Russel and Karen Wolter

Down to Earth Farm

Born in Pacific Grove, the descendent of pioneers who came to California with the De Anza party in 1774, Russel Wolter has been farming "organically" since he was fourteen, when his mother forbade him to use chemical fertilizers and sprays on their ranch in the Carmel Valley. That was in 1947, decades before organic certification, but Wolter's expertise in organic farming methods became a valuable resource to a newer generation of farmers who began farming organically in the 1970s. After his mother's death, Russel and his wife, Karen, farmed forty-five acres of the family ranch as Down to Earth Farm, growing a variety of crops, including sweet corn, tomatoes, squash, red and white chard, kale, collards, cucumbers, apricots, plums, winter squash, pumpkins, and fava beans. They distributed their produce through Bud Capurro's distribution company based in Moss Landing, California, and also sold directly at farmers' markets in the area. Down to Earth Farm was part of the original organic certification program initiated by Rodale Press's Organic

Farming and Gardening Magazine *in 1971. Russel was a founding member of California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) and received a Stewards of Sustainable Agriculture (Sustie) Award in 1994. Russel and Karen are now retired from farming, and lease their land to Earthbound Farms. Ellen Farmer conducted this interview with Russel and Karen at their home in Carmel Valley on March 28, 2007.*

Additional Resources:

Russel Wolter spoke on a panel about Pioneering Farmers at the 2007 Ecological Farming Conference (Eco-Farm). Contact them for an audio recording of this session.

Early Background

Farmer: This is Wednesday, March 28, 2007, and I'm interviewing Russel and Karen Wolter. We are in Carmel Valley. So the first thing I'd like to know is what were the early influences in your life that introduced you to sustainable farming?

Russel Wolter: My mother. They were practically organic farmers as it was. She didn't like chemical fertilizers or sprays.

Farmer: What years would that have been?

Russel Wolter: That would have been 1947. So we didn't use [chemical fertilizers and sprays]. I always thought of it as farming under a serious handicap, because all the universities, *all* the universities recommended these commercial fertilizers and sprays. And I was ignoring their intelligence.

Farmer: And was that based on experience?

Russel Wolter: Mine? No. It was because Mom didn't want it.

Farmer: She didn't want to breathe or handle the chemicals?

Russel Wolter: Didn't want it on the farm. "Use the manures that you want, but no sprays, and no chemical fertilizers."

Farmer: Had she been farming for a long time before that?

Russel Wolter: No. But for a while, because my dad was a farmer and she was the rule setter. (laughs) And very tough rules at that time. I always thought I was really deprived because I couldn't use all this new technology they were coming out with. They used to make fun of me at the Salinas 4-H office. "Over there is Wolter's weed patch because he won't use anything to kill his weeds."

Farmer: Oh, so you had to do hand-weeding.

Russel Wolter: Oh, absolutely. And they also had to do the same thing in Salinas before they got herbicides. So I wasn't in favor of it, actually. I just did it because I was told to.

Farmer: I see. So how old would you have been at that time?

Russel Wolter: In 1947? Well, I guess fourteen.

Farmer: And you were in 4-H.

Russel Wolter: Well, not yet. I was in 4-H when I was about eighteen. I only joined 4-H because my sister joined. She was younger, and she had a hog for a project, and they all made fun of her. So I joined with hogs too, and then it

became popular because I was an older boy doing it. It was popular thing to do to have a hog for a 4-H project.

Farmer: I see. Well, maybe we should backtrack a little bit, and you could tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

Russel Wolter: Right here growing up, and I was born in Pacific Grove. My grandmother was born in the [Carmel] Valley.

Farmer: On a farm?

Russel Wolter: Not on this farm. A different farm. My ancestors came out in the De Anza party.

Farmer: From where?

Russel Wolter: The De Anza party came from Mexico, walking up. I don't know where they came from there. I had a great-great grandfather who came from Germany, and married an Hispanic lady in Monterey. And here we are.

Karen Wolter: It was 1776 when the De Anza party came up with Father Junipero Serra to set up the Mission system.[1]

Farmer: Thank you. So can you describe your education and formative experiences here?

Russel Wolter: I just had experiences growing up here. I graduated from Monterey High School, but only just barely.

Karen Wolter: Tell her why you just barely graduated. It's not fair to say that. It sounds demeaning.

Russel Wolter: Well, but it *is* true. (laughter) My dad became sick, so I went to high school the last year. But also in high school, we were always trying to jam our subjects in junior year because we wanted an easy senior year. And all our buddies did too, because we wanted to relax as seniors. My dad became sick, and so I only went half a day in my senior year, and did all the chores and deliveries the other half. My physical education coach, Ron McNeil, wanted me not to graduate because I wasn't taking physical education. The dean of girls, Gertrude Rendtorff, was a friend of my mother's. She went to bat for me so I was able to graduate.

Farmer: Great.

Russel Wolter: Yes, I thought so. I was willing to quit high school. Dad said, "Don't quit." He was the only one in his family of fourteen kids to graduate from high school. I was the only one that only graduated from high school.

Farmer: Oh. Do you have brothers and sisters?

Russel Wolter: I have two sisters and a brother.

Farmer: All younger?

Russel Wolter: No, some younger and some older. The younger ones are younger and the older ones are older. (raucous laughter)

Farmer: Thank you. (laughter)

Russel Wolter: They all went through college. Well, my brother didn't finish but he did go to college.

Karen Wolter: And you ended up going, after we got married, took some computer courses, bookkeeping, and business law.

Russel Wolter: Oh, yes. That was fun because Karen went with me. Business law is a tiger.

Farmer: Yes. What memories do you have of your early life out here that stand out for you?

Russel Wolter: Working with my dad. We used to butcher the hogs. We did that every Saturday. We'd make all the deliveries in town. After I started going to high school, I'd make the deliveries early in the morning and go on to high school.

Karen Wolter: What about working with the horses?

Russel Wolter: Yes. We used to ride horses and we worked with the horses. We had a tractor later. Our first wheel tractor was a Ford. I don't remember the [date]. About 1951.

Farmer: So you had horses before that?

Russel Wolter: Yes. We had a barn down here. In the beginning, the peacocks used to sleep on top of the horse, on its back. I think it kept the horse warm, too. There's a spot where they can't get warm.

Karen Wolter: You had a swimming hole down here, too.

Russel Wolter: Oh, yes. You can't do that now, but Dad would block off the river and have a big swimming hole for us.

Farmer: Is the Carmel River at the other end of your property, then?

Russel Wolter: Yes. It's just the other side of the hill.

Karen Wolter: It runs through the lower end.

Farming Practices

Farmer: So how many acres is this?

Russel Wolter: About sixty-five.

Farmer: How much of it do you farm?

Russel Wolter: I don't. [Wolter is retired.] I used to farm. About forty-five.

Farmer: Can you describe what products you were growing?

Russel Wolter: Sure. We had sweet corn, tomatoes, squash, red and white chard, kale, collards, cucumbers. We had some fruit at that time: we had a few apricots and a few plums. Winter squash also. And pumpkins for the Halloween trade. But as we got further along, we tried to specialize in volume with [the produce distributor] Bud Capurro. That's really where the money seemed to be.

Karen Wolter: Actually before that you specialized in favas, and shipped them to New York and Chicago. We used to load the train cars.

Russel Wolter: I forgot about that. That's right. Fava beans. We used to ship to New York.

Farmer: Did you shell them?

Russel Wolter: No, shipped them in the pod.

Karen Wolter: And most of this time we didn't sell it as organic. We just went open market.

Farmer: Was there a definition of organic at that time, or was it just something that people talked about?

Russel Wolter: As far as I can remember—just no spray and no commercial fertilizer. But we didn't compost it. Raw manure—we'd spread it right out. A lot of commercial farmers did the same thing. They spread out chicken manure.

Russel Wolter: It's called sheet composting. We did that up until, practically when we quit. We used to compost it some, but—

Farmer: So was that one time of year that you would spread the compost and then grow all during the summer season? Or did you have many seasons?

Russel Wolter: Oh, no. I think we were constantly bringing in chicken manure, not in the rain, but when it was dry. Sometimes we had a neighbor that had chickens and they'd haul it in in a big spreader and then spread it. Other times we'd go up to a chicken ranch and haul it down. It was whenever we had time to do it. It wasn't just in the springtime or just in the fall.

Farmer: So were you able to pretty much grow something year round here?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: What did you grow in the rainy season?

Russel Wolter: Chard, kale, collards.

Karen Wolter: Broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower.

Farmer: Winter vegetables.

Russel Wolter: Yes, in fact our cauliflower got too big. It was huge!

Karen Wolter: And favas, he'd grow over winter, and harvest them in the spring and fall.

Russel Wolter: Yes, we'd plant them in the early winter, and then fall comes.

Farmer: And was that good for the soil, then?

Russel Wolter: Yes. The nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

Karen Wolter: Yes, but also when it gets as big as it gets when you go to harvest it, it takes a lot of nitrogen to break it down. Because there's a lot of cellulose in the stalks as they grow tall.

Russel Wolter: It's called the carbon-nitrogen ratio. As it gets more and more mature it gets woodier. That's more carbon and less nitrogen.

Farmer: So how do you get the most benefit out of that?

Russel Wolter: Well, that's a call you have to make on your own. If you want to use it right away, you try to disc it up before it gets woody, so it decomposes it fast. If you don't care, if you have plenty of extra land, you can just go in when it's woody and disc it three or four times.

Farmer: So you are basically chopping it up and turning it back into the soil.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: Is that called green manure?

Russel Wolter: Yes, you can call it green manure.

Karen Wolter: Well, green manure is when you do it when it's young.

Russel Wolter: And also, it's more exclusive. You're not taking a crop off. You are growing it for enriching the soil and don't take anything off.

Karen Wolter: I believe it's also called a cover crop.

Farmer: And then you're rotating, right? So you'd be doing that one year, and then you'd plant something in there.

Karen Wolter: Not necessarily.

Russel Wolter: Well, green manure doesn't take more than usually ninety days, maybe one-hundred-twenty in the winter.

Organic Certification

Farmer: So have you been certified organic?

Russel Wolter: I have been, yes.

