

Wendell Berry Interview

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

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Wendell Berry—WB
Tanya Berry—TB
Mary Berry—MB
Steve Smith—SS
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: This is Ron Kroese. On Sunday afternoon, November 26, 2017, I had the good fortune of being invited into the home of Wendell and Tanya Berry in Henry County, Kentucky. What I'd originally planned as a straightforward interview with Mr. Berry for the Sustainable Agriculture Oral History Archive, turned into a freewheeling kitchen table conversation, not only with Wendell and Tanya, but joined by their daughter, Mary, who directs the activities of the Berry Center in the nearby town of New Castle, and by her husband, Steve Smith, farmer and lifelong area resident. What follows are excerpts from our conversation. A theme that runs through the dialog is what must be done to bring about an agriculture that protects and restores the land, produces good food, and creates healthy rural communities. The conversation begins with Wendell recalling the benefits to small family farms in the surrounding communities created by the New Deal's Burley Tobacco Program, and what was lost when that program ended. It is followed by Mary talking about the efforts of The Berry Center and its commitment to working locally to foster a sustainable, small-farmer-based economy in their area.

WB: There was a whole lot that made the Burley program, as I knew it. It's all fallen away. The attitude of the Roosevelt administration was the attitude of trying to correct injustices and help people. That isn't so any more.

RK: Right, right.

WB: I just wrote in my book that my dad could go to Washington, with his Christian ethics and his agrarian values, and be heard and respected, about the tobacco program, about the value of the small farmers and so on. Mary doesn't have an ally—not one—in state or federal politics. She has local allies—the county judge executive, the mayor of Louisville to some extent. But I think if you stir around the country you'll find a lot more possibility of talking to the county and city governments than to the state or federal.

RK: One of the things I was thinking, in reading about The Berry Center, is that it would be in good company—I talked to Wes about this regarding The Land Institute too—to join up with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. It keeps you in the loop with groups from around the country that are trying to do some things that are related to what you’re trying to accomplish, and you could find some camaraderie there, at the least. That would be one thought.

MB: Well, it’s a good thought, and it’s a hopeful thought. I was going to say, a lot of people have reached out to the Berry Center and wanted to partner in some way. But I haven’t found many allies, and I haven’t found help. That sounds terribly negative. These are well-meaning people, but I don’t hear from many people at work in a particular place. I think we’re at a point where so much has come apart that to put it back together we’ve got to work where we are, with what we’ve got and what we know. And maybe we’re not to the point yet that, except to be allies and friends, and be glad for each other’s company, we can work very practically together.

RK: The farmers that we’ve been trying to work with over the years, and when I was with the Land Stewardship Project, and now with NSAC [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition], are what Fred Kirschenmann calls the “farms in the middle.” That’s really where a lot of the programs and policies are aimed—trying to help those farms in the middle move in a more sustainable direction—be economically sustainable, as well as environmentally sustainable. So, it’s federal programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program, which pays farmers based on the concept that every year that you get better you can get more funding and support for the things you are trying to do—more conservation funding, more support. And it’s up to now 70 million acres that are enrolled in that program. Substantial. It’s the largest working lands program in the country. The thing about it is, it is incremental change. But each improvement the farmer takes on moves the farm in a more ecologically sound direction. For me, that’s one of the important directions to go, when you’re looking at it from a bigger picture. But I’d like to hear what you say about that.

MB: Well, I think it’s going to be important that change come in every way it can come, good change. And so I don’t want to be understood to be against something that is good. I’m not—I’m for anything that is good for farmers. But I believe that changes are going to come, and I’ll speak from Henry County and Trimble County, where we are. The change is going to come, as Daddy has said, by going from farm to farm to farm and saying: what will work on this farm for this farmer? I mean, that’s what we’re down to.

WB: Yes.

MB: I don’t see that kind of thinking in any meeting I go to that’s talking about how we’re going to get farmers to make incremental changes. We decided at the Berry Center, after a good deal of thought and a good deal of work, that the place for us to start was with what we’re calling Home Place Meats, because we don’t want to stop at beef. But cattle production in our area is the best of the farming that’s left. It’s perennial agriculture. It’s small farming—the average herd is 27 cows. These farmers know how to do this. It’s culturally correct for them and correct for the topography here. So instead of asking them to make huge changes or think a completely different way, or become liberal granola eaters, we’re just saying, when we go out on a farm, we’ll take that calf and that calf, and there are a few things that you’re going to need to agree with. Our program will pay the farmers about \$400 over market price. If that pleases them, then maybe they’ll be open to something else.

TB: And they can stay, start paying, and making sure they get the money.

WB: Right, right.

MB: Let me just say one more thing.

RK: Sure.

MB: Some of our staff have gone with me to conventional farm meetings. And I'm sure you know what's being said at those meetings: "There is no market for grass-finished beef," for one thing. Organics—that's still fringe, still being laughed at. This is the world these farmers live in. Steve said one of the things we can't forget is that these farmers are cut off from the information that they need the most. They're getting all their information from Farm Bureau and the land grant universities. We've still got something left here, some people who own land or will inherit land. So I don't see any other way to go at this except the way we're doing it, and I'm hoping people are doing it all over the country.

