Interview with Paul Gebhardt

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Interviewer: Philip Hogue

Hogue: My name is Philip Hogue and I'll be doing the interview. The person that we're interviewing is Paul Gebhardt of rural Edinburgh. The date is Monday, November 26, 2007 and this interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's Agriculture in Illinois oral history project. We're doing this in Mr. Gebhardt's home. Thank you for participating in the project that we have with agriculture in Illinois. We'll start with some background information about your parents.

Gebhardt: My father's name was Arthur W for Wales Gebhardt from a family name, I believe. So he was born in the state of Illinois in 1925, the son of a farmer and his father was Charles Gebhart and my dad was an only child, so there were no other family members there and we would have had 160 acres originally in our family that was started back in 1880-something was the date of the purchase on the land and we may have had a chance to farm it before that, I don't know about that. But anyway, dad was born on the home farm and then when my grandfather retired, my dad stayed there on that home farm and then I was born on that farm. But that's not the farm we're on today.

Hogue: How did the family come to settle in Illinois?

Gebhardt: That's a good question. I didn't know for sure, studying some of the history genealogy of the family. There were some Gebhardts that came from Germany, that's where our family originated from and came here and there were some that stopped in this areas and some that went on to the Chandlerville area and some other places. I don't know why they particularly picked Illinois. I don't know where they were between Germany and Illinois and how they wound up finding this, but it was 160 that had been in the family for a long, long time.

Hogue: Do you have any other siblings and immediate family?

Gebhardt: I have two sisters. One is older, one is younger. They're all members of the family corporation that we established in 1975 and neither one participates actively in the farming and my father is deceased in 1975, I think. No, '78. He died in '78. And so the girls are both married and live away from the farm.

Hogue: And how did you come into the idea of a corporation?

Gebhardt: I went to the University of Illinois and took varied classes. My major was Animal Science, but I took other classes. I took some soils, and I took some farm management, and in one of the farm management classes I think we even had a tax class, and they were talking about different forms of business. And so it looked to me like Dad wanted to be fair with all the children in the family yet have a chance for me to farm with him, so in the process, we looked a couple of different ideas and when I came back to the farm, I actually just worked for him by the hour or the week or month or whatever you want to call it for the first finishing the crop. Your graduation was in May and we'd already had a crop started and we had a chance to buy this farm where I'm living at, so it looked like we were adding acreage, we were buying ground over the years, and the farming operation was getting a little bigger and with the sisters and so forth, we looked at it and decided we'd form a partnership.

So after the first crop year that I just worked for him, 1974 was my first crop that I shared with my father as a partner. Then we looked at that and said, "Well maybe we need to do something about a chance for me to buy the machinery and get myself established in farming beyond a partnership." So that's when we looked at the corporation because of the ground that we owned and then that way, we wouldn't have to worry about who got what ground or something if something should happen. Unfortunately, something did happen. But in 1975, we formed a corporation based on the thoughts that that looked like the system that I'd learned a little bit about in school and we had a lawyer that was forming corporations for farmers right in this area. He knew quite a bit about it and helped us and set us up for a corporation. Then by '78, my father passed away, so it was very handy or very easy or very convenient, whatever term you want to use, to just continue the farming operation the way it was and not have to worry about how owned what since it was just shares in a corporation.

Hogue: When you grew up on the farm, what kind of chores did you have responsibilities for?

Gebhardt: We had a grain—a flat black 160 that was really set up what you'd think today as a grain farm, but in those days a lot of people had livestock, some people were phasing out. But my dad enjoyed livestock and, of course, grandpa and generations before, livestock was very important to a farming operation. So dad was still interested in livestock and we raised livestock and so I got real interested in the livestock and, hence, that's why, when I went to the University of Illinois, I majored in Animal Science. You know, I liked the

cropping too, I guess, but I really enjoyed the livestock and dad enjoyed the livestock, so that was kind of my main chores. Really, I was able to help out on the farm driving tractors and things like that—that's seasonal—but the livestock was a year-round deal. So I actually wound up owning the livestock and that made more responsibility for me to get my stock fed, so my main chores were really taking care of animals, I guess.

Hogue: What elementary and high schools did you attend?

Gebhardt: Both schools were in Stonington. They didn't have kindergarten when I went to school, so I started in the first grade in Stonington. They had one through eight at the old building and then high school was over at the other building. Then before I got to junior high, they added on to the high school and put a junior high there, so a couple of classes after that started I think I entered there to the junior high and then high school was attached to that. So I graduated from Stonington, I went all twelve years to Stonington schools.

Hogue: And Stonington as a district no longer...

Gebhardt: Yeah, it's gone. They still have the grade school as part.... We've got K through five, I guess, in Stonington now. And then the sixth goes to Taylorville, so it's part of the Taylorville school district.

Hogue: Did you have any feelings about the closing of the Stonington...

Gebhardt: My class was actually one of the larger classes—we had fifty-two graduates. And that's not very many when you look at schools today and of course they got down to not very many and it really needed to be done. But obviously, you know, I hated to see it go. And of course we've still got our grade school and I would really hate to see that go. The little town of Stonington just doesn't have too much going for it. It's sort of typical of what we're seeing in agriculture today in these small towns. When you lose your schools, you know you're going down and we just didn't have the population, didn't have the farmers in the area having as many kids. So it was sad to see the school go and they actually bulldozed in the high school building and then the grade school that's left there is the grade school that was built after my time, so I never went there, but the part of the junior high that was new when I went there is still there. So we still got a little something left in there, but it was sad to see them have to make a consolidation and times are changing.

Hogue: What do you remember about any religious activities or holidays being on the farm? Was there anything special?

Gebhardt: I was raised in the Methodist church and that's the same church in Stonington that my ancestors actually started. It's the same church. I think we're on our second building. Obviously the first settlers probably didn't even have a building, they probably met in homes. Anyway, that church has been there since the 1800s and that's where I went. Every Sunday morning, it was routine

that we went to church. My mom was raised a Baptist but when she married my dad, she said she'd convert to Methodist so we all went as one happy family, I guess you'd say. We attended church every Sunday, it was just the way we did things. My dad said that his father never had to farm on Sunday, didn't think it was right to farm on Sunday. The Bible said to take the day off so Grandpa never did it so Dad decided he'd carry on the same tradition. So, we took care of our livestock, but we never went to the field, we never planted a crop, we never harvested a crop, we never worked any ground. We never did any of those kinds of things that would wait till Monday. We'd take care and feed our animals, but that was it. So every Sunday morning, we went to church. Of course the holidays, I guess, were probably typical of what most people would think about. Anything special doesn't really come to mind other than just, you know, out on the farm we had our family tree and exchanged our gifts and do those kinds of things on Christmas and the other holidays... If we had farming to do, we might farm on a holiday, but if it was a Sunday, we didn't. That's kind of what I remember.

Hogue: Growing up, what kind of interests, activities, or hobbies did you have?

Gebhardt: I played a little bit of basketball. I wasn't real sports related, but I kind of enjoyed the basketball a little. Dad was pretty good at sports I guess when he was younger and he actually played on the last football team Stonington had. Then they stopped football because they just didn't have enough players. He was pretty sports-minded and was always interested in the sports that was going on. My dad was on the school board and was interested in the school activities that went on.

I liked to sing a lot. I still do. So I remember choruses and musicals and plays and things that we had during school. I was pretty active in those things. And of course then ag was a big thing to me so FFA was a really important part of school when I was growing up, and then 4H was too, which isn't just for the school. The FFA was actually the ag class plus the FFA, so I was really interested in the ag. I was just a farm boy all the way around. Outside of sports and singing, I really didn't have too much else going except the farming stuff and most of that was livestock-related. So I really enjoyed the livestock. So that was kind of what I did with my spare time, would be puttering around with things like that if I wasn't playing basketball. I didn't do any other sports, just basketball.