Farmer: How did that happen?

Karen Wolter: First, Rodale Press contacted us.

Russel Wolter: Yes, they contacted us. And we wanted to be certified by them, and we were, but they didn't notify us.

Farmer: Really.

Russel Wolter: Right. Until finally I asked them, when did we become certified? And he just said verbally, nothing written, "Well, you've been certified for a long time!"

Farmer: Oh!

Russel Wolter: So okay. Now we know.

Farmer: Well, weren't they far away, not in California?

Russel Wolter: Yes, but they sent a man out.

Karen Wolter: They came out to California. At the first conference, Russel was one of the speakers in San Francisco.

Russel Wolter: Gee, I had forgotten about that.

Farmer: What kind of a conference was that?[2]

Karen Wolter: They [Rodale Press] were trying to get people to join Rodale Press's certification program, and they held a couple— Wasn't there one in San Luis Obispo and—

Russel Wolter: That's right. All the people came out of the woodwork, a lot of small farmers, and they came to rub shoulders with everyone else.

Karen Wolter: And they had a little seal that said Rodale Press. I think we still have a box in here that still shows our— It's the last one that we have that has the seal on it, the one that's printed on the box.

Russel Wolter: Right there.

Farmer: That's a collector's item.

Karen Wolter: (brings it over) So here's the seal.

Farmer: (reads) "Organic farmer certified by *Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine*." And here it also says, "Certified by California Certified Organic Farmer."[3]

Karen Wolter: They [Rodale] were trying to encourage California to start a certifying group. So Russel was one of the founding members. And then eventually they walked away from us. They did not want to certify so far away. They wanted people to be independent.

Russel Wolter: Too many possible lawsuits.

Farmer: Yes. So they wanted California to have their own certification organization.

Russel Wolter: Because they just couldn't handle it.

Karen Wolter: They weren't set up for it. But they were getting it started. They were promoting it.

Russel Wolter: But people like Barney Bricmont[4], he gave a lot of his time to have our meetings, and try and progress forward. Initially, we would just proclaim that we were doing everything that they asked us to. Then later, we had our members certify each other. That's very economical, but it's not very straightforward.

Farmer: They say the fox guarding the henhouse, but it really doesn't— You weren't doing that.

Russel Wolter: No. But it's not convincing to the public that we weren't, so—

Karen Wolter: I think it was at the time. It's just that it got more and more sophisticated.

Farmer: But at the time, it was sort of like an association.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: And certification was more of a description of what you were doing. It wasn't a law.

Karen Wolter: Oh, no. There were no laws until just recently. We set up our own standards.

Farmer: Yes. And isn't that what all the industry standards ended up being based on, was what happened here?

Karen Wolter: Yes. Well, I don't know if it's just here, because Oregon has one. There's the one in Europe. I think all those standards were taken into consideration, too. But a lot of people from CCOF worked on the standards, worked with government and set up standards.

Farmer: Do you remember that experience? How was that to do that?

Karen Wolter: We were not as involved with it any longer when they started doing that.

Russel Wolter: In fact, finally I was decertified by CCOF.

Farmer: You were?

Karen Wolter: And we used no sprays.

Farmer: So what did they say?

Russel Wolter: And used no sodium nitrate. A lot of organic farmers use sodium nitrate because it's a natural occurring material. Very bad for your soil. But it was legal.

Karen Wolter: And there are legal sprays. But we would not spray with anything.

Russel Wolter: We thought a poison was a poison.

Karen Wolter: Whether it's naturally occurring or not. (laughter)

Russel Wolter: No, they started a program—take one half of one percent of your gross as your payment to the club. I was very strongly opposed to that. So when my turn came to pay, I would give them $100 or $200 and I'd say, "In lieu of the one half of one percent." and send them the check. They'd cash it. Somehow that grabbed their attention after three or four years.

Karen Wolter: They said we weren't paying our way.

Farmer: I see.

Russel Wolter: So I said, "You guys cashed the check. What do you want?" They finally said, "Well, we have to decertify you." I said, "Do it if you want to." So they did it.

Karen Wolter: And then five minutes later they made a rule that people couldn't pay as we had. But there was no rule before.

Farmer: (laughter) So that's kind of how this thing evolved, just trial and error with different things, different people's opinions?

Karen Wolter: But we had been charter members when they started it.

Farmer: Put it in a lot of volunteer time, I'm sure.

Karen Wolter: Yes, we did.

Russel Wolter: Yes, they gave me an honorary membership, which they've stopped doing. They sent me a newsletter with a lifetime membership. But they've stopped sending it now. If I get moved, I'll request that they honor that again. Because it's kind of interesting to follow how much trouble they have in the local club. (laughter)

Farmer: How do you mean?

Karen Wolter: Well, just keeping things going.

Russel Wolter: Yes, you have to have people who are willing to be a secretary and a president and the committees. And if you're farming, you have little time for that. I mean, if you're really farming.

Farmer: Oh, you mean in the local chapters.

Russel Wolter: Yes. Barney Bricmont was ideal because he had a garden eight by twenty, or something. So he had time. And he was intelligent and he was fair.

Karen Wolter: He had great stamina.

Russel Wolter: Yes. But for the most part, it's hard to be a farmer and help much.

Other Organizational Activities

Farmer: Did you ever belong to any other kinds of organizations, like a Grange or something like that?

Russel Wolter: Farm Bureau only.

Farmer: The Farm Bureau. And is that something where you have to attend meetings to keep up?

Karen Wolter: No, they send you letters.

Farmer: So is that more, they're giving you advice and alerting you to rules?

Russel Wolter: Yes. Rules, yes. And tax— Things that are happening in the news that we should be concerned with.

Karen Wolter: Russel was on the local Soil Conservation Board.

Russel Wolter: That was kind of a local social gathering.

Farmer: Really? It sounds very official, the Soil Conservation Board.

Russel Wolter: Well, it is. We did official work. But we enjoyed seeing everybody once a month, people you don't see ordinarily because he's up the valley and—

Karen Wolter: Other people are in Salinas.

Russel Wolter: Yes, And you wouldn't see them for any other reason except going to Soil Conservation.

Farmer: Now, was that organization all different kinds of farmers, not just organic?

Russel Wolter: All different kinds. Cattle. Ranchers.

Karen Wolter: A man from down in Big Sur. He was married to a Pfeiffer, one of the Big Sur Pfeiffers who started the [Pfeiffer] Big Sur [State] Park area.

Farmer: And was Soil Conservation trying to prevent runoff and losing the topsoil, that sort of thing.

Russel Wolter: Yes. They had a program that you could apply for. And the fact is, [when] we put our first underground pipe in, I think they paid (the government) about half the cost. They recommended that they would pay half the cost, and that's about what they paid. Very helpful. That was a new one, when transite was first coming out. Before that everybody had cement pipe. In an earthquake, everything cracks and leaks. Transite wouldn't. It would give.

Karen Wolter: It would shift.

Farmer: Oh. So what did that pipe do, actually?

Russel Wolter: It would take water to the different areas of the farm so I could irrigate.

Farmer: I see.

Karen Wolter: It's an underground pipeline, so you don't have to pick it up and move it out of the way each time you disc or something. It's much more convenient.

Farmer: And it's deep enough so the disking doesn't affect it.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Family Farming

Farmer: Okay. So it sounds like you got into farming to help your family.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: And you became the person who was most committed to it among your brothers and sisters, to help your mother.

Russel Wolter: I didn't want my sisters to do it because I've seen other— I don't want to seem derogatory, but other females try to hang onto their parents' farm. And they lose their femininity. They look too tough. They have to be tough to be farmers. They would make a great farmer's wife, but they shouldn't be farmers.

Farmer: I see.

Russel Wolter: If they're married already there's probably a better chance. But if they're not married, it's hard to attract somebody if you look tough. But you have to be! (laughter)

Farmer: You have to be. Yes. So your mother was keeping the farm, and keeping it together for the family, and you basically became the main farmer?

Karen Wolter: Well, you've got it kind of twisted.

Farmer: Okay, tell me.

Karen Wolter: His dad got sick, but his mother died first.

Farmer: Oh!

Karen Wolter: I think you're thinking that the mother was taking care of the farm.

Farmer: Yes, carrying on.

Karen Wolter: As a young adult, Russel ended up running the farm, because then his father died, what, a year and a half later, or something?

Russel Wolter: Yes. (cough)

Farmer: Now, would you say it was the hard farming life that was so hard on their health?

Russel Wolter: No. Just, I guess, bad luck. And in those days back then, nobody had any rules against eating too much fat. I think his diet was bad.

Karen Wolter: That was your dad. But your mother had bad health.

Russel Wolter: Well, from the very beginning, yes. Then it improved, but after twenty years of good health she had a bleeding ulcer and passed away. You wouldn't die nowadays of a bleeding ulcer.

Farmer: I see. Probably not.

Karen Wolter: They had a little store that they started in what, 1940? Your mom ran the store, and your dad made deliveries.

Russel Wolter: Yes, 1940, I think it was.

Farmer: Was that all vegetables, or did you sell meat?

Russel Wolter: Meat was all on the QT, because that was World War II, and we didn't have a license to sell the meat. We just sold the meat to people who knew us because it was a source of income. But it wasn't legit. And no one questioned it. We just wrapped it up.

Karen Wolter: Also, at that time you had to have stamps to buy things.

Farmer: During the war.

Karen Wolter: And people could buy it direct from the farmer without stamps.

Farmer: I see.

Russel Wolter: True.

Farmer: Were there victory gardens around here?

Russel Wolter: Sure.

Farmer: What do you remember about that?

Russel Wolter: All the Italians would have their victory gardens in town. I think out in the ranches you might have some. You can call it a victory garden, but you'd have that garden anyway, because that's what you do when you're away from town. It's really a name for the city.

Farmer: But it wasn't started by the government. It wasn't a government program. It was somebody's idea.[5]

Russel Wolter: Well, the government encouraged it.

Farmer: Yes. But people started it. It was grassroots.

Russel Wolter: And all that's gone away now. Very few people garden anymore.