RK: Right. I guess I've just got a kind of a built-in organizer self, or advocate self, that thinks, OK, then, if that works, now we've finally got a model that can be taken to other places? Of course, it can't be just plopped down somewhere else, but some principles that are underneath it could be.

MB: I agree with you.

RK: ... Wendell's written so wisely about...

MB: The tobacco program worked. It worked for a long time. There are maybe two main reasons why the Berry Center got started. One is that there's been 40 years of a local food movement, and nothing's changed here. The other reason is that the tobacco program was not just ended—it was forgotten in a couple of years. I was on the Farm Service Agency's state board and going to meetings. Really, my first long amount of time in the world of conventional agriculture. It was like the tobacco program never existed.

WB: The past is not a resource. The future is the resource, which is a terrible state to be in. The future holds anything you want to put in it, anything. The old farm culture was full of skeptics. The new farm culture is full of consumers. And there's nobody with authority now to stand up and say—Hold on! Wait a minute. What about this? They're not there. You've got a lot of people sacrificing to be farmers. You could go up to the store at Port Royal at dinnertime and run into them. They're working in factories and steel mills and whatnot in order to earn the right to raise a few cattle, but they're cut off from their tradition. I'm the one going around telling their mothers and their fathers that it's wrong that anybody's son has to work in a damn steel mill in order to raise cattle.

MB: It's outrageous. In that movie, *Look and See*—I've answered questions after that movie a lot now—there's a farmer who says, "I can't go out on my farm and with my two hands do enough work to pay for a farm." And nobody has yet asked me about that. But that's just an outrageous situation. We've got photographs hanging at the Berry Center now that show a time in my lifetime—and I'm fairly old, but not that old—a time when it was possible, with the help of friends and neighbors during harvest time, to pay for a farm.

TB: And the Program.

MB: And we had the Program.

WB: Well, the farther they go in trying to enlarge the power of their two hands, the worse off they are. A friend of mine up the river here said he grew 60 acres of tobacco one year—this was after they went back to contracts—and the next year he grew 30 acres, and he made as much off the 30 acres as he did off the 60. I said—well, for one thing, when you went to 30 you doubled the value of your own work. But nobody's recommending that. Nobody's recommending not to buy things.

RK: One of the things that I see as positive, and it's a struggle, and it gets dismissed a good deal, but it is a priority for this group I was advocating for, is the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program. It tries to find farmers who are willing to work with young people who want to get into farming. I think the young people, even the ones who leave these programs, come away different people and wise about the world of farming. Plus, trying to find ways to finance it—affordable loans, get the land prices down so they can afford to get land. Where I grew up in northwestern Iowa an acre of corn land's still 10,000 bucks. So you have to have special ways of getting people started.

WB: Northwestern Iowa. The first place Maury Telleen ever took me was to see two holdout horse farmers at Estherville and Dolliver—do you know those places?

RK: Yep, I know those places very well.

WB: That was called the cash grain country. Well, the cash grain country's everywhere now, up and down this river valley.

RK: Yeah, yeah, I saw it today when we were out for a drive.

WB: Yes, the role of grain in all this is major.

RK: Right.

WB: Gary Snyder talks about how, in the Chinese Neolithic village, surpluses disappeared. When they got writing, clerks, record-keeping, that sort of thing, that made it possible to gather the surplus. The surplus, as I'm learning from another book that Wes sent me, *Against the Grain* by James C. Scott, the manageable surplus is always a grain—rice, barley, wheat, corn—because it's storable and transportable and concentrated. You're never going to have a state founded on sweet potatoes. So the idea that you ought to be producing meat and milk off of grass is a barbarian idea—literally. The barbarians were people who were hard to administer. These farmers now are entirely given over to grain growing, are entirely subject to markets—entirely! They don't get a damn thing, except the world to roll around on the top of, that they're not paying for. Well, they're paying rent, of course, on the land. But everything. And then Monsanto's got this new herbicide that gasifies and blows so the only way you can protect yourself against that is to buy from Monsanto.

RK: Exactly.

WB: So this is slavery. This is the worst imaginable thing that could happen to the countryside. It's moving, you see, toward a robot. I mean, a robot would be glad to drive a damn combine over a bog. Have you noticed up the road? You haven't been up there, but they've been up to the axles in these bean fields. There's no initiative, no local initiative, which means there's no local adaptation of the economic life to the place. So, Mary's right to start with meat, for sure. I went up to visit the Land Stewardship Project and, oh, it's been several years now. They're very impressive people, you know—they still are. You started that, didn't you?

RK: Victor Ray and I did, yes.

WB: You and Victor. Well, they took me out to see a dairy farm that was absolutely impressive. They were milking off of grass. I think the most productive cow in their herd was 13 years old. They were leaving the calves on the cows and selling the beef off the calves. They were bottling their own milk and selling their own milk.

RK: Cedar Summit Farm

WB: It is an amazing thing. You see, this is not the kind of farmer we're talking about. These are geniuses. They're scattered around. Your friend down in Georgia is another one.

MB: Will Harris.

WB: Will Harris and, oh, what's his name in Virginia?

MB: Oh, Salatin?

WB: Salatin, yes.

RK: Oh, yeah, Joel Salatin.