Hogue: What years did you attend Stonington High School?

Gebhardt: I went four years to Stonington, would have been I graduated in '69, so four years back would have been '64-'65.

Hogue: What other kind of items did you learn in FFA and 4H?

Gebhardt: Well there was a lot of things. I was a pretty good public speaker, it turned out. I just had a knack for it. I wasn't afraid to get up in front of people and say anything, organize my speech. One of the really neat things in FFA was the extemporaneous public speaking contest. I won the chapter all four years and led the chapter all four years and went to, I think it was Sectionals they called it then, Section Nineteen we were in, and every time, I got to advance to a higher level from the section. So I had four pretty successful years in extemporaneous public speaking.

Of course, with the livestock, there were FFA shows and there was record keeping. That was a good thing. Then, of course out in the ag shop, I learned a lot skills that I suppose my father could have taught me but it seemed like a lot of things came to me by way of my ag class. Dad was good with an acetylene

torch, but he never used an electric welder. So I learned to electric weld in ag class and I remember coming home and using those skills on the farm and some things that I learned in ag I still remember to this day and I have a deep respect for my ag teacher and the help that he gave me in the FFA. I went on to become a state farmer, which is an honor that the FFA doesn't give to just everybody and actually my dad had been an FFA state farmer in the Stonington chapter in 1943, and so they had a plaque on the wall with all the state farmers listed on it in the shape of the state of Illinois. My dad and I were the first father-son team to enter that plaque. After that, there were a few more guys younger than me that became state farmers and their dads' names were also on that. That was kind of a neat thing and quite an honor.

Stonington only had one American farmer, that's an even higher honor. I always thought that would be nice if I could have been one of those, but I didn't stay with the FFA after I got out of high school. About the only way you became an American farmer was to stay active in the FFA after high school, which was possible in those days.

Hogue: After leaving Stonington, you said you went to the University of Illinois?

Gebhardt: Yeah, I didn't have the very best grades in Stonington but I was in the upper third of my class, good enough grades to be accepted at University of Illinois. My dad had never been to college. He believed that his kids ought to have the opportunity to have as good an education as possible so he was willing to put up the money to send all three of us kids to college. So I entered U of I. Now, my two sisters went to Eastern Illinois. But U of I was an ag school, but I actually had thought at one time to be a veterinarian. But I kind of gave up that idea when I realized that being the only son and coming back to the farm was probably the only thing for me to do, so rather than going into vet school, I didn't have quite good enough grades for that so I thought, "I'll just go into General Ag and go to U of I." That's what I did. I went four years.

Hogue: What kinds of classes interested you while you were at Illinois?

Gebhardt: I had a choice the first two years to just explore different courses and see what major I'd like to take. Of course, since I enjoyed livestock and I looked at some of the courses and I enjoyed the livestock courses and nutrition and some things, reproduction and things that dealt with animals at the U of I Anatomy and things like that, physiology. So that was my greatest interest, was in the animal sciences. I also took some soils because I knew I'd be coming back to the farm. I took some foliages because that relates to feeding of the livestock as well as the soils and so I was interested in that. Then farm management was an important segment of agriculture, being able to manage your business, so I took some farm management courses. So I took lots of other courses besides animal science, but my major was in animal science and that's what I really enjoyed the most.

Probably, the highlight of my career at the University of Illinois—or my schooling at University of Illinois—was when I became involved with the livestock judging team. There were about ten or twelve people that traveled and learned how to judge livestock under a coach and then went to a contest and competed. Now I was never quite as good as the rest of the people on the team, but it was very enjoyable. I'd give my arm to do it again, because that was really, really something for me to do that.

Hogue: When you said you traveled, where did you do this?

Gebhardt: We would go out and do practice judging wherever our coach could entice some livestock farmer to let us practice on his animals. In other words, have a livestock operation where we could sort different animals out and then make a class. There's always four animals in a class and you place them based on what you thought was the best. We would go mostly on practice judging, we'd stay within the state of Illinois. But sometimes we'd travel quite a ways and sometimes we'd practice a little bit on the way to a contest, and so the contests I recall—the bigger ones, I guess you'd want to say—the ones that were inter-collegiate contests against other universities in other states. So we were kind of in rivals with Purdue all the time, so it would be us winning it or Purdue winning it. We'd come in second a lot of times if Purdue... Or we'd beat them once in awhile. Back in those days, they had the International in Chicago—they called it The International Livestock Exhibition. So we won that and that's the biggie. That's the one that's really neat to win. So we won that. In Kansas City, we went to the American Royal. That wasn't so good. We didn't do so hot out there. We went to Austin, Minnesota and judged at the National Barrow Show there. We went out to Timonium, Maryland—a suburb of Baltimore—and I think that was called the Eastern National. That was a pretty big contest. Then we went to another one while we were out there, about a week later. I don't remember the exact name of that one, but it was at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Then we also judged in Louisville, Kentucky, and there was a pretty good contest in Amboy, Illinois. Those are the ones I remember and there was quite a bit of traveling involved with some of those, especially the one out East. We were way out there then. We traveled by car.

Hogue: When you returned to the farm—this would be the 1970s—how has your farm operation developed from the 1970s to the year 2007?

Gebhardt: Well, there's been a lot of changes, that's for sure. When I came back to farm, I tried to pick up as much information in college as I thought was pertinent to what I wanted to do and my dad was rather progressive in things that he did. He was willing to take on something new in agriculture, but he wasn't exactly the inventor of it, let's say. In agriculture, we kind of divide people up in the way they think. So you had more or less the inventors or early innovators and then the early adopters, is actually the next group. They're the group that sees this guy do something different and they say, "I believe I'm ready to do that and not wait around any longer." And that was the category my dad was in and that's probably the category I'm in. I'm not quite an inventor. I usually watch a little bit and pick up things from someplace else before I do it. But it doesn't take me long to be willing to make a change and neither did dad. Putting corn heads on combines was something new when I came back and drying chillcorn and things that we did that everybody else was—picking on the ear and things like that. We did those early on and so I continued following my dad's footsteps and so when we were making these changes and my dad died of a rare form of prostate cancer in 1978. He got it in '76—discovered it in '76—and so surgery wasn't an option and chemotherapy and radiation didn't work well, so he only lived two years with it.

But in that time period, I was given some responsibility to operate the farm but I still had my dad to go consult and so I'd talk about something new or doing something different and we'd talk about those things and where it might lead us and so forth. I was very much into conventional agricultural. By "conventional," I mean we used the latest seed, we used the latest fertilizer recommendations and the chemicals and trying to control weeds and moving up with more acreage. Our acreage was increasing. We had some rented land and we continued to buy some ground, so at the farm I'm sitting on talking about now is one that we bought right before I came back from college because my dad thought that I needed a place of my own and some more acreage so that we could farm together.