Karen Wolter: People are so disconnected. But I've found, like at farmers' market, people will come through and talk to you, and everybody lived on a farm or had a grandfather that had a farm. It's just that we've gotten so advanced now, and so technological that people are more specialized. So they've lost some of that. They all have very fond memories. But it's not the same. Being a kid growing up on a farm, or visiting, is different than working a farm. You have these fond memories. You know how long days are when you're a kid, and the sleepy days and— (laughter) It's different getting to go feed the chickens rather than *having* to feed the chickens.

Farmer: Before school. Yes.

Karen Wolter: Russel's mother raised chickens. Was that during the war?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: She sold the eggs to help augment—

Russel Wolter: Dad milked the cow and I delivered the milk, almost after sundown to different people who had ordered it.

Farmer: You mean people close by? How did you get there, on the horse?

Russel Wolter: No, no, no. No, you walked. It wasn't very far. It was up on another homestead. I guess it was less than a half mile away, all the people who were ordering milk.

Farmer: Was it all farms around here at that time?

Russel Wolter: Oh, they were mostly all farms. But they were mostly small farms. They were not as big as they are today.

Karen Wolter: We were the last farmers in the [Carmel] valley, row crop farmers, or truck farmers, to actually raise crops on their own soil. Other pieces were rented out. Now Russel's family rents out this land to Earthbound Farms, so we were able to still keep it an organic farm. But we farmed other pieces up and down the valley. We'd rent from people. We rented down on the Odellos for a while. It was beautiful soil down there.

Russel Wolter: Yes. And up there at the MacKenzie property.

Karen Wolter: And Mrs. Coleman's property.

Russel Wolter: Right.

Labor Challenges

Farmer: So did you have a lot of workers? How did you manage all this?

Russel Wolter: Oh, sometimes I guess I'd have as high as twenty.

Farmer: Tell me about that. What it was it like to hire people and how did you do that?

Russel Wolter: It was easy, but we usually picked Hispanics, and when we needed more men we'd ask them if they knew somebody else that could come. They'd have them come in a couple of weeks, or right away. They might be looking for a job already. We didn't try to mix it up. We did hire some women, but not very often.

Karen Wolter: But those were usually the wives of some of the guys who helped out.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: Tell about the year that we opened it up and ran an ad. (laughter) That was interesting. You were an equal opportunity employer.

Russel Wolter: Oh, yes. We were having trouble finding enough people to help us pick our fava beans for market. So we ran an ad in a local paper. And we did get a pretty good response. One response was from two middle-aged ladies, maybe thirty-five. They just did it for companionship for themselves. And then when they went home, it was quitting time, they were getting themselves all prettied up. I was just curious. I said, "What are you doing that for?" They said, "Well, you never know who you meet on the way home!" (laughter) I got a kick out of that.

Karen Wolter: They would only work the hours that their kids were in school. We were pretty flexible about time. We had a man who only had one leg that came and picked. He did okay.

Russel Wolter: And then there was the Taylor family.

Karen Wolter: Yes, the whole family came and picked beans.

Russel Wolter: They got paid by the hour. We had to go through at the end of the week and add up all the hours times the rate, take off the SDI, FICA. And we'd make mistakes. If you short them, then you have to make it up next week, give them more. But if you overpay them, we didn't correct that.

Karen Wolter: But our accountant used to get mad at us. We ended up taking over the books because we didn't want anyone getting mad at us. (laughter)

Russel Wolter: Well, we finally went to night school and to summer school to take accounting.

Karen Wolter: So we could do our own.

Russel Wolter: So we could do our own books.

Farmer: So you never had a crew boss or a manager.

Russel Wolter: [We had] one guy who was Negro.

Karen Wolter: No. Angelito, first. He came up from Mexico to work with your dad.

Russel Wolter: Right, he came up legally. Most of the others were illegal. He would instruct some of the orders, what to pick the next day. He'd talk to the other guys. But we'd talk to the other guys too, if they wanted to talk. There were no outhouses. That finally came in, a law to have outhouses.

Karen Wolter: But we had a portable toilet available.

Russel Wolter: We did?

Karen Wolter: Some of the time we did, up at the place, Edith's and—

Russel Wolter: Oh yes, especially when it became a law. So we complied.

Karen Wolter: But they had the workers' house and they had the store here that they could go up to if they needed to. So that part was taken care of. But after a while the government regulated that you have to have one, and practically watched to see if you rented each year.

Russel Wolter: Yes, U.S. Immigration came once in a while and you'd see the workers all run like a wave towards the river.

Farmer: Oh.

Karen Wolter: The rule was you couldn't harbor a person, but you could hire them at that time. If Immigration asked if there was somebody in your house, and somebody was in there, you'd have to be sure you let them [the Immigration officials] in, because otherwise you'd be breaking the law too.

Russel Wolter: We were harvesting some lettuce on Schulte Road. And we were way in the field, and all the men were illegal. Actually, I don't know that for sure. We assumed—

Karen Wolter: Not all of them. Angelito wasn't illegal.

Russel Wolter: We assume they were illegal. Karen had to go out for something, and she got to the edge of the road and she honked her horn. She honked her horn!

Karen Wolter: Because I saw the green Immigration car go by.

Farmer: Oh, they drove around with the emblem.

Karen Wolter: Well, they have that kind of odd color green.

Russel Wolter: And emblems on the side.

Karen Wolter: And the emblems on the side, too. You see that color green, you know exactly what it is.

Russel Wolter: We couldn't figure out what she— We couldn't make heads or tails of what she was saying. So we didn't move.

Karen Wolter: You didn't do anything.

Russel Wolter: So in rushes an Immigration car. It came in so swift and fast there was no point— We didn't have any time to beat it. The guys stayed right there, kept on packing, didn't move or make an effort to move. And Immigration never got out of the car. They backed up and left. They figured everybody must be legal. Why waste our time with these guys? And we were so proud of ourselves!

Karen Wolter: But later on when they did make it a law you couldn't hire— We wouldn't hire anybody. We had to be really careful about the paperwork they had and stuff. So we wouldn't hire anybody. It was like a $2500 fine, and we just

couldn't afford to be fined. I was sorry for the guys that worked for us, but by that time hadn't the government had a program where people could get here legally who had been working for a long time?

Farmer: Oh, an amnesty program?

Russel Wolter: They had a lot of programs. But anyway, we found out the neighbors were—

Karen Wolter: Yes, all the men would say, "We have somebody else that wants to work." These were the guys that were here and had gone through an amnesty and they had buddies. We'd say, "We can't hire them." And they'd say, "Well, your neighbors are doing it!" We'd say, "Maybe they can afford it. But we can't." It was amazing. I really thought it was going to kill us, that we wouldn't have a labor force. But all our men stayed with us. It worked out. But it was a very scary time.

Russel Wolter: We used to have a labor house. A house with free rent. And then the problem with that, the workers' friends would come by in the middle of the night and they can't say, "no," because maybe he'll help me out next time. We had twenty-two, twenty-three guys in the house. And ladies of the night would come down. I'd have to go down and kick them out.

Karen Wolter: Russel would have to go down and settle fights.

Russel Wolter: Finally someone had to. Someone—

Karen Wolter: The neighbors turned us in, I think, from Quail Lodge. They wouldn't tell us who had said it, but we're right next door to a five star hotel! (laughter)[6]

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: So the health inspector came out and said, "You can only have five people in this house." We had twenty. So I said; "Well, I can't select five people." So I said, "Everybody goes."

Karen Wolter: We thought, there goes our labor force.

Russel Wolter: But they all went to Seaside, found housing they paid rent for, and paid it themselves. And we never lost a day's work. Soon we remodeled that, and now we get rent from it.

Russel Wolter: And the men all seemed real happy after that, too. They didn't have a problem with it. More than once, we would go to Salinas, to skid row.

Russel Wolter: Oh, yes. Fava bean time.

Karen Wolter: We would hire men over there. A lot of those ended up staying with us. Some of them stayed here in the valley and became businessmen on their own. We have this wonderful Mexican subculture here. There're families up the Carmel Valley—their daughters have become attorneys and schoolteachers. And the sons have done real well, carpenters and things. They all are kind of related, and are from the same area in Mexico.

Russel Wolter: Yes. Oaxaca.

Karen Wolter: A lot of them have done very, very well. One is a tree trimmer. He has his own business and lots of employees underneath him. It's really interesting how these people have settled here. They've been able to stay here and buy homes. It's just wonderful to see.

I remember the first time I saw the U.S. Immigration agents come. Because my dad was from a farming family, but then he was a schoolteacher, I never was around Immigration. The first time they came around and made a sweep up at Pilot's Farm, I was there and they grabbed these men and handcuffed them. And I just wept, because these are really fine people. They sent their money back to their home in Mexico. They weren't doing drugs or things like that. And they would support their families. Now they're being deported! They were hardworking people. It was a tragedy to me. I had never seen it, and it was very upsetting. I get very emotional.

Farmer: So you said you never lost a crop. You never ran out of labor even with all these different events.

Russel Wolter: No. We had to go to Salinas every once in a while to get extras, but never lost a crop for lack of labor. That's not so true anymore. California is having a very hard time now.

Karen Wolter: Yes, we just heard recently that down in Hanford they had put in peach trees, and they had them in the ground only two years. And they pulled them all out and put in walnuts and almonds, because they don't have to have laborers to pick them. They can shake the trees, and go through with a vacuum or something and pick them up. There's no hand labor.

Farmer: Wow. So that's going to change the nature of what is available.

Karen Wolter: I would think so. But China also planted how many acres of peaches, or something? We heard there are huge numbers that are all going to mature soon.

Russel Wolter: You'd think all the land was over there, wouldn't you?

Farmer: Yes. Well, several people have told me that you were really influential in helping them get started in sustainable farming and organic farming.

Russel Wolter: I can't name a one! (laughter)

Farmer: You probably never learned their names, some of them. But they remember you, because you had established a way of growing crops that looked good enough to sell conventionally, that would pass.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Marketing and Distribution

Farmer: So can you tell the story about how you marketed your crops in those times?

Russel Wolter: Well, before I met Bud Capurro we just sold all our things locally, in stores in Carmel, Pacific Grove, and Monterey.

Farmer: To small stores?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: At that time there were lots of stores.