WB: Theirs are works of genius that are put together in such a way that they'll survive. And moreover, as Gene Logsdon always confirmed when we talked about this, there've always been traditional farmers who've done well.

MB: But—there's a but here. Will Harris, Steve, Joel Salatin—OK, let me stick to Will and Steve; I know this for sure. They have been successful entrepreneurial farmers. But they did not—Will will tell you now—he hasn't even affected his cousins next door.

WB: Nobody has yet!

MB: And Steve— I want to talk about the economics of this in a minute—Steve bought his farm in 1986 at 13½ percent interest, and paid for it. Well, he had to find out a lot, and then he paid for it, finally, with the CSA.

WB: First one around.

MB: First one in Kentucky. Did it affect anybody much in Trimble County?

SS: It amused a lot of people—they found it funny, kind of a joke.

MB: Well, it certainly did. These entrepreneurial farmers are not affecting agricultural communities, which are not becoming land-conserving communities or economies. And I want to say another thing about the economics of all of this. I think that there are some ways in which our movement just is not thinking, and this is why we have to be thinking in particular places. When Steve and I were young and buying farms in the early 80s, land prices here were probably \$1,200-to-\$1,500 an acre. We had a “young farmer loan” that was nine percent interest. Steve had 13½ percent interest. And we both did all right. Well, tobacco gave us our start, and then we managed to survive as farmers by doing entrepreneurial work. Now, farm prices here are around \$3,000 an acre. What we don’t have is the tobacco program. The problem’s different here than it is other places. You can’t pay for a \$3,000-an-acre farm any more than you could a \$20,000-acre farm, but what we’re getting around here now is the idea of the benevolent landlord. Instead of people hoping for a small piece of ground that they can own, they’re living on rich people’s land. Is this what we want? It’s not what I want.

WB: I was out at Ames, Iowa, one evening at a to-do, and there was an agriculture economist there saying that renting farms was the way to go.

MB: Matthew Derr, the president of Sterling College, is teaching a class about share cropping, and his students are saying, “What’s wrong with that? It sounds like a good idea.”

WB: Well, some farmer stood up in the audience at Ames and said, “Professor, I don’t think many of our foreparents came here in order to *rent* a farm.”

RK: Well put.

WB: Very well put. Sufficiently answered—if you believe that democracy owes anything to the independent landowner. Jefferson thought it did, thought it owed everything.

TB: Well, if Jim Wayne does sell his farm to these two young couples, there’s a story, to go back to look at what Jim Wayne’s trying to do with his farm, and how many people he’s taught, helped, and then finally made it possible for kids to learn to buy a farm. We’re watching that take place, and Jim Wayne’s a state representative in Frankfort, and lives in Louisville, but wants to do the right thing. And he has helped a lot of young people come out here. But he has never been willing to sell the farm to them yet. But maybe it’s going to happen, and maybe it’ll be a pattern that then you can talk about in a larger scheme. What we need is a sustaining economy under good farming.

RK: I know one of the strategies that groups like Land Stewardship Project talked about, at least when I was working more closely with them, is not necessarily owning your land right away as a young person, but you could probably get a loan for a small herd of cattle or whatever, and you get started on the land with livestock and eventually, hopefully, you’ll accumulate enough capital to be able to buy some of that land. I know that’s a rough row to hoe, but that is one of the strategies.

MB: Steve has talked about that. Some young people we know ... I don't know if they ever want to own land, but this is their thinking. But, you know, they're burning their years. We need a sustaining economy under good farming. How can farmers afford to farm well?

RK: Where I'm seeing it happen in what seems like a good way up in Minnesota is the farms that are close enough to the city having markets for alternative crops. And there are some nice examples happening—although they're just examples—of even restaurateurs going out and renting or buying the land and then working with the farmers. Or if the farmers own the land, like my late friend Bruce Bacon did, giving him enough of a market for what he was growing in his excellent raised beds that he could actually make a living. Not an elaborate living, but a living from it, through opportunities in the city.

WB: Here's a letter from our judge executive, who's a good farmer. This is dated October 3rd, 2016: "I've taken a couple of afternoons to work on the accounting for farming cattle under the current terms. Enclosed you will find that product based upon a real example, which is our 100-acre farm and its approximately 25-cow herd. The good news is that for a young man wishing to earn a middle- to slightly below-middle-class annual salary of \$45,000 farming cattle full-time, he only has to have \$3,281,000 in capital to get started. If he can find 780 acres to rent, he only has to have \$551,000 for used cows and equipment. I say this is the good news, because the reality is that this was based on a weaned calf price of \$850 from June of this year. According to today's sales reports, the same calf is now worth \$650 at best."

WB: Mary says that our side is not thinking, which is, up to a point, pretty true.

MB: Up to a point, it's absolutely true.

WB: Well, anyway, I don't think the official people are thinking, and I don't think they have thought for the last 60 or 70 years. I think what has been the project, virtually, of official agriculture in the government, the universities, and the corporations is to eliminate thought from farming. And that's what they've done. It's just gone. So if they were going to think, somebody would go up to Holmes County in Ohio and look at the Amish thriving on small farms up there and do the accounting—study the fertility economy and then the money economy, and see what's going on.