So anyway, after Dad died and I didn't like the looks of the cancer thing, I got to reading the labels on some of the chemicals and they just got to scaring me and I just thought I had been reading this magazine about natural farming or organic farming or whatever term you want to give it at the time. It was kind of an eco-minded thing, I guess you'd say. I'd been reading this magazine and it was totally off-the-wall when I first started reading it. Then after Dad got sick and I studied it more and I thought about it more and thought about it more and started doing some things a little different, why I actually made a conversion from the chemical farming to organic farming. And that took place kind of almost on a little whim of some ground that had been set aside for awhile and hadn't had any fertilizer and chemical on it for several years and that would qualify as "organic." So I thought, well, I'll just plant a little bitty

strip of crop just to see what would happen and see how bad the leaves would be and how poor the yields would be, and really it wasn't bad! I was just kind of amazed by it and I thought, "Maybe this is the way I need to go." So I made a pretty big conversion to go from chemical farming to organic farming. And it hasn't always been a bed of roses, but it's been something that I've dedicated myself to and continued to learn and study and so now we actually farm at the maximum. We farmed 850 acres. Cut back to 260 acres. We've sold quite a bit of ground, we lost some rented ground, and things have changed. I'm not into the big equipment and all the latest seeds and all that stuff now like I used to be. There's a been a really, really, really major shift from 1973 when I got out of college to 2007 where I am now.

Hogue: When you talk about organic farming, what are you talking about?

Gebhardt: Basically, we used to have different organizations throughout the country and even around the world that had a little different definition of what organic should be and they did certification and verified whether you were or weren't according to their rules. Most of those were all formed and started by farmers and they all had their different thoughts on it. But basically, what happened then, eventually the USDA got involved in it. So now we do have an absolute definition of what's "organic." I say "absolute," I really shouldn't quite say that. There's still some gray areas in it, but I meant as far as everybody that's been certified as "organic," that's done through the USDA. It basically boils down to this: we're not allowed to use synthetic, man-made products that we feel are toxic to the land. This would include fertilizers, chemicals, all your bug sprays, most of those, practically everything that we know today that is man-made. Whereas, on the other hand, there are natural materials, so there is some of that that's done in organic, but basically, we don't use fertilizer that comes from a bag or from a factory or whatever you want to say, and we don't use harsh chemicals that are man-made that kill things. That's the main gist of the program for organic. It's what you don't use, I guess is what it really boils down to.

Now, as far as the management goes of organic, it's a very complicated process, but it's actually in-sync with nature. So what we look at is how would this happen if man wasn't here intervening. What would it look like? So that's what we're trying to follow, is a natural process. When it comes to annual crops, then we start looking at, they may not have been the most natural thing because crops have actually been modified from the beginning of time. They've been modified by man. So I don't do as much annual cropping as I used to, but when we do annual crops in organic, we need to do rotations and we need to have soil-building crops rather than just always harvesting crops and taking away from the land, we need to pay attention to the soil—the microbes, the worms, all kinds of things in organic, and that's where we start getting into some of the gray area on how organic should actually operate. But basically, it's a list of things that we don't do or don't put on.

Hogue: When you say "we," is there an organization?

Gebhardt: I was very instrumental in the late eighties in helping some other farmers who had the same thoughts I had about organic. I helped a bunch of guys. We got together and we had meetings and talked it over and formed a chapter—the Illinois chapter—of the OCIA, which stands for the Organic Crop Improvement Association. It was one of those independent agencies that was certifying farmers before the USDA came along and came up with the standards for organic. So I was one of the original guys in the state that helped set that up. What it was primarily for was so that we could certify more farmers in Illinois more efficiently and be able to service those farms with this paperwork that was necessary to sell these crops to certain people who said, "Well, you're telling me it's organic but let me have you prove to me that it's organic." So that's what OCIA would do. It would come out to your farm and basically take a history and take a look at your management practices and then recommend or not recommend that you be certified organic.

So I was very involved with that organization in forming it, then I became involved with the certification process and I was on the certifying committee and then I moved up to president of the Illinois chapter and then had some involvement with the international organization at one time because I was president. So that was the organization that I more or less helped start in Illinois. Now the organization on an international basis was already going, but we just thought we needed a chapter in Illinois. So it grew from a handful of farmers sitting in the back of a Maverick Steakhouse talking about OCIA to a pretty full-blown organic program in the state now with a couple hundred farmers, certified with different agencies as well beyond OCIA. The organic thing grows every year. There's an increase in the acres going into organic, there's an increase in the demand for the product. A lot of it now domestic that we didn't have before, but we've had foreign markets for organic for some time and that was my first venue, raising organic soybeans for the Japanese.

Hogue: Could you go into a little more detail on that?

Gebhardt: It takes three years for your farm soils to be certifiable. In other words, we know you can't put any prohibited material on for a three year period. We call that period a transition period. You can't sell it as organic. You can't put on the fertilizers and chemicals that raise a decent crop (laughter), so you have some real suffering in the transition period. So I went through the transition period a few acres at a time, so to speak. In other words, I didn't just get up one morning and say, "I'll never put on any more fertilizer and chemicals." But I had certain fields that I would designate. "Well this field this year I'm going to stop using fertilizer and chemical and then in three years, that field will raise me a crop." So I figured out a rotation and I figured out a system and I was still a crop farmer at the time.

Now I enjoyed livestock—I was still raising livestock—but my first experience with organic was on the soils and raising crops. So the market seemed to be very, very strong for a tofu-type soybean that would go to Japan and that took a particular variety. You had to be three years off of the chemicals and then of course you'd have some weeds in your beans and they were difficult to harvest and so you had a real—I like to say we sweat little drops of blood (laughter), because it was so difficult to do! But it was a profitable venture in the long run. The yields were lower. The variety was not particularly well-suited for our part of the state. The varieties they wanted us to grow for tofu do a little better north of I-80, but we kept trying and kept trying and the market was rewarding us with good value even though we had lower yields. We had high value per bushel. So the beans were the main thing that were really paying in the organic. There really wasn't any other crop in our rotation that seemed to be selling well in the organic system. So we concentrated on being able to make enough money off the soy beans to cover a four-year rotation. We tried to make enough money on the soy beans to really make up for the other years when we didn't make as much.

Like corn—our basic rotation at that time was corn followed by soy beans then followed by wheat, and then we'd put clover in the wheat and in the fourth year, we'd leave the clover stand over to build the soil and then we'd plow the clover down and go back to corn. So the corn and the wheat and the clover weren't paying very well. We were selling that all conventional or feeding it ourselves and the hay we didn't want to bail because that's robbing from the land, so a lot times we left the clover and didn't harvest it. Maybe mow it once and then let it grow back and that would be it. So we really had to make some pretty good money on the soy bean here. And frequently it did turn out well for us. But like I said, it was a specialty bean and it wasn't well-adapted to our areas, so I was kind of glad that we didn't have to continue that path because it's difficult to grow beans without chemicals to keep the weeds down and it was difficult to grow this variety that didn't like our climate that well. It was difficult to get the quality of bean they were looking for, so really there's better areas than the United States to grow tofu-type soy beans, so we've actually given that up since. But that was the main thing that we started with and the main that got us going and kept us going in organic.

Hogue: Currently, you're farming how many acres?