Russel Wolter: Yes. Also, there wasn't more than one farmer trying to sell to the same store. But then we met up with—

Karen Wolter: Actually you did B&L before you did Capurro.

Russel Wolter: Oh yes. When we had the fava beans we did have them shipped back to Chicago. We had to take them to Castroville. Gene Boggiatto was the broker.

Karen Wolter: Mr. Artichoke, I think, was his brand.

Russel Wolter: Yes. So then later, though, I can't remember the guy's name who used to sell produce—

Karen Wolter: Frank Corrigan from New York?

Russel Wolter: No, the guy who sold in Carmel. He sold locally. Jim Turner.

Karen Wolter: Oh, Gene Griswald was one of them. But that wasn't Gene. The guy who started Coast Produce.

Russel Wolter: Yes. Anyway, I asked him, "Who can use some more product?" He suggested going to Capurro. So I went over there. They were a big operation, but they only had three docks. Only three trucks would be loaded at once. He was very, very supportive. So we started a relationship that lasted until I retired. I can't say enough for him. He was honest. We have dealt with a lot of people

that aren't honest. And he was honest, and I found him very trustworthy. The checks came on time. That was a big help to us.

Karen Wolter: Oftentimes he paid us before he'd been paid. At certain times of the year, it's real tight to get started, because you're picking up again and your labor force has gotten big, and they would still pay us. And we had been selling also for B & L, wasn't it?

Russel Wolter: Yes, when we saw the difference in price— B & L would always have, we called it adjustments. It means a reduction in how much money you get. A thirty-dollar adjustment on this, a forty-dollar adjustment on that.

Farmer: What was the reason?

Russel Wolter: Something wasn't quite right. The lettuce wasn't packed just right. Or it was too old.

Karen Wolter: Or when it got there it wasn't in good condition.

Russel Wolter: Any reason. And you can't dispute it. The produce is sold and eaten already.

Karen Wolter: And at the same time we found Bud, after we'd been selling to the other people.

Russel Wolter: That's right. So we sold the same product to Bud and the same product to B&L this one particular time. And when the checks came back, we got the full price from Bud Capurro, and these guys had all these adjustments on it.

We said, "That's it." We just went with Bud. He's just such a nice, easy man to deal with.

Farmer: He's in Moss Landing. Is that right?

Russel Wolter: Yes. He's very, very low profile.

Karen Wolter: And he helped us at the beginning when we were selling with him. Most—he [inaudible] about the hippies. Because they are conventional farmers, themselves. And we were bringing produce in wire bounds and WGA crates, and things. That label that you saw in there, Down to Earth, he actually had his daughter, Pam, design that for us. He researched it and got the label for us.

Farmer: So this was when you were selling as organic. You were certified by Rodale Press with [Capurro], and later by CCOF.

Karen Wolter: With him [first], yes. Yes, it was certified at about that time. I guess we all started in about the same time.

Russel Wolter: Right. It was strictly Topless before that. That's [Capurro's] brand. And soon he gave us our organic brand, Down to Earth. It doesn't mean we weren't shipping [with the] Topless [brand as well]. It's just that those who wanted organic paid a different price for that Down to Earth produce.

Karen Wolter: He would sell it as organic.

Farmer: And that was a better price, right?

Karen Wolter: At that time, yes. There have been many times in our shipping that—

Russel Wolter: It would just come out that we would get less money for organic. We never figured out why, but it wasn't very often.

Karen Wolter: The short supply in the commercial market, even though it's commercial, and we'd sell more volume and also we'd get a better price. But it wasn't always— Everybody would say, "Oh, you get a premium." Well, sometimes you don't.

Farmer: Yes. But he was always looking out for you, it sounds like.

Russel Wolter: It seemed like.

Karen Wolter: We'd heard stories like Stuart Fischman would put in a complaint about our— Stuart Fishman was with a store in San Francisco.

Russel Wolter: Rainbow Markets.

Karen Wolter: And he'd go in to talk to Bud, and Bud would just swell up like a grizzly bear [and say]—

Farmer: (laughter)

Karen Wolter: "Don't start making comments about Russel's lettuce."

Russel Wolter: Bad comments.

Karen Wolter: Yes, you want somebody on your side selling it. And then our wintertime quality would always drop, and my dad would call it Down to Dirt, instead of Down to Earth. (laughter)

Farmer: Ooh! (laughter) Just because it's harder to wash off when it's raining and muddy.

Karen Wolter: Yes. And your lettuce will be shorter a lot of time. It's not springtime quality. He loved to tease us.

Farmers' Markets

Farmer: So did you have anything to do with farmers' markets?

Russel Wolter: Yes. We had a good time with that. It's such a joy to sell at farmers' market. My wife said that she liked it because it made a great release. I didn't have to tell her the old jokes anymore. I could tell them to somebody who hadn't heard them! (laughter)

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: She enjoyed that. And then people would ask her, after I'd told a few jokes they'd ask, "Do you live with this guy?" And she'd say, "If you call that living!" (laughter)

Farmer: (laughter) Oh, that's neat. So there is a sense, even though you have workers around and everything, it can get a little isolating on the farm and the farmers' market is a place to see people regularly.

Karen Wolter: Well, I think the big thing about farmers' markets is, you know when you wholesale everything you don't get any of the kudos. You hear the bad things, or what you could improve. But with farmers' market, people come back because they really like your product.

Farmer: Oh, that's nice.

Karen Wolter: We used to, every year, much to my husband's chagrin, go to the Monterey County fair. And people would see your product. It would get some advertisement out there for you, too. But they started charging to enter the fair. We were doing farmers' market, and we said, "At farmers' market we win every day. Why are we spending our time coming here and spending money at the fair?" So we quit doing the fair, because it takes a lot of time to enter because you want everything matched and true to type and whatever. It took just too much time out of our days. We'd always be late for deliveries, and Russel would be mad because he was having to do this. (laughter) He loved it afterwards, but he didn't like it before. It hung over him.

Russel Wolter: The interesting thing about the fair was that there was a farmer there that was buying all his entries. We knew he was doing this.

Karen Wolter: Well, not his lettuce. I think he only bought his fruit. And his tomatoes.

Russel Wolter: Okay, it wasn't all his entries. But buying a lot of them. Peaches and tomatoes, especially.

Karen Wolter: And nectarines, yes.

Russel Wolter: We told our farm advisor what he was doing, and they wouldn't do anything about it because he brings in so much stuff.

Farmer: I get it.

Russel Wolter: I said, "Wait a minute! I'm missing something here. This is supposed to be a fair for showing local produce. And you don't care if this guy ships in whatever." That helped me leave, too.

Karen Wolter: They would go fill out his entry blank for him. We had to fill out our own. It just was wrong.

Farmer: So at the farmers' market where did you first start taking your stuff?

Russel Wolter: I think it was Monterey.

Karen Wolter: No. Darryl and Bunny Willis used to take [our produce] down to the farmers' market at Live Oak School near Santa Cruz. We had apricots at that time, and they'd take apricots over and they sold really well. It was kind of a seasonal thing.

Russel Wolter: We started going here in Monterey, right?

Karen Wolter: Yes. Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Markets.[7] They had markets in Aptos. And the Salinas market used to be at Hartnell [College].

Russel Wolter: Now they do Carmel here.

Karen Wolter: Yes. They do one at Crossroads, and then they do one at MPC [Monterey Peninsula College].[8] The Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Market is

farmer-run. It was started by farmers. and it's run by farmers. Jerry Thomas and Nick Pasqual.[9] Nick and Jerry were real instrumental in starting one over there. Particularly Nick, I think.

Farmer: So it means that what you bring you've grown yourself? Is that how it works?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: Certified that you're the farmer of it. Some markets are run where everybody can bring items. We used to have a rule about what percent could be non-farmers, so that all the money isn't taken by the guy with the silkscreen shirts and the bakery goods.

Russel Wolter: And once a month you had to be there yourself.

Karen Wolter: The farmer had to be there himself.

Russel Wolter: That way you wouldn't get somebody like Earthbound.[10] They're not going to come down themselves.

Karen Wolter: The owner is not going to come.

Russel Wolter: If you are high enough up in the money bracket, you probably won't go to farmers' market. So that gives a chance for the lower echelons to get in.

Karen Wolter: To survive. The small farm.

Farmer: Yes. Do you think that's still the rule?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: Oh, it is for the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets. It's still the rule. There's a long waiting line to get into it. We charge a membership fee, and then also a stall fee. Then the organization does advertising for you. They advertise the whole market. And then they run sometimes, special events along with it so you get more people to come and see.

Farmer: And those musicians. They've been there for a long time. At least at the Cabrillo [College, in Aptos] one.

Karen Wolter: Some of them, yes.

Russel Wolter: They are just there to provide atmosphere.

Farmer: Right.

Karen Wolter: Yes, but we were there. I used to sell there when I was pregnant. It's been twenty-seven years that we were selling at Monterey Peninsula College. I used to sell with them [her children] on my hips.

Farmer: And that was Thursday afternoons? So one day a week.

Karen Wolter: Yes. And we used to go to one in Hollister.

Russel Wolter: That was very short-lived.

Karen Wolter: We quit that one because it was—

Russel Wolter: They don't have the people.

Karen Wolter: At that time they didn't. I think they probably do now. Because Hollister has really grown.

Russel Wolter: That was a long ways to go for us, and just sit there. (laughter)

Karen Wolter: It was Friday night. We had a Saturday and a Sunday market. And we had to be up at five to load our truck. We couldn't load it the night before because the produce gets too hot stacked on the truck. You want everything spread out and watered down.

Russel Wolter: Yes, a lot of the farmers go to twelve, maybe fourteen markets in the state of California. But you know it's not the local farmer going.

Farmer: No, he's got people.

Russel Wolter: Yes, he *has* to have people.

Karen Wolter: Well, one time, Russel, you went to the one in Palo Alto.

Russel Wolter: One time. I barely made it back.