MB: Because you have to do both.

RK: Right.

WB: You have to do both. You can't separate the land and the people. You can't do it. David Kline wrote his little book, *The Round of a Country Year*. And it tells everything he did, every day, for a year and a little more. Well, it's a happy book. One reason it's happy is that nobody's working too hard. They paid a lot for their land up there, just like everywhere, but they're not buying very much. They're not buying big farms, so there's that. They don't buy power above the limit, always a limit. And they don't buy labor, because that's coming from the family and the neighborhood. That never gets on the books. Why doesn't somebody who's interested in thinking about agriculture go up there and start...

TB: And they have a guaranteed price on their milk, thanks to Organic Valley.

MB: David Kline said to us when we went to visit four years ago, “Young farmers around here are happy.” I mean, that hit me like somebody’d kicked me.

WB: This is a happy book. He’s always got a grandchild with him. I read it as an editor, to start with, off his typescript, and then I’ve been reading it again; I’ve got almost through it again, and I’m not sure I recall anybody working a whole day at one job. Somebody’ll go and start mowing in a field, and then somebody else comes at 11 o’clock, and they mow until one, when somebody comes with a fresh team and does the rest of it. It’s that way every day, unless they’re trying to save something, a hay crop or something like that. But they’re sitting out in the yard at night, talking, sitting in the dark and talking.

TB: Buying scatter rugs for their neighbors. I loved that.

WB: Buying scatter rugs for their neighbors. Well, they’ve got an old neighbor; he’s not an Amishman. He’s my age. He’s had a knee replacement; they look after him. He drives over as far as their house, David gets in the car with him and goes to town to do the footwork. And then he goes to get a knee replacement and have the therapy, and he’s gone a substantial amount of time. They keep his orchard mowed, his yard mowed, all with his equipment. They keep the bird feeders full, they water the African violets. Before he comes home they clean the house, they throw away his old scatter rugs and buy some fragments at a factory and have them bound. When he comes back the mail is sorted, the windows are washed. This is a great pleasure, you can tell it is. They’re pleased. He’s pleased. They’re pleased with his pleasure.

MB: To get to the culture that we want is going to take thinking.

WB: Well, I started to think about our flock of sheep. We moved here in 1965, and by 1978 we’d acquired some more land. Some of it was cleared. The cattle were wrong for these hillsides. A couple of milk cows is one thing. Several big animals walking around on these hills in the wintertime is a bad deal. So we went to sheep. And by the measure of what we know now, we didn’t know anything. I had had experience with sheep all my life, but this was an exercise in local adaptation. We were learning to live on our place. We’d been thinking pretty hard about this—not effectively, always. I’m a pretty sloppy thinker, and slow. Slow to learn what to do on this place. But it’s absolutely fascinating. Now, this could never be a paying farm in our time. This little old place, 12 acres, was a living at one time, because it had the landing. The river traffic, the store, a little crop of tobacco, and the subsistence.

[Break in recording]

WB: There’s never been an orthodoxy like modern agriculture. If you put yourself at odds with it, you’re eccentric. That’s it.

RK: At best!

WB: That’s what Steve experienced. If you’re smart enough, as Steve was, to put yourself out of it in order to pay for the farm, nobody notices that you paid for the farm, they notice that you did it in an odd way.

RK: Well, one of the things that the groups that I know about are doing is working with younger people who are interested, and not just kids raised on farms. If farming is going to really change, it’s also going to come from the city—young people who were not raised on farms but are drawn to farming. I know the area

where I grew up in northwestern Iowa—and I remember Wendell talking about this—conventional farmers are still doing all right there, as long as the government stays in there with them. It's on the fringes that the real change happens, and I think change is going to be coming probably from the outside when you look at the country as a whole. The most interesting proposed farm bill I've seen recently came out from Congressman Earl Blumenauer of the Third District of Oregon, and he's not even on the ag committee. So it's coming from the outside the usual agricultural circles. And these are some good ideas—really conservation based, permaculture's in there... So that's where I find some reason to carry on.

WB: You've got to have allies in the city. You've got to. That's why we've been working with Louisville. But to change the urban mind, to make it able to understand what's happening out here, and to converse with people out here is not going to be an easy business. Just thinking about food is not going to do it. They're going to have to... well, the other enemy, besides the industrial agriculture—that monolith, that orthodoxy—is conservation. It's absolutely been on the wrong foot for a hundred years. They think you can preserve the natural world in a few wilderness areas. Wes just drove out to Fort Collins from Salina. He said it's hard to imagine after you've seen it, the acreages of soybeans and corn that he drove through. And he talked somewhere on his trip to a woman who's working on water pollution, and he asked her if she thought we could say that there is an unpolluted river anywhere in rural America, and she said she didn't think so.

RK: I think that's right. Conservation's got to happen on working lands. As I've seen in your writing, the idea is that the conservation comes from agriculture as a fundamental aspect of successful farming, rather than being separated out and then farming goes on its merry business.

[Break in recording]

RK: I'd like to move now toward your 50-Year Farm Bill. I'd like to talk about that, the whole movement that must happen. What I see the 50-Year Farm Bill trying to achieve is a longer-term, deeper solution.