Gebhardt: There's 260 acres and our family corporation owns it all. We used to rent some ground. We don't rent any ground now. It's all organic and very little of it's being cropped. What we've actually found out is that the annual rotation, since it was so difficult, since we had some weed problems, since we were worried about the fertility of the soil—by hauling crops off the farm, we're actually removing nutrients from the farm. So the goal in organic is to remove as little as you can get away with and still make a profit. So I actually looked at the fact that the part of the state—the country—that we live in now was actually covered with perennial grasses forever and ever after, you know, the

formation of the earth and the soil started. That's how they actually got formed, and the buffalo grazed them and the Native Americans and, boy, that was a the system. They just cropped a little bit for themselves, the Indians. So I looked at that system and said, "If I can figure out a way"—since I like livestock so well—"If I can figure out a way to go back to a more permanent type of crop, I wouldn't have to have as many tractors, I wouldn't have to have as many weeds." Because, you know, the elevator and the science book and the professors and so forth—they determine what's a weed. But actually, when a cow comes along, they don't get out the book and say, "This is a weed and this is not a weed." They eat certain things, and in fact eat what we call weeds and you can't sell to anybody—they'll eat 'em. And sheep are really good at eating weeds. So now I don't look at them as weeds. Now I look at it all as a forage process. We're growing forages on this farm and the animals are harvesting the forage and if we can do that in a permanent-type setting—what we call "permaculture"—then we don't have to deal with having a weed here or a tractor with a flat tire there or burn more fuel to this or do that or haul very much off the farm. We just want to haul the animal off the farm in the form of meat. Or milk or eggs or whatever it would be. That, to me, is more in-sync with nature and it's much easier to do. It's turning out—you've got to find the market and work the market part of it—but I think it's going to be just as profitable as any other system.

Hogue: What amount of livestock are you now having on the farm?

Gebhardt: It's primarily a beef operation right now. There's some sheep and there's some goats. We used to raise hogs, but hogs take a lot of grain and that means you're back to growing grain again and I didn't really want to do very much of that so I've actually eliminated the hogs. Now I've got chicken and I used to have turkeys. They take grain, too, but you can also get a little grazing with them and so it's a product that's a little easier to sell. So we're still involved some with the poultry. But the main operation right now is beef. It actually needs to make a bit of a shift for some more sheep—there's some reasons for that—but I don't have very many sheep right now. The other option we're looking at is to actually move away from the beef and move into the dairy and be able to market the milk. So that's in the future, I guess, is what you'd say. There should be dairy cows here instead of beef cows, but right now it's beef and we're selling grass-finished meat directly to people.

Hogue: As far as the training that you get with organic, it sounds like it's been an evolving format. How do you stay current in it?

Gebhardt: That's a job, but that's one of the jobs I like. I guess I never think of myself as ever quit learning. You just never quit learning. You need to make sure, of course, the source of your information is good and accurate and has something worthwhile to you, but my main two systems to keep up on it would be to go to conferences where you can interact with people who are doing things that you're interested in, that you know something about but they know more than

you do and that's what you're trying to do. Try to pick their brain and find out what they know and then the other option is instead of leaving the farm and going to conference, you have material sent to you to read. In other words, I read a lot of books and I take periodicals and magazines and I read stuff that's a little off-the-wall to the average Illinois farmer, but that's the kind of stuff that puts out information every day. Those are my two main sources. There are some other sources where you can get your information for organic, but those would be the two main ones.

Hogue: How big is the state association for organic?

Gebhardt: I don't know the exact numbers now, but we were up to a couple hundred farmers in the state of Illinois back when, not too long ago, and I'm sure we have more than that. And of course, when you say "farmer," we're talking in organic all the way from somebody that might have a half and acre of vegetables up to the largest organic farmer acreage-wise in the state of Illinois. He's a good friend of mine. He doesn't live far from here. He farms almost 2,000 acres. So you've got all sizes of farmers so when we start talking about these little farmers, why it would take a lot of them to be very much a portion of Illinois' agriculture. But there are a few large acreage farmers in organic, and we see that growing some, but I think the main thing is talking about food.

When we start talking about food, we can start separating ourselves from regular commodity growers. Regular commodity growers are selling the raw product to some processor who's turning it into food. Very few people that farm today—call themselves farmers or are in agriculture today in Illinois—are selling food. They're selling raw commodities. So the organic people tend to back up a little bit and say, "We're raising a better quality or healthier food, or whatever label you want to put on it, and we ought to be involved in what you call 'value added' in the food arena." Something that people do three times a day—they cook for a meal. And so if you can get into the food business, then you start to get to people's stomachs. So I think when we're looking at agriculture in Illinois today, we're seeing a major shift now at the local, we're seeing a shift to organic, we're seeing a shift to healthy, we're seeing a shift to being able to buy direct and things like that.

In other words, know your farmer that you're buying your food from. And so that's where the organic is really gets a nice boost, because there's lots of things that you can do in a natural way as far as food production goes, but what's the verification process? And that's what the organic does—it gives the consumer a verification process. So there's more certified organic going on all the time but there's also a good bit of local and direct sales to food. It's a question of knowing your farmer if you're buying food, and that's what people are really starting to do now. So we're looking at a golden opportunity for this thing to take off and I happened to be in on the ground floor before it all took off and went through some of the hard times, but some of the people

that want to start up and do this kind of thing now have got more people that they can mentor with and more information and universities are starting to pick up on it and big businesses are starting to pick up on it, too. Which may not be the greatest thing in the world either, but... Anyway, just a small portion of Illinois is involved with local and organic, but it's ready to turn the corner on a really big deal.

Hogue: When you talk about the livestock raising, can you walk me through the whole process from getting the livestock, how you deal with it in an organic basis and what happens to the livestock when they leave here?

Gebhardt: When we started the direct sales and food, you want to say, of livestock or meat, it was with chickens—turkeys and chickens. And you can sell somebody a chicken pretty easy, you know. So I looked at the model where we raise the chickens outdoors on the ground. So what we can do on a chicken is, since they are hybridized—not good or bad, whatever you want to say about that—we would buy a day-old chick from a hatchery. Organic says that if that chick's never had a drink or anything to eat, then if it comes to your place and you start it organic, then it would be organic. Now that doesn't hold for the other species—a lot of them explain that real quick. So we would buy chickens from a hatchery, day old, they're just hatched, and they won't have anything to eat or drink until you get them. So you put them in the brooder house and get them started and then move them outside as soon as you can and raise them outdoors and you feed them organic and they're running on your farm, on your grass that's growing in an organic soil, then you've got an organic chicken. So we started out in that process. That's how you can do the poultry.

Now when it comes to the mammals, then we're talking about a process whereby how do you ever start organic? So what the rules allow, is they allow for the female to be non-organic. Somewhere, there are all these females and they're not necessarily organic. So you can take a female and, in the last one-third of the pregnancy, if you'll maintain that female under an organic regime—and we'll talk about that in a second—if she's under an organic regime, then her offspring will be organic. So even though that female is not organic herself, her offspring will be. That's how you would start in an organic mammal system. So your hogs and your sheep and goats and cows and all that stuff can be done organically by buying conventional animals in the last third of their pregnancy. Then you start an organic program. Now, the organic program means that the premise that they live on has to be organic, so in other words, my farm and my soils are all organic, so the animal can live here. Then all the feed that that animal would consume would either have to come from my farm that is organic or someone else's farm and have verification that that's organic. That's what the certification program is for.

So all those products that that animal would eat would have to come under the rules of what is or isn't organic. And then as far as any medications go, if you

wanted to use a medication, then that animal no longer would be organic if it wasn't an approved medication. Now, there are some things that we find that are natural and so you can use those things. It's quite a long list when we start getting into animal production and then there's fly control and worms and all these other things that you deal with in the animals. But you have to follow the procedures, again. You know, it's some long, drawn-out rules on what you can use and what you can't use, but once that baby's born here, from that mother, then that baby becomes organic and grows and, if it stays on your farm—which it wouldn't have to. You could sell it to another organic guy and he could raise it from there, but again you'd have to have the paperwork to transfer him over to another guy's farm. I don't do that here. I raise everything myself as far as the cattle and the sheep and the goats. I don't have hogs anymore, but I used to. And they all have to be born here and maintained in an organic program.

Hogue: When you talk about the paperwork that's required for this, who is the group or agency that monitors that?