Karen Wolter: Yes. We split up and went to two different markets. It was too hard. We also had our family, and were doing town deliveries and wholesale. And we were doing all the delivering ourselves. It was just too much. We went back down to three markets. Then one Sunday we didn't have enough to go on a Sunday. And it happened a couple of weeks in a row that we didn't have enough to go to the Sunday market, picked and ready to go. So our daughter said to us, "Does this mean that we get to do things on a Sunday, and go to church and be like a family?" And we said, "Oh, oh." So we immediately dropped that one.

Farmer: How old was she when she said that?

Karen Wolter: She was like a freshman or a sophomore in high school when she said it.

Russel Wolter: Yes, we took a hint quick.

Karen Wolter: Yes, you can do without money. But you can't do without seeing your kids. So we took time off. And it worked out really well because that also gave us time to do little things around here, and we could do things with the kids. Because you're on a treadmill. I don't think a lot of farmers know that that's what they're on.

Challenges of Farming

Farmer: Yes. I mean, even without animals. Dairy farming—

Karen Wolter: Yes, we're so glad we don't have a cow. Or goats. We have a cousin who's going to start a goat farm. She has no idea what she's getting into. But we wish her well. She wants to make cheese.

Russel Wolter: But she's in a position where she can pull out of it if it doesn't work out. Sometimes farmers get into things and they can't pull out. You've got to slug it out until— Do or die.

Karen Wolter: Well, most farmers now, the wife or the husband works off the farm. We both worked together instead of working off.

Russel Wolter: They tell you that farming doesn't pay.

Karen Wolter: Small farms.

Farmer: Yes. I was surprised to learn how many people lease land, that it's not a family farm, family-owned property. I mean, this is unusual, to [own this land], I think. For the newer farmers coming in.

Russel Wolter: Well, they can't buy the land.

Farmer: Not around here.

Russel Wolter: Even if we were where land is cheap. If you are just starting out, you don't have the capital, and you spend all your capital buying land, what are you going to do for a tractor? So you have to make some choices until you have money.

Farmer: Yes, some of the younger farmers, they do big, fancy farm dinners on the farm in harvest season, and bring people out and get them interested in fresh food.

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: But it's a lot of effort.

Karen Wolter: Yes, it is. We had people come through a lot to our farm. But we weren't as intelligent as Earthbound. Because Earthbound charges people to come see their farm. On a Saturday or a Sunday they'll have a special event, and you come and you see the farm, and maybe you pick potatoes, or this is the flower one, or come check out the insects, or whatever. They are given a bag of produce. A person leads them through.

Russel Wolter: Twenty dollars a head.

Eco-Farm Conference

Karen Wolter: I think at the first Eco-Farm Conference they had, we must have had three hundred people come through our farm.[11]

Farmer: Oh, my gosh!

Karen Wolter: Russel gave a spiel. He stood up on a manure spreader, which we thought was probably appropriate, (laughter) and told them the history of the farm, and how he did the farming. A good three hundred people must have tramped through that farm that day. Now they've got it more limited. I think they take a busload or something.

Farmer: I actually went on that this year. Yes, that's exactly how they do it.

Karen Wolter: That's how they do it now? Boy, the first year was amazing. They came through all morning long.

More Reflections on Organic Farming

Farmer: So what are your plans for the farm now? What do you think will happen?

Russel Wolter: I don't know how to answer that.

Farmer: Do you have any dreams? What would you *like* to see?

Karen Wolter: Well, so far we are happy to stay in farming. We have no plans to sell it. We just moved our lot lines, trying to secure for our kids and our

grandkids, or whoever might decide at some point that they want to change the way that it is. But Russel has what, three nieces and nephews and an ex-brother in law who are all involved up in Washington state and Texas. And this has been since 1957 that the family has let us farm here, and then leave it in family. No one pushed ever. We've been so grateful and so lucky, because we understand a lot of families get torn apart once there's inheritance. They've all left it the way it is. Russel's sister lives here in Carmel Valley and she's not particularly anxious to sell. I think she likes it the way it is. So as long as it can support itself, I think people will be happy.

Russel Wolter: Yes, there will probably come a time that the grandkids will be further and further removed and say, "Why are we sitting on all this wonderful value when we could buy three Cadillacs?" Whatever they decide. It's theirs to decide. I won't be here to decide for them.

Farmer: Yes. But right now you're leasing it, and is it leased to organic farmers?

Karen Wolter: Earthbound is leasing it. And we even, like up here where it is leased out to the feed store, we have stipulated that you cannot use poisons on the soil, or synthetics.

Farmer: So that land where the [feed] store is, is your property also?

Russel Wolter: Yes. Family.

Karen Wolter: And right here where the tractors are. We keep it all as pure as we can.

Farmer: I understand that they are starting to try to use biodiesel in their tractors and trucks, too.

Russel Wolter: Who, Earthbound?

Farmer: Yes.

Russel Wolter: Yes. Well, they gave them a bad rap, the paper in San Francisco.

Farmer: For biodiesel?

Russel Wolter: No, Earthbound. For how they're shipping all this stuff with old-fashioned diesel. They thought that was terrible. I read it because I saw Myra [Goodman] and she said, "You ought to read that." She was all upset about it. It was a slam to Earthbound. Using regular diesel to go on a five-day trip to New York with their produce, that's probably more economical than the local farmer that takes three bunches of lettuce half a mile.

Farmer: You mean with regular gasoline.

Russel Wolter: Yes!

Karen Wolter: And do it five times a week. They quoted some lady that delivered to Whole Foods. And she takes nineteen heads of lettuce when it's ready in, you know, maybe two or three times a week.

Russel Wolter: That's not very efficient.

Karen Wolter: That's not as efficient as taking three hundred crates someplace. You know, I can see both sides of it. But it's something that could really be debated.

Farmer: It is the issue of the hour, what are we going to do about fuel.

Karen Wolter: It is right now. Yes, we had people mad at us, actually, when we were selling under a commercial label and also organic. They said, "You should send it all organic." But we can't sell it all organic. You've got to sell what you have to sell. We sold too much at that time for the way the organic system was set up.

Farmer: So this was in the early days of organic?

Karen Wolter: Yes, well, everybody was organic at one time. But this was in the sixties and seventies. I think it was more the seventies. And they were upset at us because we were selling a lot under the commercial label. We said, "What difference does it make? We're getting healthy, organic food out to people. They don't have to know that it's organic. The point is you want people to have healthy food." And they still wouldn't relax on it. They were very upset that—

Russel Wolter: I never understood the logic. They would like it if you could just mark the Topless boxes with a small dot so they could tell which ones were organic.

Karen Wolter: No, they would have bought Topless if they could have told which one was our organic produce.

Russel Wolter: That's what I'm saying.

Karen Wolter: They were upset that we were selling, and not selling it all under the organic label.

Russel Wolter: I thought they were upset because they couldn't distinguish which Topless boxes were organic.

Karen Wolter: That was the buyers. But this was the people in CCOF.

Russel Wolter: That's right. I forgot about that. Good thing you're here or it would be a very short story! (laughter)

Farmer: (laughter)

Karen Wolter: (laughter) That's because I have the gift for gab.

Russel Wolter: Well, how about Capurro deciding— Because we started composting horse manure from Pebble Beach. And Capurro, having had more organic farmers come in and selling their product, he had his own certifier to see how we would do. I thought I would be at the top of the list because it had been so long. I barely passed!

Farmer: Really?

Russel Wolter: Yes! Because I didn't have a cover on the horse manure, and there might be some *E. coli* that could escape or something. And I didn't have a trench around the horse manure to keep juices from leaking away. I used raw manure. I just barely, barely passed. In fact, I think now today I wouldn't qualify.

Karen Wolter: If they measured things the same way.

Farmer: Yes. So how were you supposed to learn about what you were supposed to do? Just when they inspect you or—

Russel Wolter: No, no. They'll tell you. But I wasn't aware that it was changing that fast that I would have to get a thirty-thousand-dollar composter.

Farmer: Oh, my gosh!

Karen Wolter: For the amount that we would use on our property. Or you could buy it from somebody, have a jobber come in and spread it for you.

Russel Wolter: Right. But when you compost you have to take the temperature to make sure it's all nice and hot, like it's supposed to be.

Karen Wolter: And water it.

Russel Wolter: And what the commercial guys do, like Earthbound, they have somebody else compost it, and then they have it certified, and then they bring it in and spread it. You don't have your own compost piles. But I was shocked that I was so low on the totem pole.

Farmer: Well, isn't it true that conventional farmers don't have anybody checking that stuff?

Russel Wolter: Why would they? They have nothing to check. "Do you grow?" Yes. (laughter)

Karen Wolter: No, but on sprays they have to be signed up with the Ag department.

Russel Wolter: That's right. They have more regulations.

Karen Wolter: There are a lot of regulations on them now. And they're starting to take away some of the sprays they can use. More regulation is coming all the time to all farming, I think.

Russel Wolter: Yes, we spread raw manure for years. In fact when this *E. coli* came out, I was talking to a local artichoke farmer. They said, "Russel, we spread raw manure all the time. We never even gave it a second thought. That was just the way we did it! And sometimes some would fly off and hit the crop getting ready to harvest. And we never— We thought well, we'll wash it out somewhere. Maybe not here, but somewhere." He said he can't understand how this *E. coli* gets out and infects everybody.

Farmer: Well, do you remember the actual *E. coli* itself, the bacteria being in the manure, like ten, fifteen, twenty years ago?

Russel Wolter: Well, that's supposed to be in all intestines, every animal, and humans.

Farmer: But were there outbreaks twenty years ago?[12]

Russel Wolter: Well, they couldn't detect outbreaks, whether it was from meat. If you got sick you didn't know what it was from.

Farmer: Oh, because they didn't have the tracing back of the packaging and all that stuff.

Russel Wolter: Right.

Karen Wolter: Right. They didn't have the same kind of scientific equipment. Even now, it seems like there is still some guesswork. It could get anywhere. But we had an instance where a guy called Russel up on the phone and said he'd done some testing of some lettuce in San Francisco at a store and he was writing this article. He said he found sprays on it and it was sold as organic.

Russel Wolter: But I interrupted right away and said—

Karen Wolter: Russel's hackles were going up (laughter)

Russel Wolter: I said, "I don't have any doubts that what you found was accurate. But when our products leave our farm we have no pesticides, no chemical fertilizers, nothing. It's good. But it could get sprayed on the way up." He said, "No, Mr. Wolter. I'm saying we found pesticides in all this product except *yours*!"