WB: I'll deal some of my cards here. My dad devoted a lot of his life to the tobacco program, but his passion was grass. He said the one crop that we can grow here dependably, year after year, and be safe, is grass. Which is absolutely alien to modern agriculture, you see. Every acre in grass has ruled out the industrial revolution. And all those suppliers of everything from interest to chemicals to seed, the rest of it. My hillside here is the hillside that it could always have been, always. It's covered in grass. All that I get from the industrial revolution is the fence. The rest of it's in my head, and I'm on the ground. So there's that. It was in bad enough shape when we came here, and the rest of the land we have was in bad enough shape that I can tell our success by my ability to sleep at night when it rains. And it's wonderful what you can do on these gullies and galls by hauling a little manure to them—a little. Up the creek was the same way—a big old hillside up there that had been dozed off, and some fescue had been thrown on it, but it took a lot of work to get it finally covered. So this is a very good lesson, and it's very important, and it's *the* issue, the issue of perennials. The great thing about perennials is you don't have to worry about them when it rains. Once they're started you're not paying for seed every year. Now, there'll be people who will tell you what good nitrogen fertilizer will do on your pasture. Well, you don't have to grow every blade of grass it's possible to grow up there.

MB: To compare the 50-Year Farm Bill and perennial agriculture with no-till agriculture and how that has been sold to the world is a good way to start talking about the worth of a 50-Year Farm Bill, because look what's happened with no-till. It's a mess.

WB: No-till works very nicely for one year out of a grass sod. You kill the grass sod—you've got all those roots. But what they're doing now is using it year after year after year, and then they put soybeans on a slope. The soybeans loosen the soil and you get gullies.

MB: Well, you'd think the Dicamba scare would change people's minds, but it won't. They'll go right on.

WB: Well, it erodes, and the chemical goes off with the soil...

MB: It won't work.

WB: This river hasn't grown a willow tree for years. The muskrats are gone. I've been trying to find out what's going on for fifteen years. Nobody knows. It may not be agriculture; there are strip mines at the headwaters, and then the central Kentucky cities—I don't know what it is, but anyway, it's the story of every river. The Ohio is notoriously polluted. The other thing is that if you're going to talk about farming with perennials and you're going to bring in these corn and bean lands, you're talking about diversification. You're talking about re-diversification. Agriculture, if it lives, is going to live by diversity. You remove diversity, and then you have to have insurance. These people are depending on crop insurance because they don't have anything to depend on except corn and beans, both rain dependent. So, I'm absolutely convinced that the 50-Year Farm Bill is the right way to go. There's no question about it. But it means re-diversification, which means a renewal of culture.

The farmers here used to raise or at least maintain their work stock, but also they raised sheep, cattle, and hogs. They had to know all those... they had to participate in the motherhood of all those animals. I was with my friend Maury Telleen up at the Columbus draft horse sale one time. He said, "Come here, I want you to hear this." It was a little clutch of men listening to a guy named Lancie Clippinger from Mt. Vernon, Ohio, and he was telling how he grew 40 acres of corn, and instead of selling it for \$2 a bushel, he bought 40 gilts. He bred the gilts to farrow when the corn would be ready to pick. The gilts produced 360 pigs. When the corn was ready he used electric fence, put his pigs and his corn picker in the field at the same time. He got enough corn to feed his other stock, and he marketed the pigs. He made \$40,000 that way. He made \$1,000 an acre. Well, the point I'm getting to is that when Lancie was done, Maury said, "Do you farrow your sows in a farrowing house?" "No," he said. "Oh, you do it in huts?" "No," he said, "I have a field I turn them out in. It has plenty of shade and water. And I see them every day." The gist of it is "I see them every day." He knew what he was doing. When he looked, he knew what he was looking at, and if something was a little wrong, he knew what to do about it. That was free. It was free to him, once he'd paid his tuition of experience or listening to elders or whatever he did in order to know what to do. Well, agriculture survives that way, in my opinion.

So we come to the issue of the economic value of intangibles. What Lancie Clippinger had in his head couldn't have been bought or sold. He had it as long as he lived, but it may have died with him. Or did he have an heir, a successor? I don't know. Maybe. Most people who die—that's gone.

RK: Yes, and that really adds to the grief of all this—with not only what’s happening to the land, but just where is our knowledge going to come from when these young people are out there trying to get things going.

TB: Well, maybe some of them will go to the Berry Center farm program and get a little extra education and go on with it... That’s what’s happening.

MB: Well, we don’t know what’ll happen yet, but we hope that we can use the intelligence that’s here, that we know is here, to educate.

RK: I hope it works. One of the things Land Stewardship Project started a long time ago, and they’re still doing, is a young farmer training program. They’re bringing that wisdom from the elders to people wanting to get started in farming. The trainings are in demand. Someone’s done an analysis of how many actually became farmers. Some of them don’t. Maybe that’s what the training had to teach them—that they weren’t necessarily cut out for it. But the trainings are a big part of the whole sustainable agriculture agenda.

MB: Well, one of my favorite stories from Steve’s growing up is—Steve, would you like me to tell them my favorite story about you?

SS: Sure.