Gebhardt: What it's set up for now is that the USDA says, "Here's the rules." Then they say, "Anybody that wants to form an agency to go out and make the verifications for certification can do so." So you and I could start a business tomorrow if we wanted to, to certify other farmers. All we'd have to do is follow a certain procedure based on the USDA. So USDA does not actually do the certification. An organization does—an agency. And so there's beginning to be several of those around. So what happens is the USDA looks over their shoulder and says, "How do you go out and certify those farmers?" And they say, "Here's how we do it." And the USDA says, "Okay, that's good enough. That meets the rules, so now you can use our label," (USDA has the label), "that says 'USDA certified organic." And you'll see those on packages in the store. All the little green round circle and it'll say "USDA." So any agency can form and start the process of certifying farmers. Different agencies would have different forms, but they're basically asking all the same kinds of questions. "What are you using on your farm? What's your rotation? How do you maintain your soils and how do you build your soils?" All these kinds of questions that they'd ask, whatever procedure they want to use to ask them, that's part of the paperwork involved. You need a trail that says, "I bought this from that place and that made it organic or it wasn't," you know. So that's what the paperwork involves. An agency coming on your place once a year going over your records so you can verify that this has all been done according to the rules. (break in audio)

Hogue: Okay. Start again. You serve on some state committees yourself.

Gebhardt: As far my activities, I'm interested in the grazing, so there is a federal grazing group that has state chapters and that's called GLCI, that's Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative. That's been kind of an interesting thing for me since I've converted a lot of cropland into grazing land. I serve on a state committee

there and I kind of represent the organic segment of it, I guess you'd say. That's one thing I enjoy. Another thing I enjoy off the farm, related to farming, is an organization made up of a lot of different groups and it's called CFAR, which is the Council for Food and Agriculture Research. That's a group of people—I was actually asked on the very, very early side of that whole thought process as to how sustainable agriculture could be accepted in the state of Illinois when it came to lobbying the legislature for funds that could go into agriculture research. And so they sort of said, "We're not getting our fair share of money to study agriculture, but we also don't think the state legislature's going to give us a lot of money and say, 'Here go do research' without being able to reach a broader group of participants. And so, since I was involved with a group called the Illinois Sustainable Ag Society, and a couple guys with me, we were invited to come in the early talks of "Can we do this? Can we go to legislature and ask for this money for research?" I said, "I won't be with you if it's going to be same-old, same-old." That's the term I used. "Same-old same-old" being, "Well, we're just going to study how to raise more corn in Illinois." Or, "We're just going to study how to get hogs to grow faster." That, to me, wasn't the answer for the future of Illinois agriculture and we needed more research and we needed it in the areas of what, at that time, we were talking a lot about sustainable agriculture.

Now, I had already brought up the term "organic," of course, and some people argue about the differences between "sustainable" and "organic," but we were hitting them pretty hard with the idea that you're going to have to spend a little of this research money in an area that we have interest in, or we're not going to help you get the money. So they said, "Okay." And actually it was formed and CFAR is over ten years old—I think they just had a ten-year recognition not long ago and so they've been getting money from the legislature to do research. Well, in the process, I helped get the thing started, then I need to sit there and make sure the research does in fact become something new and different or something that's in my area of expertise and not just more same-old-same-old. So that's when I got to my participation in CFAR. It's been very extensive and I've hardly missed a meeting and I'm on the research committee and I do some things on that level that I find, at times, discouraging that I can't always get everything done. But by the same token, it's rewarding when I do get this little piece of the action, so to speak, or whatever, and get some research projects that I think are exciting for the future of Illinois besides just growing more corn. So that's been something that's relaly been, put a lot of effort into dealing with the CFAR. Then I mentioned the Illinois Sustainable Ag Society, which is no longer. We were kind of the organization that—I wasn't in on the founders of that. That was a few years before I got involved with that. But those guys were just saying, you know, how can we keep agriculture going in Illinois? How can we make sure farmers stay on the land? How can we make sure that we're doing this thing for the future, not just for today? So I got involved with that organization but it has since passed on and I think that the actions that that group has taken are more widely accepted now and that it isn't as necessary as it was.

Another organization that I'm pretty proud to be involved with is the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. I happen to be the board president now and have been for three years. I've been involved with the board four years and I've been involved with the group even more years than that as a member but also as doing some lobby work with them—farmer fly-ins to Washington D.C. and ag issues that relate more to sustainable-type agriculture. That actually, that group started as a coal-mine reclamation group in southern Illinois. It was called Illinois South Project. And they just thought, "We're tearing up all this farm ground and not putting it back together right. We ought to form an organization to try to work on it." That was their goal. So what happened was, as the board members would go off the board and new board members were elected, the goals and objectives of the organization would shift. It shifted primarily to a farm focus and at the time, the group was interested in legislation, which has an impact, but also interested in local issues. So they were dealing with things like hog confinement that's coming in and different things. It was interesting to watch the organization evolve. Now, it's actually making it another step as I'm president and sitting here talking about it. We've actually moved into an area more related to local foods and organic is part of that. But the local food issue, since it's really a hot topic, we're trying to make a major impact on agriculture in Illinois so that we can maintain some farms, so that we can maintain some farmers to live on those farms. Because a lot of us on the board just don't like the trend that we see so what we're doing is we're trying to give people an option. You can go to the grocery store and you can buy food that comes from a factory farm that's had all the chemicals and stuff put on it that you want, or maybe you can buy from some local farmer who's growing it and you can go you and see is farm and find out how he's doing it and know where your food's coming from. So I'm really excited about serving with the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. It doesn't take a lot of my time, but I put effort into it and I feel like there's a lot of rewards in it and it's heading in the right direction and we feel good about our organization.

Hogue: The selling of the product here—is there something different for an organic farmer as compared to a conventional?

Gebhardt: I think so, because what people are basically saying is, "Why is it that we have so much cancer? Why is it that we have so much diabetes? Why is it that people are overweight? Why is it that we're having heart attacks? Why are all these things happening to our people and our dear friends and our family?" My dad died of prostate cancer—a rare form of prostate cancer. There's plenty of prostate cancer around and a lot of guys can't get cared, but not Dad's. Dad's was really weird and we got other farmers that we know in the area that come up with these cancers. Then I read those labels on those chemicals and I thought, you know, there's a connection here. That was my connection and that was personal, selfish reasons was all that was. Then, I recognized other people have those same thoughts that I have and they're the people that's eating the food, not necessarily growing the food. So I thought, "There's my opportunity." To find these people who care about how their

food's being raised, who care that there's going to be a farmer out there in the country, instead of going to the grocery store and you don't know who you're buying from. I mean, you give your money to the checkout counter and that's it. But when you go out to a farm and you see how the food's produced and you see the guy that's raising it and you recognize that he's sweating and working out there just to try to raise you food, you know, it becomes more of an association with how your food is being raised and how it's being produced. The beauty of the organic, your questions is—I'm trying to get to the answer here—The beauty of the organic is that there's someone else who has stepped in the process and said, "Look—we know that this farmer is doing these things and not doing these things based on the history that we've taken from his farm and the paperwork and the trail that he shows and the records that he's got." So that's what I like about the organic.

Now, if you're a person that says, "I don't think those traces of chemical in our food are so bad," then I suggest to you that you don't worry so much about, "Is it organic?" But, "Is this a good, trustworthy farmer that's raising your food? Is this a good person to be associated with?" And if he sprays of little of that, than you'd find that out and you live with that and say, "Well, that's okay." But I like the organic part because it automatically tunes into these people who say, "We just don't want those things in our food. Here's the things we don't want and you organic guys are not using those things." And that's what gives us the step up, I think, on the rest of agriculture and conventional agriculture, is that we have a process that says this stuff is not in our food.