Farmer: Oh! (laughs)

Karen Wolter: But I didn't wait for that. You can't dispute what they found. I mean, I didn't think I could. But I can tell them, "If they had tested it down here, it would test free." But anyway, he was trying to give me a compliment. (laughter)

Farmer: Well, what would you say were your secrets of building up your soil to have such healthy vegetables?

Russel Wolter: There's no secrets. It's just green manure, chicken manure, and any other manure you can— Cow, horse bedding—I just put on all when I could.

Farmer: And what did you do for weeds? How did you manage?

Russel Wolter: Just— Either you lose your crop or you try and hand hoe, yes. Because we have a lot of weeds.

Farmer: So you had people, not in harvest season, but all the time.

Russel Wolter: Yes, usually the harvesters are weeding before the order comes in what to cut for the day. Then they all stop and harvest, and they go back to weeding. There's a lot of weeds. In fava beans we grow we had a flame cultivator. We would burn the weeds off over the top, because the bean is thicker than weeds. It can take a burn and not die. The weeds would die.

Karen Wolter: Ours was tractor-mounted. But you could hand—

Russel Wolter: It would spray a flame out about that wide, and you'd go over each row, four rows at a time. That worked out pretty well.

Karen Wolter: People do it with onions.

Russel Wolter: Earthbound does it. The only problem with it, or the drawback is that you can only get the weeds that are above the ground. The weed that was

just coming through, that will come through the next day, it'll still come through. So the next day you can look out there and you still have a weed crop.

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: But you can only do it until— Like when lettuce comes up you can't burn.

Karen Wolter: And when you sell, like the baby lettuces that are now a major crop for people, the baby vegetables, they harvest them so fast and turn them over so fast that they get more crops off of a year, and also it kills the weeds more. We would leave the crops in. We'd have a real weed problem because we'd maybe hold onto our crops longer to get the last little bit and maybe sell it to town or something. You'd done your major picking for wholesale, and then maybe you'd hang onto it a little bit too long and it would go to seed. Or pumpkins and squash, dried squashes.

Russel Wolter: Sweet corn. They left the weeds. It's too long of a crop. It takes too long to get the crop out. So we used to let the weed seeds sprout.

Karen Wolter: Get more weeds. You'd have more problems following those crops than others.

Russel Wolter: Earthbound's type of farming is terrific for getting rid of weeds, after maybe three or four years. Because they only have a real short span on their crop, and they disc it right up before the weeds go to seed.

Farmer: And it seems like they just sort of happened on this crop that you could grow quickly and over and over, and it ended up being really lucrative.

Russel Wolter: Well, they explored the market on salad greens. Before we would never cut a premature lettuce. You'd wait until it got a full head and pack it in a box, and you'd take it home and make a salad out of it. These are little tiny greens, and it's already made for you in a salad bag. So you can disc up the land again.

Farmer: So that was an innovation.

Karen Wolter: They came in at a good time and they were very creative.

Farmer: Well, I remember, I had small children when those bags came out and I was like, "Thank heavens!" Because I didn't have to tear up the lettuce. I didn't have time after working all day.

Karen Wolter: Well, that's it. See the parents are working, both of them, now. So it's not the same kind of thing.

Farmer: Yes. That was the huge difference. So it caught on.

Karen Wolter: But I still wash; when I buy the bagged lettuce I still wash it. A lot of people don't, but I was always taught you wash your vegetables. You don't know what's gone on, who has handled it, or whatever.

Russel Wolter: Well, I have one story I want to tell you about Capurro. We had an infestation of aphids in our leaf lettuce. Bud couldn't sell it. So Bud said, "Russel, why don't you just spray the outer edges [of your fields]. That way

maybe in time they'll leave." "I didn't want to tell him no, because I'd be a liar if I didn't do it. I said, "Okay, I'll think about that." I didn't do it. The aphids did leave, but we lost about half the crop and salvaged the other half. That was in the springtime. In the fall, he was showing me his new icebox. He said, "Oh, Russel, I meant to ask you. How did that work out when you sprayed the edges and so forth?" I said, "Spray? I thought you said pray!"

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: "I did it twice a week." He almost dropped to his knees. (laugh) It was a very funny time. It was really great.

Karen Wolter: I think one of the fun things too, were the different times that you had infestations of beneficials. Like when you used to sell to R&M and you'd bring the lettuce in.

Russel Wolter: What was that one Syrphid fly larvae? We had a real infestation of fly larvae and they're very beneficial. But people don't like them crawling on their vegetables.

Karen Wolter: They look like a little worm, an almost transparent worm.

Russel Wolter: We'd go in usually after hours. He'd give us a key and we'd put it in the icebox so it's all ready to go in the morning. Later on I talked to him about it, he said, "Oh yes, when I went in the icebox to get your stuff, there were worms all over! All over! Because they are cold-activated. And it was cold in there and they all left the produce. They didn't get a single complaint on the lettuce because they all had left! But there was a mess to clean up." (laughter)

Farmer: Yes! (laughter)

Russel Wolter: Yes, but you see he was a very supportive person.

Farmer: Yes. And did you ever use the beneficials? Like could you market those to other people?

Karen Wolter: Oh, no. We never marketed them. But we had purchased some.

Russel Wolter: Ladybug larvae are the best. They work hard. Most of the Syrphid fly larvae are okay, but they are a little slow. They don't move as fast as ladybug larvae.

Karen Wolter: The problem with ladybugs is they fly away. But their larvae are really active. But when Russel used to sell to Levy Sentner in Monterey, he took lettuce in and they had lots of ladybugs in them. And they started creeping out of the boxes. They actually rejected the load.

Russel Wolter: I can see why.

Farmer: They didn't want to deal with it.

Russel Wolter: Right! It's still a bug.

Karen Wolter: But they're good and you can see them.

Russel Wolter: But who is going to take any? A restaurant can't cut those things in half and serve them. (laughter)

Farmer: Yes. But what about tomatoes, tomato worms and that?

Russel Wolter: Very little problem with tomato worms. I don't think anything bothered our tomatoes.

Karen Wolter: That one year, remember Darryl delivered the corn to Salinas someplace? I don't remember where he took it for us. Or he was talking to them anyway, the guys that grew head lettuce in Salinas and the corn borer was inside—

Russel Wolter: That was at the fair. The guys from the fair had the corn borer. We didn't have any spray on our corn, and these guys said, "No spray on your corn, but we have a worm inside our head lettuce that we can't even spray!"

Karen Wolter: We had no worms on our corn. The first of the season, if you plant it early enough it usually doesn't have worms. It's just a phenomenon. I think it's too early for that particular worm. So the guys were just, "How come we have this, and there are loads being knocked over because of the worm?" And we didn't have any in our corn. It was kind of fun.

Russel Wolter: We are very impressed with how many things are organic on the market now. Canned goods. Frozen food. Before all we had was fresh vegetables. That was it.

Farmer: Well, in order to put an organic label on those other things all the ingredients have to be from organic farms.

Russel Wolter: Right. Which is just tough. Cleaning all their vats. You can't cook it with a regular—

Farmer: I was looking at organic beef broth the other day. And it said "organic beef flavor" on it. So I thought, well, what's an organic beef? (laughter)

Karen Wolter: Well, for years at CCOF we really batted around certifying livestock. It's really hard because there are times when antibiotics— Or there is something regulated that, how are you going to control it. I don't know how they finally solved it. Since we weren't into livestock we didn't really follow it too much. But like, Janet Brians.[13] They've always raised cattle over in Hollister. And they grew vegetables and fruit, mainly fruit. Didn't they have apricots?

Russel Wolter: Yes. And some hay.

Karen Wolter: Anyway, they were always trying to promote getting it [organic meat certification] because they wanted their cattle to be certified. But I don't know that we ever actually—

Russel Wolter: Actually it is very difficult with livestock, because if they do get sick, and you don't get them well, that's a big loss. That's why, maybe at first (and this isn't a fact), but maybe the last six months there had to be no antibiotics. So they used to get partial organic. I don't know how they do it.

Karen Wolter: It's hard to get financing for organic farms. I think now it's easier because organic has gotten more mainstream. When Russel was first farming with his mom in the 1950s, you didn't tell people you were organic, because it was mainly "just a little bit different" people that were interested in it. It wasn't mainstream.

Farmer: And mainstream was easier to finance. So you didn't tell the bank or the loan people—

Russel Wolter: Well, one time I told the loan people and they said, "Well, how organic are you?" I didn't know how to answer that.

Farmer: Because they wanted you to sell stuff and make money and pay off your loan, right?

Russel Wolter: Yes. They were looking after for your welfare, which includes theirs. But then it might mean that you are going to promise to spray if a crop becomes infected. You just don't know.

Karen Wolter: And besides farming changing, banking changed. When we first went in, I think his name was Hallstone?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Karen Wolter: Mr. Hallstone. Very nice. We told him how we grew and stuff, and he was willing . . . Our crop was just about ready and we needed help to harvest it. He was very nice about it. It was practically a handshake deal. But ten years later you go in, or fifteen years later, and it's very cut and dried. And he actually told us that if he had started banking at that time, fifteen years later, he probably wouldn't have been able to be a banker.

Russel Wolter: He wouldn't qualify.

Farmer: Oh, because there were so many rules.

Karen Wolter: Yes. And the different attitudes. The other [old way] was, you were really trying to help the farmer. It was through production credit. So it's a farm banking business. But anyway, it was interesting to even hear it from him, how it had changed. We had seen the change in it also. Now I think all these organic farms get financing. But for a period of time it was real hard. And there was a time in there, too, one year, where we thought about spraying.

Farmer: Why?

Russel Wolter: Yes, we did think about it. Because aphids were just killing our horse bean plants. Not killing them, but they were not going to produce very many beans.

Karen Wolter: And it changes the quality of them.

Russel Wolter: So we ordered to have it aerial sprayed.

Karen Wolter: This was way back in the seventies before we got—

Russel Wolter: So we ordered the spray. But then that morning it was a little too foggy so he couldn't come over.