MB: He was seven or eight years old maybe. He woke up early in the morning and he could hear his parents talking in the kitchen. He heard his father say to his mother, “I need Steve today.” And Steve thought, “He needs me, he needs me today.”

SS: It ruined me. I was ruined from that point on.

WB: It was a little different for the girls, but boys knew from before they knew anything how cows breed. I mean, they’d seen all that. They knew what the attitude of a mule’s head meant he was going to do.

MB: Well, I think some girls knew that, too, but they also knew how to preserve food.

WB: Well, they knew the whole other...

MB: The whole home economics.

WB: A lot of them knew everything their husbands knew and everything they themselves knew. They weren’t very well-served by the women’s movement, because they were called, “just a housewife.” But they knew how to do. They knew what to do with everything that came out of the garden, everything that came out of the pasture.

RK: I did some work awhile back analyzing the impact of World War II on agriculture, and how basically the guns were turned into plowshares, except big plows. Gunpowder became fertilizer and all of those things. But there was a whole aspect of it aimed at women, and the message was, “You’ve got to be more city-like, like your city cousins, if you’re going to succeed your in life.”

MB: Well, that's the defeat of the rural culture.

RK: Yeah, that was the big chemical companies, the Proctor and Gambles of the world out there, telling people what they ought to be doing out on the farm. So it happened there too...

WB: Living better with chemistry. But if you get the farming right, the labor decreases. Steve, by mistake, got a hold of Tim Kline, about a product that the Amish were dealing with. Tim is David's son.

RK: Oh, that's his son.

WB: And he was calling to hear about a product that Tim deals...

MB: It was for non-GMO corn, wasn't it?

SS: For side-dressing corn.

WB: Tell him what he was doing and what he said.

SS: I'd gotten a phone number, I'd called about this product for side-dressing corn. Some company, and they said, "Here's the number to call." So I called the number, and it was Tim Kline. And I said, "Wow, Kline!"

WB: You didn't know it was him for awhile.

SS: No. I said, "You any kin to David?" He said, "Yeah, that's my dad." And I said, "Well, do you have time for a question?" First I told him how much I admired his dad. And then I said, "Do you have time for a question? He said, "Yeah, if you can hear me over the sound of these horses."

WB: But he told you that last year he'd cultivated his corn *once*.

SS: One time.

WB: One time.

SS: Really hard to imagine.

WB: Well, you see, what they were doing, rotating their pastures...

RK: Yeah, so they didn't have a huge weed problem.

WB: So the weeding of the row crop began with the pasturing of the cattle. And probably they weren't in a race to get it planted as early as they possibly could.

SS: Well, that, too. They plant pretty late, like middle of May, which shocked me.

WB: When I was writing *The Unsettling of America*, I talked to an Iowa farmer who was deliberately getting out of that first-planting race, because, he said, he was doing his first cultivation with his disc.

RK: So he was taking care of it before he even planted.

WB: Yes. That many weed seeds were gone from the surface before he even planted. So that's thinking, you see.

SS: Yes, exactly.

RK: I haven't read the recent things by David Kline, but I always remember that story that Wes told, which I think David Kline had told him, about how bad he felt for his neighbors who were conventional farmers, because they were working day and night, and how glad he was that horses didn't have headlights.

MB: But I have something to say about all this.

RK: Oh, please do.

MB: And here it is. I feel more hopeful now than I did six or seven years ago, partly because I just finally told myself the truth. The local food movement wasn't working here, and it's still not. But if we don't tell the truth, then we just keep on in some kind of fantasy, something that people think is happening, because farmers markets seem to be good. So somehow, I find this hopeful, to say, OK, fine, it's not working, but it can work.

RK: Right.

MB: So how can it work?

RK: And you use that to come to what you hope will be really real and thoughtful solutions that can work.

MB: From here.

RK: From here.

MB: What will work here. I don't know what will work in other places. I do agree with you that there's such a thing as a good model. The tobacco program was one, and, like I said, it was virtually forgotten. In two years it was gone. It was absolutely gone.

WB: It's of the past. I'll add something. My daddy said of a man we knew and admired and worked with quite a lot, "He's the best manager of work I ever saw in my life." He said that with absolute respect. No doubt at all that it was high praise. A farmer who's a good manager of work has two structural problems: one is temporal and the other is spatial. He's got to put his day's work and his seasonal work all in order. Got to answer the question, what do you do first? Right along. Then you've got to say where are you going to put this; where's the best place to put this fence, this building, this crop this year. Where is the permanent pasture, and so on. I think this is in every way equivalent to managing the structural problems of a very good novel. It's not less artistic; it's not less culturally accomplished.

MB: It might be more important.

WB: It *is* more important.

RK: I can even relate to that with my half-acre and my two gardens—both the space and the timing. I mean, they're on my mind all the time.

WB: That's right—it's exactly equivalent—I mean, you're doing, in little, the whole process. What do I do? What am I going to do now? And if you can't answer competently, you're up shit creek!

RK: That's right.

WB: The creek we're all familiar with, or we better be.