Hogue: When you talk about work with the state legislature or with USDA or with the federal legislators, who are you dealing with specifically?

Gebhardt: Usually there's a group that goes together to try to get more done than an individual can. I have done very little on an individual basis of something that I just wanted for myself. One that does come to mind, though, is when I was butchering chickens and turkeys on my own farm, there was an exemption in the rules for processing that allowed a farmer to do that on the farm. But they were kind of goofy and I actually went to the Illinois Department of Agriculture and said, "Look, some of these things are silly and we need to change some things." So in the process, I did see my legislator—Duane Noland was our man at the time—and I told him of my difficulties and how I'd gone to the Department of Ag and dealt with this. So that was one personal thing that I sort of did on my own.

Otherwise, my general activities involved with legislation and lobbying deal with what we come together as a group of people who have a common thought and say that we think these legislative issues are something that need to be addressed. Usually, what they're addressing is something that gives the farmer the opportunity to be able to grow and raise his own product and show that he's different from somebody else. There's a lot of examples—we don't

have time to go into all these—that show that, really, the factory-type farming or the conventional farming on a large scale, or the things that people perceive as where their food's coming from the grocery store—it's not coming from a farm—that those entities are having some unfair advantages or that they're writing the laws or that they're making sure that the subsidies and that the payments and stuff are going through to maintain their business, so to speak. And so we've got corn being subsidized, but we don't have vegetables being subsidized. Well, people eat more vegetables than they do corn. Now, they get corn, in a long, roundabout way, and lots of it, but they're not eating the corn. They're eating something made from corn.But, they're eating the vegetables, but we don't have any incentive for a vegetable farmer to grow vegetables. But we sure have an incentive for a corn farmer to grow corn.

So when I go to do legislation, I'm trying to get—as a group with other people—we're trying to get things balanced. We're trying to say, "If it's fair for this, it's fair for that. Or if it's not fair for this, it's not fair for that. Just put us on a level basis and then we'll let the people decide, you know, what they want to come up with." So we're actually lobbying a lot of times against our conventional farming neighbors. Which is not the most pleasant thing for me to think about, but I just want to give opportunity to other people and I don't think we ought to be just paying farmers to grow corn. We need to either be paying farmers to do what's right or don't be paying farmers. I mean, really getting down to the bottom line, that's my opinion on it and a lot of the people have that same opinion. So we work together to try to bring issues that come up to the legislature. Through legislation, we try to get those changed. Then, of course, there's agencies that you can go to that make the rules after we get the legislation. Those are an interesting process to deal with, too. I've been to Washington, D.C. and talked to people who are setting up a process to determine what is "grass-fed beef." We now have the government overseeing what is called "grass-fed." We don't have any rules over what's "natural." We're going to have rules about "free-range," someday. We're going to have rules about "antibiotic free." The government's going to be involved. So I've got to be involved with the government to see that those things line up with my thoughts and so that's what I'm doing when I'm working off the farm on those kinds of issues.

Hogue: How do you see the universities such as the University of Illinois and how they deal with organic now?

Gebhardt: That's been interesting. That's been a process that I've been pretty close to for a long time because I couldn't get the information from the university that I was seeking and I'd gone to the university, even went to school, and I came home educated from there thinking, "This is the way we farm." Then I realized that maybe this isn't the way we farm and I went back to the university and they didn't have any information. So that was disheartening, in a way, but in the process, they found out about me and how I was blazing this trail, I guess—or me and a handful of guys were blazing these trails—and they

would actually refer calls to me. The university would get a call from a grower who wanted to know something about organic and they'd say, "Call Paul Gebhardt." Or, "Call Jack Harris or call Marvin Mangis or some of these other guys that had been doing this stuff. And I guess you could say that's a feather in my hat, but it really isn't my job. I mean, I happy to do it, but that's the university's job because they didn't know.

Then they kept getting more calls and more calls and they couldn't keep referring these calls to me, that was embarrassing to them. So they finally decided, "You know, we're going to have to get with the program. We're going to have to find out what this is about. We're going to have to bring in these farmers to these conferences and have them talk about organic and have them talk about sustainable and natural and whatever they want to give these other people an option." It's all about options. I'm not twisting anybody's arm that says they have to grow organic and they have to think like me. I'm just saying, "If you want this option, then how are you going to learn it?" So the university has said, "You know, that's part of our job is to help people learn the process. To help give them an option." So that's actually been a great, great change that the university's made through extension and we are starting to see programs with experts on the panel that they've actually learned—their personnel, hired by the university—to talk about sustainable ag and organic, and those people have actually learned what they know from farmers. So it's just completely turned around, you know. The extension taught the farmers, now it's farmers that taught the extension so the extension can go back out and teach the farmers. It's made its full trip around. It's been interesting to watch.

Hogue: When you talked about the number of people doing organic, you talked about some very small operations to some larger. Are they located evenly throughout Illinois or are they in certain locations?

Gebhardt: It was interesting, that when I first got involved with the organic process, that they actually were in clusters. You could actually take the state of Illinois and you'd find about four or five little guys over here in this one area who didn't live very far apart. Then you'd go a long ways across the state somewhere else and you'd find five or six guys there. And it was just kind of by clusters and I don't think that was an accident. I think that was guys who were willing to get together and take a chance at doing something different and having somebody else they could talk to. When you find that one guy that's isolated in the state all by himself that's organic and there wasn't anybody else around him, he's a unique individual. I mean, he's blazing a trail there on his own.

But even though we weren't living next door to each other, we were close enough together that we kind of could lean on each other and could know what was going on, so there would be associations of little groups. Now I don't think that's quite as prevalent. I think we've got them pretty well scattered around now, but a lot of those will be the smaller operations, too.

Obviously, that's what we need in a local food system—you've got to have a grower close to a town. The people in the town buy from the grower and so you're going to have them all scattered all over wherever there's another town to serve people food, you're going to start finding these growers, and that's what's happened. And through the extension being able to teach these growers, we have beginning farmer programs now that we didn't have and we have research that's being shown, we have universities doing research. It's just interesting to watch this thing grow and it's coming from the consumer side of it. People want to know about their food. They want to know the guy that's raising it, they want to know that it's wholesome. And we could argue all day, is it better or is it not—it's the perception. The perception is what it's all about. So these people perceive that if I know this farmer and I know how he's growing it, then I feel better about eating his food, then so be it. I don't think there's a problem with it. So we're glad to see that happening and we're starting to see, probably, growers scattered through the whole state, by necessity.

Hogue: The livestock that you raise that goes to market—how far away is this market that it goes to?

Gebhardt: I've got a guy that will sell some of my beef. He'll actually be brokering it. He'll buy it from me and he'll sell it to somebody else. Not very much happens that way. But he'll take it to Indiana or Chicago or wherever. I don't want to sell there. I want to sell to people close to home. So basically, my product is advertised in one little Springfield paper and that's it. And it needs to be more than that, but that's selling some beef for us and those people are usually not very many miles away. Now, the internet is an option where people are going to be trading stuff from long distances and I don't particularly like that idea. I've had a few calls from people a long distance off and I'll say, "You know, we're a long ways apart." And I leave it at that. It's their choice. If that's what they want to do, they can come get it, but I'm not taking it. That's not my idea. My idea is to sell locally as much as I can.