Karen Wolter: And we had to go tell all the neighbors to keep their kids in and their pets in.

Farmer: Ooh!

Karen Wolter: We had done the door-to-door with our neighbors, and told them. Actually, they were kind of excited. They thought, this airplane was going to go

through! (laughter) Well, people weren't as aware then as they are now about that kind of thing. This went on for, how many days?

Russel Wolter: I just remember it was two mornings. The next morning it was foggy, too. So we went up there anyway, and we looked at the bean crop. Maybe it was the third day. And the aphids were gone. They were just gone!

Farmer: How fortunate.

Russel Wolter: But we had to run full bore to the phone to stop them in case they were getting ready to come! We caught him in time so he didn't come. And we're still organic.

Karen Wolter: It's a lesson to be learned that a lot of things cure themselves if you allow time. The weather pattern changed. The wind came up, and the aphids died off, and they moved on. So it was a real eye-opener to us. We lost crops later on because we waited and it didn't happen.

Farmer: You mean the bugs got them?

Karen Wolter: Yes, the bugs get to be too much. But most of the time things work out if you can wait long enough and be patient. It was a real test, and we came close to not being organic. But I'm glad it worked out the way it did, because it restored our faith that we could keep going.

Farmer: Yes. I wonder if the people who were saying they were influenced by you, I wonder if they were remembering some of those early Eco-Farm tours?

And coming out here and just having no idea how to do organic farming. You told them.

Russel Wolter: I haven't a clue.

Farmer: Because that sounds like a lot of people to come through here, three hundred people.

Karen Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: If they saw that it could be done that may have been—

Karen Wolter: Well, people would tell us, they would hear that you can't raise broccoli. And [Amigo] Bob Cantisano would say, "But I know a guy who is doing it!" (laughter)[14]

Farmer: And that was you?

Karen Wolter: Yes! He would say, "It can be done. They've been doing it for years."

Russel Wolter: The *LA Times* wrote a story about it. And then he called back and said, "Well, we hear that you can't raise cauliflower." I said, "Well come on out. We are raising cauliflower." So he called back again, "You can't raise—" and he named a different crop. I can't remember what it was. I said, "No. We're raising that crop. We're doing that." And then finally he came back and said, "Well, the other farmer said, "They're not using organic seed." I said, "Well, there he's got me." Because all the seed was commercial [conventional]. (laughter)

Karen Wolter: At that time organic seed wasn't very much available. It's more available now.

Russel Wolter: Now it is. He had an article out about all these sprays they have in Mexico. The title was, "They don't even bother to count the dead." Well the other article I was going to try to find for you was *Time Magazine* had a cover article. It was, "Forget Organic. Eat Local."[15]

Farmer: Was that recent?

Karen Wolter: Yes, it was one of the Western editions.

Russel Wolter: I saved it for you. (leaves room to go look for it)

[recorder turned off]

Farmer: Okay, we're back. So you brought me out a *Time Magazine* that says, "Forget Organic. Eat Local." And what do you think about that?

Russel Wolter: It's so one-sided. It's slanted one way. It's not a fair article. And it's a slam to organics.

Farmer: Why do you think they're doing that?

Russel Wolter: Oh! Because it attracts attention. They don't like farmers shipping across the United States. But if we didn't do that, I don't think people would come out here and eat it. (laughter) So it's not a good article. You can't do what he's asking you to do. Maybe he doesn't know how difficult it is to get something

to eat in the middle of snow country. It can't be done. I mean, you could freeze it. But he's saying to buy the local produce.

Karen Wolter: But he's saying to do it even in California, to buy local.

Russel Wolter: There's nothing wrong with buying local. But if you have a chance, I think you should consider organic. "Just forget organic." That's pretty derogatory. This is not just a small article here. I mean, it is a small article. But they put it on the front page!

Farmer: It's the major story.

Russel Wolter: Yes. That's why I said they did a slam against Earthbound in the San Francisco paper. "Do you really think that a person who burns that much diesel taking his crop to market could possibly be organic?" What a statement is that? To say, "You know, he may be organic to his terms, but maybe not to my terms." We're not doing this in terms. We're doing what the government says you have to do.

Karen Wolter: A standard.

Russel Wolter: Yes! He said, "I think to be organic you should not burn diesel." Well, that would take care of the farm problem. There won't be any! (laughter) I mean, that's ridiculous! I don't quite understand how anybody logically, even in Arizona, how can you think of, well, I'll buy local. You look at all that cactus and you can't think of a cactus salad. How do you? Where are they coming from? "Buy local." It isn't there!

Farmer: In this area everything is available.

Russel Wolter: Right. Also in certain parts of New Jersey, the Garden State. But not all year round.

Farmer: Well, people used to can, and they used to freeze, and they used to eat seasonally.

Russel Wolter: That's great.

Karen Wolter: And they could still do that. But most people have a job that pays them way more than they spend on their food. Food is such an inexpensive, or a small part of a budget. Because farmers have gotten more efficient. And they are growing for how many more people than they used to?

Russel Wolter: It used to be, a hundred years ago, one farmer for twenty people. Now there are probably about two thousand people for every farmer.[16] I think on the average how many farmers we have versus how many farmers are in the population. You divide that and the answer comes out to about two thousand. Maybe it's higher now. And therefore we are all getting further away and removed from the farm. Even Earthbound can't shrink down to fifty acres and make it. They'd just go broke. Because they're making less profit per acre. They have to have more acreage to turn the corner.

Karen Wolter: Well, that's the same with the big commercial farmers, too. They're getting bigger.

Russel Wolter: Yes. They have to.

Karen Wolter: A family farm has got to be really specialized to make it. The little herb guy that's selling the fresh flowers in the little plastic container is doing well because that's something you have to do pretty much local. You can't ship them too far. But that's one of the things that Whole Foods is saying. What do they do, buy forty miles— How far is it? One hundred and fifty miles?

Russel Wolter: Maybe one hundred fifty miles. That may be more believable. But that's if you're in an area where there is something to buy within one hundred fifty miles! (laughter)

Karen Wolter: Well, I think they say, "when available." There's probably a codicil to it.

Russel Wolter: Right. We don't buy far away when it's not available.

Karen Wolter: But in some ways, this is trying to get back to the roots of meeting the farmer. On a positive side of that. Trying to have you meet the farmer, so you know how your food is grown.

Russel Wolter: To look on the good side, yes.

Farmer: Get more of a sense of where food comes from.

Karen Wolter: Right. And fuel is the big thing. They really object to spending a lot of fuel to get it there.

Russel Wolter: That's honorable.

Karen Wolter: Well, the efficiency is lost.

Russel Wolter: Can you see a donkey pulling a big truck and trailer because you wouldn't be burning any fuel.

Farmer: (laughter) You gotta feed the donkey.

Russel Wolter: Yes, but it's just grass along the side of the road. (laugh) I don't think people ate as much variety as they have a choice from now.

Farmer: Right. We're very used to a complete choice because of grocery stores and refrigeration.

Karen Wolter: Right. Well, people would come to market and say, "Well, I want this, (something in the middle of winter) like where are your tomatoes?" We'd say, "We can't grow tomatoes at this time of year." "Oh, you can't? They have them in the grocery store." Well, they came from Lima, Peru. They're flown in.

Farmer: So here's a question. Do you think that the original idea of organic, sustainable agriculture included all these other topics? Or was it really mostly just about not following what the pesticide salesmen were telling you?

Karen Wolter: For us, you mean?

Farmer: Yes, what was your experience with that?

Russel Wolter: I think it was just trying to get away from the pesticide poisoning, no matter how mild.

Farmer: And when the salespeople were first coming out trying to sell that stuff, I hear it was right after World War II because they'd been using it—

Russel Wolter: DDT?

Farmer: Yes.

Russel Wolter: It worked well.

Farmer: They needed a market because they'd been using it in the war industry and then what were they going to do? So they sold it to farmers. Some people have said that the sustainable agriculture movement was a reaction to that, a resistance to that.[17]

Russel Wolter: I was never aware of that.

Farmer: You just didn't want the chemicals on what you were eating.

Karen Wolter: His mother was buying from Deaf Smith County [Texas] the wheat to make her own bread. I mean, she did all of that kind of stuff. Her health looked really bad when she married Russel's dad. And with the organic foods that they were eating, her health improved. Then she stayed with unsprayed foods. She really, really believed in it.

Farmer: Because she could feel the difference in her physical health.

Karen Wolter: Her physical health changed, yes. I think that was why she believed so strongly in it. Russel had done all this reading. Every report that came from any university was saying, go with spray, and it would tell you the quantities that you were going to get off of it. All the figures said you should spray. They were selling it to the farmers. And then once you get everything out of balance, all your beneficials get killed. Everything gets out of balance. So they

just never started doing it. It was a different era, too. The fifties were different than now. When Russel did farm, his dad moved the cow from one area to another and ate things. It was a true family farm at that time.

Russel Wolter: The cow was staked out. When we were through with the lettuce crop we'd stake the cow, leave it there for ten days and have it eat all the lettuce that wasn't harvested. Dad would milk the cow, and there was always plenty of milk. In fact, one time he called me, he was down milking the cow. Whenever he called me, usually I was nervous that I had done something wrong. So I wasn't sure I wanted to run to his calling. But of course he saw me. There was nothing you can do but go. So I went down and said, "Yes, Dad. What's up?" He says, "Well, I've got too much milk. Can you drink a little bit off the top so it can all fit in the can?" Sure! (laughter)

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: I was so happy that there was something easy to do. (laughs)

Karen Wolter: Well, we raised hogs too, but with the hogs we did use—

Russel Wolter: Oh, vaccination.

Karen Wolter: We had to vaccinate them. That was a state policy for tuberculosis. You did that so you could pay your taxes.

Russel Wolter: Yes. The county didn't want us to have the hogs there. But if you tell them you want to augment your income to pay your taxes then they can't deny you.

Karen Wolter: Well, they were less able to. Because we were zoned for it.

Russel Wolter: Anyway, times have changed. That's one thing we can always be sure of. It's going to change.