MB: You mentioned Fred Kirschenmann earlier. He's said so many wonderful things, and he's a wonderful man. He says in one of his short essays that now we've got two opportunities for farmers: they can be large and industrial, or small and entrepreneurial, with nothing in the middle. And we're trying to put something in the middle. When Steve started his CSA—again, it was the first one here—he had a hundred-person waiting list the entire 15 years he ran it. We now have three or four CSAs that I'm sure of right around here, and they're having a lot of trouble selling enough subscriptions, because there are 20 farmers markets in Louisville.

SS: Right.

TB: And then Green BEAN Delivery which will bring you only what you want.

MB: And Kroger is full of pictures of farmers and organic food.

RK: We have the same thing happening in the Twin Cities.

MB: So do we have the intelligence and the will and the imagination to put something in the middle, like the tobacco program.

RK: I think it's real important to remind people about it, even though it's in the past, and ask, What could it offer as we go forward? What kind of organizing did it take to make that happen? I feel like so much depends on organizing.

MB: Well, my grandfather had a lot to work with the tobacco program here. He had people who already knew how to grow the crop and a lot of them, and a market. So they had only to control production.

WB: It was simple compared to what we've got now. But as an illustration, my brother and I knew that my father had sent somebody over into Pendleton or Grant County, somewhere over in that direction, to get “a good man” to be on the board. Everybody understood that; everybody knew what that meant. That meant somebody who knew the crop, knew the culture of the crop, knew the people who grew it, knew the history that made the program necessary. They knew the starvation and the heartbreak that went before it, the

privation. If he was also a good man in a religious sense, that didn't hurt a thing. That board meeting opened with a prayer, right along. The good man that they got was a man named Mike Satterwhite. He prayed at the last meeting that John attended after his heart attack. He prayed for John and he prayed for the program, and...

RK: For your dad.

WB: My brother.

RK: Your brother—oh, excuse me.

WB: And he ended, "In the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord, we beg it all."

RK: We beg it all.

WB: We beg it all. So that was understood; that was culture at work, that's culture. Look, I'll give you another example. I just talked to a young woman who is very bright and wrote a very good book, to my surprise, about record collectors, people who collect old 78s.

MB: You read it?

WB: Yes, I read it.

WB: She says that at one time music was ephemeral. It was played; it lasted as long as it was remembered. It survived as long as it was handed down from musician to musician—very ephemeral. Then they put it on records. It's a whole different deal then. And finally the artifice becomes the measure of the thing, rather than the thing becoming the measure, remaining the measure, of the artifice. I said, that's exactly where we are in agriculture. The tractor is the measure of the farm—the farm's not the measure of the tractor. So you gave up the farm as a measure, and there's no limit anymore. The Amish accepted unquestioningly Jesus' second law, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." They have understood that as an economic imperative. You can't love your neighbor and replace him with a machine. You must not. So they accepted that, and that's a limit. The other limit is the horse: Don't own more land than you can work with a horse, with a team of horses, or four horses or however many. But you can't increase the field speed. Absolutely, you cannot do it. Then this is my argument. If you accept the limit, then you're in good shape to accept the formal problem that I was talking about. If you don't accept the limit, it's hell for structure. Too bad.

[Break in recording]

RK: I'm glad we've come back to the subject of production controls, because I've been operating under a kind of illusion, perhaps, that if farming is done with the deepest commitment to conservation and stewardship, that production would take care of itself—there wouldn't be over-production, because the land wouldn't allow it. But I guess that's too naïve...

WB: This goes clear back to the Renaissance. You can take nature and put your hands around her throat and make her do what you want her to do, up to a point. That is, you can do it as long as she lasts. That's all. This is advertised as competition. The farmer competes with nature and with every other farmer. There

is no limit to this, short of exhaustion. David Kline's story is a story of cooperation. Well, he says, if I get sick or die, all these people will be here at work. And they won't be wanting to know what I'm going to pay.

MB: Farmers around here are so heavily into corn and soybeans and going broke, and they're clinging to that slogan: "We're feeding the world."

WB: And then how many farmers are feeding how many people.

MB: But it means a lot to these farmers.

WB: You don't have to encourage competition. There used to be a lot of handwork in tobacco crops, and people raced. I mean, the young men, they raced. Dropping tobacco plants, which I did a lot when I was a little boy, for somebody who's in a race, and they're coming at your heel with what they called a "tobaccer peg." They're coming right at your heel, and if you're not dropping them the right distance apart, and you're not fast enough, that peg would be punching right at your bare foot, you know. After it rained we would set the tobacco by hand... So you'd be barefooted, and they'd be flying along. What they were doing was racing.

MB: Well, men are just ridiculous!

WB: For the pleasure of it. Sometimes the competition would be rather desperate, and the old men were coming along congratulating themselves on having better sense. They were getting the work done. And every time they would be rained out, conversation would spring up just like weeds. And they would be enjoying that. And then whoever's crop it was, his wife would have a dinner like a Christmas dinner. Wasn't that what you were saying the other day?

MB: It was a banquet every day.

TB: A banquet, yes.

SS: It was.

WB: And then she might be at work in the field shortly afterwards.

[Break in recording]

MB: I think the parity pricing idea, it's not going to work for everything. It won't work for grain right now, I don't think.

WB: You could do it for grain...

MB: You could do it for grain for bourbon, that's no question.