I got the map out. I drew a circle around my farm that reaches out twenty-five mile diameter, so the radius of that is a pretty good size area. That area includes Decatur and Springfield and bunch of other towns. Those people add up to roughly 250,000 people. So I'm looking at my little farm and I'm saying out of those 250,000 people, there ought to be enough of them interested in buying the kind of product I want that I don't have to go farther than twenty-five miles to sell my product. So, there's even a little thing going on about a "hundred mile diet," that's actually people who are trying to buy everything that they eat in their household within a hundred miles of where they live. It's an interesting concept. I use twenty-five—you can use any number you want—but our food is traveling a long, long ways as it is today, and I don't think it needs to. So that's the key, to me—that we market as locally as we can and then get these farmers scattered throughout the state to serve those markets. Then what do we got? We've got a whole bunch of farmers that we

need to keep on the land and we need to be able to sell this stuff direct and when we'd start selling direct, we'd start to pick up that amount of money that we were giving to somebody else.

In other words, I still have to have my beef and lamb and goat processed at a state-inspected plant, but that state-inspected plant is only fifteen miles from my farm. When we lose that, it'll be a sad day. If I want to go to an organic certified plant, I have to go almost a hundred miles. I don't really want to do that, so I don't worry about telling these people that I'm going to go to a certified plant just so they can say their meat went through a certified plant. I'm going to tell them I'm going to go through a local plant. It was organic on my farm. You're going to get the meat from the animal I delivered to the slaughter plant. That's the meat you're going to get, so why do you need to get any more excited than that? What the process is saying is that it's a possibility that you could non-organic meat and organic meat mixed up and there's, you know, lots of things that are involved with that. But I'll take chickens over to Arthur tomorrow and get them processed—this is not a certified organic plant—but I know I'm going to get my chickens back. I know how the plant operates. It's fifteen miles away. That's really close for me because that's the only chicken plant in the state that will do custom work. So you take somebody at Rockford, if he wants to get chickens butchered at Arthur, he's got to drive 200 miles one-way with his chickens, then turn around and haul them back 200 miles to sell them local. So we've got some problems in processing that we need to resolve. So the whole idea of "local" involves your community. You're going to have to have slaughter plants, you're going to have to have people working together. You're going to have to have farmer's markets or whatever to introduce yourself to the system. Being able to sell that food local and sell it direct is, to me, really what we need to be thinking about because that's what the trend is. That's what the people want today.

Hogue: What are you planning to do in the year 2008? Is it going to be similar to this year?

Gebhardt: Pretty close. We're still staying in the beef business. What I'd really like to go to eventually is dairy and I don't think I'll probably be buying dairy heifers in 2008, but if I can find a young man that wants to come milk cows on my place, I need to buy dairy heifers. Now, we'll go back to the idea of how something becomes organic. I'll throw in a little twist here on the dairy because it's of interest to me and maybe it's of interest to other people. When you obtain this female dairy animal, we talked about how the offspring will be organic. But now, to get organic milk, what we have to do to this female dairy animal is we have to feed this animal organically, maintain an organic program on this animal for one year. After one year, then the milk derived from that animal becomes organic. The animal is still not organic. Never will be organic. But its milk will be.

So in order to start an organic dairy here, what I would do is I could buy anybody's cows, but I'd have to feed them for a whole year organic feed, but not be able to sell organic milk. The easiest way for me to do that would be to buy young stock, that's not ready to give milk and feed them for a year. After that year, if they're ready to give milk, that milk's organic. So rather than buying a milk that's already milking, I would be buying young heifers. Those young heifers would come on here and be maintained in an organic process for a year—they're not giving milk yet but they're going to get bred here and then they're going to give milk. So I could start an organic dairy by buying up some young dairy heifers. I don't think I'll get any in 2008, but I'd like to get them as soon as possible and I'd like to find this young man that would come onto the farm and start milking with me because what we have today in agriculture is we have a lot of young people who have a desire to be involved with agriculture but they have no capital to get involved. They have no farmland. And if they were to go borrow the money to buy the cows, borrow the money to buy the land, borrow the money to raise the feed and put in these animals and then try to make a living, they'd really be hard pressed. So I have the land, I have the feed, and I will buy the appropriate animals. In other words, stop the beef and start the dairy. I would do that for a young person if they'd be willing to do the work.

Because I'm getting older—I'm fifty-six years old—and I'd like to continue this farming in organic mode. The only way to do that is the ensure that the next generation is going to do that. My children will not come back to the farm, so therefore my concern is what will the next generation do with my farm when I give it up? Someday, I'll have to give it up. I'll either be too old or I'll die! So someday, somebody's going to take it over. I would like to start those young people now and this is my plea going out to anybody that wants to come out here and look at this place and say, "I'd like to get involved with you." I'll provide them with the animals and the feed and the land and they can come up with housing and the work and we'll make a split on the income from the milk. So that's my goal. I don't think 2008 will bring the dairy heifers, but I'd like to have them in 2009 for sure. I think 2008 will be probably just a continuation of the beef and the chicken. I think if there's going to be an expansion or an area that's new for 2008, it would probably be the sheep enterprise. We're getting into hair sheep instead of the wool sheep. I used to raise a lot of sheep and I let that go and then I got back in them again now, so we're interested in trying to market lamb and this hair lamb is a little different, so we'd like to be selling lambs in 2008 that we haven't done yet.

Hogue: If I understand correctly, you are not raising any crops?

Gebhardt: I had six acres of corn on a 260-acre farm. I did that mostly to raise my own seed. Organic is supposed to use organic seed. This actually happens to be an old variety, an open-pollinated variety, and so I'm concerned with the contamination of crop from the genetic engineering. You can't have any of that in organic. So it's all about all the corn that's being grown around me and

about all the soybeans that are being grown around me are genetically modified. We don't want that in organic. We don't want that in our food system for these people that are concerned, so I need to maintain some kind of genetic purity. So I grew the corn so I'd have my own seed. Part of the reason I'm doing a little bit of cropping is because we still use some annual cropping, but those turn out to be a forage rather than a crop that we harvest for grain and send off the farm. We could chop corn for silage, we can chop sorghum for silage. We currently bail oats, we plant oats. It looks like we're growing an oat crop and then just before it's ready to combine, we mow it down and bail it. So, instead of hauling oats of the place, we're feeding our oat hay right here on our farm. And then that is also a means by which we convert the ground from crop land to grazing on a temporary basis. We have a real long term rotation on the ground that we do farm. This year, I had no soy beans. Next year, I might have a few. We can feed them on the farm. That can increase the protein level of the chickens. But since we are grass-finishing the beef, we don't need the grain for the beef either. The hogs are gone, so we don't really need the grain. So yeah, I don't have very many annuals. I do have some acres of annual crops, but they're not really this typical of Illinois. It might be a crop, but it doesn't wind up being harvested with a combine. It usually winds up being a livestock feed that stays here on our place and goes to our livestock.

Hogue: As we get into some final thoughts, how has your life in agriculture changed over the last few decades?

Gebhardt: Yeah, there's decades. '73. Seventies. I farmed through most of the seventies. They were really profitable years for conventional-type agriculture. (Inaudible speech) said we needed more corn, we could plant fence row to fence row and we could sell everything we grow and there were some good profits to be made in the seventies. So I actually was in school three years of those seventies when some of my high school buddies went straight up from high school into farming. They actually made more money than I did because I was spending money going to school and they were making money on the farm big time in the seventies. Then in the eighties, things turned around pretty bad and we had just the opposite effect and we started losing a lot of farmers and that was sad for me to see happening. The consolidation and farms got bigger and we got bigger too, some—it wasn't our goal to get bigger, but we bought land and that got to be a problem and the interest got to be a problem, so the eighties was a decade I'd like to forget (laughter). And it was also the decade when I was making the changes to go organic, so it was a very difficult time. Very difficult time.

