’s charges, public outrage eventually resulted in Alar’s voluntary removal from the domestic market by Uniroyal Chemical Company.” M. Elaine Auld, “Food Risk Communication: Lessons from the Alar Controversy,” *Health Education Research* Volume 5, No. 4, 1990. pp. 535-543.

¹¹In the fall of 2006 cases of *E. coli* [*Escherichia coli*] 0157:H7 bacteria on spinach resulted in three deaths and several hundred illnesses across twenty-six states in the United States. Trade groups serving the conventional produce industry led an effort to develop a Leafy Green Product Handler Marketing Agreement. In July 2007 this agreement was put into effect.

¹²See the oral history with Sam Earnshaw and Jo Ann Baumgartner for more on hedgerows.

¹³See the oral history with Larry Jacobs in this series.

¹⁴Meyer is referring to the 7.1 Loma Prieta Earthquake of October 17, 1989, which caused significant damage in the Santa Cruz and San Francisco Bay areas.

¹⁵Under the federal National Organic Program, five percent of a USDA-certified organic product can consist of non-organic substances, provided that the substances are on a list or materials approved by the National Organic Standards Board. Companies appeal to the board every five years to keep a substance on the list, explaining why an organic alternative has not been found. On May 15, 2007, the U.S Department of Agriculture issued a proposed rule to amend the agency’s National Organic Program’s regulations at 7 C.F.R. Part 205 by allowing 38 ingredients such as nineteen food colorings, two starches, casings for sausages, hops, fish oil, chipotle chili pepper, gelatin, celery powder, dill weed oil, frozen lemongrass, and fructooligosaccharides (a sweetener that also acts as a bulking agent) to the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances at § 205.606 of the NOP regulations. The rule eventually did pass. These ingredients can be used if organic versions were not commercially available, allowing organic food processors to produce products that are labeled “certified organic” under the green and white

USDA label. The Organic Consumers Association (OCA), an organization with 600,000 members, opposed the rule. The director of the OCA, Ronnie Cummins, expressed concern that the rule would weaken the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) and allow the organic movement to be taken over by the organic industry. See

<http://www.organicconsumers.org/organic/release092705.cfm>. This controversy was another chapter in a long and continuing political battle over the federal organic standards. According to a July 3, 2009 article in *the Los Angeles Times*, "USDA Organic Label Comes Under Fire," the list of non-organic substances approved for organic food processing has "grown to 245 substances." See: <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/03/business/fi-organic3>

¹⁶ See the oral history with Mark Lipson that is part of this series.

¹⁷ Meyer is referring to colony collapse disorder.

¹⁸ See the oral histories with Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson in this series for more on OFRF.

¹⁹ Samuel Fromartz. *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Harcourt 2006).