WB: If they'd determine what the "disappearance" would be; that is, what would be used. How much grain do we need for next year? And then they'd tell the farmers, "You grow this much, you grow this much, and it'll all add up to as much as we need."

MB: Quota, then we guarantee you a price.

WB: Quotas, it would have to be quotas, and then you could talk about parity pricing.

RK: And then you would have a granary, storing some of the excess, in case it's needed?

WB: There are ways to do this. In the tobacco program they figured in a certain percentage over disappearance. But with parity pricing food would be too expensive for poor people. You'd have to go do something for them.

MB: But I do think it might ... that bomb that gets thrown in a lot of these meetings: "It's just too expensive. It's just going to be too expensive, and people can't afford it." But I don't think we know that.

WB: Cheap food as a policy is a disaster.

MB: I don't think we know that. I don't think we know that...

WB: People who eat ought to pay a just price for their food. There's no way to argue against that. Well, here's another thing. I've got a good friend who's a forester—Troy Firth up in northwestern Pennsylvania, up in the country that produces the best cherry. Troy says that forestry's not methodological, ultimately; it's observational. He doesn't talk much. He uses very few words. It's observational. You learn how to log a forest from knowing what's in it, knowing it intimately. He says the good logger goes to the woods asking what he can leave. The bad logger goes asking what he can take out. Then Troy started what he calls the Foundation for Sustainable Forestry. It's a local foundation, so far, but he envisions an ultimate association of local foundations for sustainable forestry. So, he gives every year a conference called *Loving the Land by Sustainable Forestry*. You see, he introduces that word "love." No respectable agricultural scientist would use a word like that. Why, what's the basis of it? Well, you're just raising a very interesting question: can you use the land and preserve it if you don't love it? In my book, the phrase "death wish" creeps in. I think that we're laboring under an immense burden of wishing to be dead. That is, we're wishing all the time against our physical life. The American Dream is to sit down and then as soon as possible lie down. There it is—sedentary work, or no work, for a lot of money. That's a death wish. You want your work to be done by pushing a button? You don't want to *do* it? You don't love doing it? Gene Logsdon was interviewing David Kline on his economy, and he said, "Now how much of an expense do we put on cultivating your corn?" David said, "I don't count cultivating my corn as an expense, I count it as income. I like to cultivate corn." He wants to live! You want to cultivate your corn by spraying poison on it? Well, that's the death wish. I talk all the time to writers about how physical writing is. You execute it with your hand, you see it with your eyes, you pronounce it with your mouth, you hear it with your ears. It's a very physical thing, unless you go all the way to a computer. Then you're into the death wish, in my opinion. And how do you argue with a death wish? Do you want your food ready-made, pre-chewed?

MB: We've had, at the Berry Center, quite a few groups come in to talk about different kinds of triple bottom line, investing, and so on... And Steve very rightly said, when they are talking about what they want

to talk about, it sounds like solutions looking for problems. They're not interested in finding out what's going on in Henry County, Kentucky, and how some intelligence could be applied to this place. I mean, let us present our problems and then with your big brains talk to us about solutions. Well, in most of the policy meetings I have been in they're not getting down to it. They don't even know the right questions to ask.

WB: How can you make a person matter who has a small farm, say 200 acres? How can you make that person's success a significant thing that's worth trying for? When the whole world is lined up with people offering to sell him something that will help him to be a "success"? But nobody's saying, "Now wait a minute. Do you have to spend that? Wait a minute. Is that something you need?" I know of three young farmers that my dad looked at to tell himself what it was he was working for. One of these remained on the Burley Association board during my brother's tenure as president. And he'd come up to the office... My brother was a lawyer.

MB: You're talking about Ralph Singleton?

WB: Yes. My brother told me that one day Ralph came in and he sat down and he started talking about "this fellow." He had an inventory of all that "this fellow" had—land, livestock, equipment, CDs, insurance policies, and so on. John said it was unreal what "this fellow" had. "This fellow" interests me quite a lot because he never owned a big farm, and I don't think that he ever rented or sharecropped off his own land. Pretty interesting. Now he would be one of the examples I would have in my mind when I would say to Gene Logsdon, "There have always been people who thrived right along, whatever the farm economy was doing." Gene would always say, "Yes!" There are always, I think, two sides to this. One is the observance of limits. The other is thrift—not buying what you don't need. And "this fellow" told me that when he and his wife bought their farm—it would have been in the late '30s or in the early '40s, during the war, maybe—they didn't have any money. By the time they went through the rigmarole that they had to go through to get their farm, they didn't have any money. And so he went to the Clover Farm Store—that used to be a kind of a chain; I think it's gone—and he said...

TB: It's been gone for 75 years.

WB: "Would you carry me until I sell my crop?" Well, they would; they knew him, they liked him. That was when everybody knew everybody. And he and his wife went up there whenever they needed something, and they charged it. It was in the spring this started—and when he sold his crop around Christmastime, he went in to pay his bill at the Clover Farm, and it was eleven dollars and something.

MB: Oh, my word.

SS: Sounds right.

WB: Doesn't that sound right?

SS: Sounds about right.

WB: You see, they were living from their place, they were being thrifty...

TB: That's the thing that's never counted in is what you're living on. If you're living right, you're producing your own food and your own entertainment, and nobody ever figures that in.