So then, the nineties—everybody thought, "Well, it's got to get better than it was in the eighties." And I think there were some good times in the nineties, but the trend was still kind of the same thing. We're going to have bigger farms, we're going to have pretty low-profit per-acre basis, so we're going to have to have more acres. Of course, I was into the organic then but still doing

the annual crops, so that was kind of my transition in there. Then after we turned 2000, the direct food thing, I was really starting to come home on the direct food thing and get some things going on that. So it's been interesting to watch. I don't know how those years got away, how many of them so fast (laughter)! It seems like it's gone very fast. But there's been a lot of trial and error involved with it. Way more error than I want to remember, but when you do hit something right and it feels like the right thing to do, you have to dedicate yourself to stay with it for a long time. Agriculture is a long-term process. Anything you think you can accomplish on a short-term basis is probably not going to last long, either. So it's a long-term process and it's been a roller coaster ride for me, but I've enjoyed most of it and I'm looking forward to hanging in there as long as I can and keep doing the kinds of things that I think are right.

Hogue: What would you say is the biggest change you've experienced in agriculture?

Gebhardt: No doubt the fact that we don't have as many farmers left around us. And we need neighbors. We need good friends and we need to get along with each other. But it's a trend that I just don't like. I don't like to say this, but we just got a dog-eat-dog situation out here on the farm and these guys need more acres to survive according to the economics of it and the volume that they need to run and it's just not making for a good neighborhood. I think things have deteriorated in agriculture. Agriculture used to be fun and it's not fun anymore, for most people. It's still kind of fun for me, because I'm not into that rat race, but you know that dog-eat-dog thing, it's just so sad to see. And our little towns are dying because we don't have farmers that have families that live and support our communities and our little towns are becoming bedroom communities and we've lost our schools, we've lost our barber shops, we've lost our grocery stores, we've lost everything down the line. And all we got is another branch bank in each little town. It's just sad to see happening. That change in agriculture is one that's not been good. It's going to come back to haunt us someday in the long run, but it's one that I've seen that I can't get off my mind. You ask me about what change I've seen, that's the one I just keep trying to find solutions to that situation, and I think we've got a chance to slow it down or maybe turn it around. We're probably not going to go back to planting corn and put a fish beside it, go back that far, but I think we can stand to go back a little ways and look at our food system, because agriculture is really what we're talking about. What we're really doing here is we're harvesting the energy from the sun. So we see a lot of emphasis on ethanol and energies and things like that, and really it's all about capturing the energy from the sun so that man can utilize that energy through nutrition of his body. In this case, now we're starting to move that body with a car, so that's where the ethanol's really grown, so we're still in the energy business. Maybe not as much to sustain the human body as to move that human body or whatever we need to move, but obviously energy is a big thing that's coming about now. We're probably in the mess we're in because we didn't address the problem soon enough. But if we would address agriculture

as a form of capturing the energy from the sun and send back and take another look at agriculture, I think we'd really have an eye-opening situation.

Hogue: What advice would you give to someone thinking of pursuing a career in agriculture today?

Hogue: Go for it! But be careful the direction you go, that's all I'm going to say. I just want to say that we have an opportunity here to feed people. We have an opportunity here to grow our own energy. We've got a lot of opportunities in agriculture and, in Illinois, it's such a diverse state in its soil types and the kind of agriculture we can do, but we've got all these people and we just got to think about how we're going to hook up with these people and make agriculture something really neat in the future. So these young people have this opportunity, have this energy, have this ability to get in on something that's really making a turnaround. If they head the right direction, agriculture in Illinois has got a wonderful opportunity for young people. And we need them. We need them bad. I just realized the other day that they always used to talk about the average age of the farmer in this country. I realized the other day that I just became that average. (laughter) It's around fifty-five, fifty-six years old and that's how old I am. And I didn't even think about it until the other day and I realized that now I'm the average age of the farmer, which means we don't have very many years left as a farmer. If you're fifty-five and if you did retire at sixty-five, there's only ten left, so we need these young people to come back to farm and the opportunities are there.

Hogue: What would you like to be remembered for?

Gebhardt: It would be nice to have people say, "That guy looked like what he was doing was crazy and then in the long run, it was the right thing to do." I don't know what all those things are, necessarily, or whether they have to spell them out, but just the fact that a lot of people would say, "You know, it looked like he was on the wrong road and he was really on the right road." That would be good enough for me.

Hogue: What advice would you like to give young people in general?

Gebhardt: Take a look at agriculture in general and see that there's a place for you and see it's not necessarily going to come from the type of agriculture that you see driving down the interstate. It's going to come from another kind of agriculture. So get in there, take a look at it, come back to the farm, grow food for people, do the things that are right, and it'll reward you in the long run. Come back and farm.

Hogue: Were there any other final thoughts you'd like to make about the topic of organic farming?

Gebhardt: Well not really. I would say this: it looks like, since the consumer trend is really picking up on organic, it increases every year. If you've only got one

little grain of sand and you double it, that's two grains of sand don't make a beach. But as you start to double two grains and four grains and double four to eight, when these things start to happen—and I'm not saying organic is doubling every year, but it is increasing at the rate of twenty percent each year. Now, twenty percent of the first little tiny sliver isn't very much. But now that we're starting to get a little bigger piece of the pie, twenty percent on top of that again—which it seems like it continues every year at twenty percent—that's going to be a significant increase when you start getting up into some bigger numbers.

So at these kinds of increases, if they maintain themselves at this level, we're going to need a lot more organic. You know, big businesses figured that out. They haven't set back and watched us crazy guys out here getting a little piece of their market. It didn't bother them. When we start getting big pieces of this market, they're concerned. So they've studied this market, and the largest organic chicken producer in the United States is Tyson Foods. It's not us little farmers out here raising chickens organic, it's Tyson Foods. Why? Because Tyson Foods studied the market and Tyson Foods said, "People want organic and we raise chickens and they'll buy our organic chickens—we're going to get in the organic chicken business." Okay. Here comes my concern about organic. At what point in time is it no longer that nice little farmer that you can go buy your chicken off of? And because the term "organic" is out there, people say, "Well that must be the way to go. We must need to buy organic. We'll just buy organic." And they buy it from Tyson instead of me. So I'm looking at a day that's coming—and some say it's coming sooner than we think—that industrial agriculture as we know it today or major food processors will actually take over the organic thing and it may not be for the best.

Now, that's just my opinion and that's for what it's worth, but the key is what will keep the consumer's confidence up to continue to support the small little farmers, the people that are local that are selling their food direct? To me, there may have to be a term beyond "organic." So my comments about organic are that I'm concerned that industrial will take it over and not make it quite so good as it is today and that we'll have to—small producers and organic producers—maybe label ourselves another way. I'm already thinking of other terms we can use and better ways. What we need to do is continue to set the hoop higher. Or the bar—set the bar higher. Industry is very happy to have a level that they know where it's at and they can hop over it without too much trouble, and I think the true food producer that's concerned with the land, concerned with the animals, concerned with the environment, concerned with the wildlife, concerned with all these ecological things that's going on, global warming and all that—thinks about setting the bar higher. When we think about setting the bar higher, it can't be a bad thing. It has to be a good thing for everybody. It has a to be a win-win. So I'm cautiously concerned

about where organic is going and that we might have to set the bar higher and try to achieve something even better.

Hogue: Well thank you for the time that you've given us today and for your thoughts and to explain the history of your evolution into organic farming.

Hogue: It's been fun.

(end of interview)