Karen Wolter: Yes, and we are in a very expensive area. The land values are really high. Russel and I used to tell people. They'd say, "You're a farmer?" And we'd say, "Yes. It's an intelligence test and we failed." (laughter) Everybody is selling their land off and they have all these big houses and other things. But you know, we are so happy the way we are. We don't need all these things that other people think they need. So we were happy going along failing our intelligence test.

Rodale and Organic Certification

Farmer: Yes. I had another question about the Rodale part. Do you remember if the actual family members came here? Or did they send employees or agents to come and talk to you?

Karen Wolter: Well, one time it was the son, wasn't it?

Farmer: Robert Rodale?

Russel Wolter: Right. But I'm talking about the inspector.

Karen Wolter: Oh, I thought she meant at the conference.

Farmer: What was the experience at the conference?

Russel Wolter: It was a long time ago.

Karen Wolter: I might have that magazine, still.

Russel Wolter: It could be.

Karen Wolter: They had more than one meeting.

Russel Wolter: Yes. It was overwhelming, as I recall, just to be invited. You weren't the in crowd. But there were a lot of people there.

Karen Wolter: They came from all over.

Russel Wolter: Yes, they did. And they all talked very enthusiastic.

Farmer: Did you say this was in San Francisco?

Karen Wolter: Yes.

Russel Wolter: Yes, they had one down south too.

Karen Wolter: Yes, there was one in San Luis Obispo, which was a small one. The one in San Francisco was held in— I don't know which hotel it was, but it was the Hilton or something.

Russel Wolter: It was very impressive that we were there.

Karen Wolter: And then besides that, they wanted Russel to speak. Russel is so cute. He always gets so emotional. (laughter)

Russel Wolter: Yes. She made me practice my speech. Because she had seen someone give a speech the day before, and he didn't have any rehearsal, and she

said he didn't come over very well. So I practiced. I would be perspiring in my shorts. (laughter)

Farmer: (laughter)

Russel Wolter: But Karen said that speech came off very nicely. If it pleases her, then I'm happy.

Farmer: And what did they want you to talk about? What did you talk about?

Karen Wolter: Well, just being an organic farmer and—

Russel Wolter: I talked about Karie (our daughter) out there. If she wants to go out and pick something, she can pick anything she wants to because it's not poisoned.

Farmer: This was your child?

Russel Wolter: Yes, one of them. But if you're a commercial farmer, they post out signs, "We just sprayed. Don't come anywhere near." You have to go out and grab them before he keels over.

Karen Wolter: But we don't have to do that. We don't have to post the field.

Farmer: Yes, so it is a place where a family can be.

Karen Wolter: Yes, and animals and everything are safe. But, just generally, like what we talked about [in this interview], a few stories and what he used on the soil and things. It didn't have to be a very long [speech], fortunately.

Farmer: But you were an authentic organic farmer in, what, 1970, or something. So there you have it.

Russel Wolter: Yes, and it didn't catch on until after I retired. Then it really hit the fan!

Farmer: What year did you retire?

Russel Wolter: About five years ago [in 2002]. Sorry, I can't quote the year. But now we notice canned organic stuff. Trader Joe's has a lot of organic things. And they don't seem like they are exceptionally higher than the regular brand. I am impressed with that. Because every year that you get certified cost you at least $1200. Of course if you are a bigger farm, it wouldn't cost you as much per package, but it still costs you.

Farmer: So do you feel like one of the reasons it was important to have higher prices for the vegetables was because you had to pay your certification fees?

Russel Wolter: I hope that's part of the reason, because it *is* an additional cost. The thing I used to get mad at, but it had nothing to do with organics though, is that the state would want to know exactly what you sold for how much. So it meant you had to keep detailed records of everything, including all that we sold to Capurro's, how much we got for that. We used to have very intense records. Then it's due January 1 of the following year. And if it's late, there's a twenty percent surcharge. I used to get irate because there is no way you could— If you had all the figures even add it up to get it correct. So I always cut out the last ten days and made all my records to that point and had it in on time. Because I

didn't want to pay twenty percent surcharge. I don't know why they ever did that. If you had followed instructions and did it to the very last day of the year you can't get there by the first. Well, not the first, the second. The first is a holiday.

Farmer: That's crazy.

Russel Wolter: That's very crazy. So I'd cut off the 15th of December and run it all through and send it in. No one ever checked me. I thought it was strange. I wonder how many other people— Well, maybe other farmers, their crops stopped in October.

Farmer: Oh, maybe that was it.

Russel Wolter: They had two months to do it in. But we went all year round.

Ocean Organics

We want to tell you one more story about Ocean Organics and how it was more beneficial to have a separate sales company.

Karen Wolter: Frank Capurro of Moss Landing, and Tony Scherer, and John Scherer, and Bruce Dau, and Russel Wolter became partners in trying to set up a sales medium just exclusively organic, so that you made sure where you run the produce through the cooler, only water that had organics would be put on it. Because you recycle the water, so you wouldn't have any sprays in the water or anything to contaminate. It was trying to help our local farmers be able to ship

and get good prices, hopefully, and be able to sell more volume and get it to more people. Which is also contrary to that article— (laughter)

Farmer: Right. So this is when organic was just starting to grow and the demand was starting—

Karen Wolter: It was probably in the 1980s, wasn't it?

Russel Wolter: Yes.

Farmer: So there were a lot of small, independent stores that were starting to ask for organic, maybe?

Russel Wolter: There were more, and there were starting to be more stores like in Los Angeles.

Farmer: Health food stores.

Karen Wolter: Yes. Mainly health food stores. But then there were food stores, like in San Jose, that were starting to buy. There were different distributors that would buy, like The Well. I think The Well had probably gone out of business by then, hadn't it? Did they buy from you?

Russel Wolter: They bought from me through Capurro, but I don't know if they bought through Ocean.

Karen Wolter: But anyway, they would distribute across the United States. There would be a pick-up point. We had a dock and a sales staff. It was originally in

Moss Landing and then Castroville. First the four partners. And then we got other growers. Phil Foster, and then Blue Heron Farms.

Russel Wolter: And the guy up the coast who has an aunt here.

Karen Wolter: Larkey. Jeff Larkey and his partner, "Steiny" [Jonathan Steinberg].[18]

Russel Wolter: The smaller ones.

Karen Wolter: Smaller guys. We brought them together so we could try to serve them and ship variety, because you help each other when you have variety.

Farmer: So would you say that was the first organic—

Russel Wolter: Exclusive, yes. I think it was.

Farmer: Exclusive organic wholesale business in the area.[19]

Karen Wolter: In our area, yes.

Russel Wolter: Things were going fairly well and then someone unknown ordered a full truckload of produce and they shipped it to him. And he said, "That was so good I want to order a second load." But they hadn't paid their first. They shipped it out to him and he never paid. Took too big a loss. Took us down.

Karen Wolter: Well, we folded.

Farmer: But that was what you were talking about gambling. Everything was always gambling.

Russel Wolter: This was a planned operation.

Karen Wolter: We tried to get the government to go after him, but they could never catch him. He had put all his assets in other people's names. He was really clever at defrauding farmers or similar businesses.

Farmer: Well, thank you. It's exciting that you remember all this and that you're here.

Russel Wolter: (laughter) I don't remember all of this.

Farmer: Well, as a team.

Russel Wolter: We've always been a team.

Farmer: I really want to thank you for this time. It's been great.

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[1]Juan Bautista de Anza's party left Tubac, Mexico (south of present-day Tucson, Arizona) on January 8, 1774 on a mission to discover an overland route from Mexico to Mission San Gabriel in California.

[2] A three-day National Conference on Organic Farming and Composting was sponsored by Rodale and took place May 11-13, 1972. It was attended by 350 farmers, food distributors, public officials, as well as consumers, researchers and students. The keynote speech was given by Wendell Berry. *Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine* wrote about the conference in an article by Jerome Goldstein entitled "The Farming Conference on City Problems." "Russel Wolter described what it takes to grow and market organically-grown vegetables," Goldstein reported. See *Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine*, August 1972. pp. 88-91.

[3] This seal pre-dates the establishment of the organization of California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF], and was provided by Rodale—Editor.

[4] See the oral history with Barney Bricmont in this series.

[5] Americans, Canadians and English planted victory gardens (also called war gardens or food gardens for defense) in their backyards, on apartment rooftops, in city parks, and in vacant lots during both World War I and World War II. In addition to indirectly aiding the war effort by producing forty percent of the produce consumed in the United States, these gardens also boosted morale. Gardeners felt empowered by their sweat labor and enjoyed fresh produce. A poster campaign "Plant more in '44!" to plant a victory garden inspired nearly twenty million Americans. The US Department of Agriculture produced *Victory Garden*, a twenty-minute training film and published basic information about gardening in public service booklets.

[6] The Wolters' land is near the Quail Lodge Resort and Golf Club in Carmel Valley.
[7] See the oral history in this series with Catherine Barr about the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets.
[8] See the oral history with Catherine Barr of the Monterey Bay Farmers' Markets in this series.
[9] See the oral history with Jerry Thomas in this series and the excerpt of an interview with Nick Pasqual, reprinted in this project.
[10] See the oral history with Drew Goodman of Earthbound in this series.
[11] See the oral histories with Amigo Bob Cantisano and Zea Sonnabend in this series for the early history of the Ecological Farming Conference [Eco-Farm].
[12] The strain of *E. coli* that caused the recent outbreaks of food-borne illness is *E. coli* 0157:H7, which is not the same strain of *E. coli* that is present in human digestive systems.
[13] See the oral history with Janet Brians in this series.
[14] See the oral history with Amigo Bob Cantisano in this series.
[15] *Time Magazine*, March 12, 2007.
[16] There are over 285,000,000 people living in the United States. Of that population, less than one percent claim farming as an occupation (and about two percent actually live on farms). There are only about 960,000 persons claiming farming as their principal occupation and a similar number of farmers claiming some other principal occupation. The number of farms in the U.S. stands at about two million. http://www.epa.gov/oecaagct/ag101/demographics.html
[17] See Will Allen, *The War on Bugs* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008).
[18] See the oral history with Jeff Larkey in this series.
[19] See the oral history with Melody Meyer in this series for more on organic food distribution, and about Ocean Organics.