

WESTERN ORGANIC DAIRY PRODUCERS ALLIANCE
2015 CONFERENCE AND TRADE SHOW
MR. TOM WILLEY – KEYNOTE SPEECH
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27TH, 2015

Canines became intimate with humans some 15,000 years back, and are generally considered “Man’s Best Friend”. Humanity has really gone to the dogs over the last ten millennia, having crafted brother wolf, *Canis lupus*, into 300 breeds as distinct from each other as Chihuahuas and Great Danes. But another candidate from God’s bestiary also vies to wear our “Best Friend” crown, the bovine. Cattle domestication shares most of Fido’s ‘get friendly’ timeline, but ancestral herders fashioned *three times* as many breeds from the now extinct wild auroch, *Bos primigenius*. We Westerners subsequently even reshaped our own genomes, evolving a special trait which allows adults to digest milk, a singular adaptation that appears to precede, to even be a prerequisite for, advancing ancient European civilizations. Though little understood, the selective advantage this “Milk Revolution” conferred on agricultural peoples moving into Northern and Central Europe, beginning some 7,500 years ago, is considered by researchers “among the strongest yet seen for any gene in the (human) genome”. Do anti-milk propagandists study history?

Traveling Italy’s Piemonte Region a decade back, I visited a traditional home in which cattle were stabled on the ground floor, with the family residing directly above. Since then, I’ve read several European peer-reviewed scientific studies demonstrating that children who live in such bovine-intimate arrangements suffer fewer allergies and much lower incidence of asthma. Many infectious diseases, unknown to humans in pre-agricultural history, and the resulting immunities we have since acquired to these originate from intimate associations with our domestic animal species. Indeed, vaccination is derived from *vacca*, the Latin word for cow. Do anti-milk propagandists study biology?

Everyone in the room understands this anonymous quote: “Humans — despite their artistic pretensions, their sophistication, and their many accomplishments — owe their existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.” Most of our urban brethren do not. They are, however, becoming aware that misplaced carbon in our atmosphere is causing serious climate mischief. Where did that carbon come from and how did it get up there? Earth’s soils harbor *twice as much* carbon as that circulating in our atmosphere, and up until 1957, humans plowing those soils to plant crops had released more carbon into the atmosphere than from burning fossil fuels. That fraction of atmospheric carbon so profoundly disrupting our climate cycles should, and maybe could, be safely returned to our agriculturally managed soils from which it is sorely missing. It has been recently understood that Middle America’s natively carbon-rich prairie soils got that way, in large part, by the pounding of millions of bison hooves. Ruminant ungulates grazing native grasslands, or managed pasture in agricultural systems, is nature’s method of building soil carbon stores. A small group of progressive Midwestern no-tillers have adopted high species diversity cover crops, intensive grazing and a broader range of cash crops to rotations. Farmers who master the tough learning curve of this radical departure from business as usual, are rewarded with significant increases in soil carbon, extraordinary improvements in water’s infiltration, its root zone storage and crop water utilization, good yields and steadier incomes from greater product diversity. Without purposefully pursuing organic status, their aggressive soil building, has facilitated reductions in fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide use of up to 80% amongst the best practitioners. Do anti-milk propagandists study soil science?

I raise vegetables, not cows. I feel privileged to pay five-dollars for a half gallon of pastured organic milk at my local grocery. I find it in the dairy case rain or shine, every day, and I do my best to educate my community about what an immense effort that represents on your part. I’m convinced the world’s dairy people suffer from an

even rarer genetic mutation that commands you to live in service to the bovine species. Your willing servitude is the rest of society's gain, and I, for one, wish to express my supreme gratitude. I too feel like my vegetable back forty owns me heart and soul, but I don't have to milk the carrots and beets twice on Christmas Day. I also don't know any group of farmers, other than yourselves, who stoically tolerate losing money, burning through seed corn until a milk price cycle turns around. Organic production once held out promise as a cure for that disease, but recent events have proven otherwise.

Though one neighborly song from the musical Oklahoma teaches "the farmer and the cowman should be friends", what business does some clod-kickin' vegetable farmer have looking over your shoulder into organic dairy's crystal ball? None, but that's what I must attempt in exchange for a free lunch today.

Let me share a bit of my and Denesse's farmer story in hopes that we'll find some relevance by and by. I was raised in a Los Angeles suburb by certified "black thumb" parents who couldn't keep a houseplant alive. After university, I attempted to reform juvenile delinquents with the California Youth Authority. Fearing this work would soon drive me to drink, I sought refuge in the soil. I moved to Fresno and studied grape growing, viticulture. Hardly knowing the front end of a tractor from the back, I was hired on a sprawling 10,000 acre Westside corporate farm where I learned the cannery tomato business. Denesse, whose grandparents had been Illinois sharecroppers, grew up in Fresno. Ness's mom actually bankrolled herself through nursing school by raising replacement heifers. We married and set out to fashion our own small farm in 1980, Denesse supporting the effort employed as a nurse, while I worked at growing several vegetable crops on 20 rented acres east of Fresno. Green beans, cherry tomatoes and zucchini were sold through a local wholesale house that assembled the production of dozens of contracted farmers. Though I avoided burning up Denesse's salary, profits were slim to nonexistent. Our breakthrough came when "Governor Moonbeam", as a younger Jerry Brown was known in those days, bankrolled the resurrection of farmers

markets up and down California. We carved out a two-acre market garden from our twenty, struck a partnership with my Dad, freshly retired from the City of Los Angeles bureaucracy, and launched ourselves as produce retailers in as many as half-a-dozen Southern California open air venues. Though our marketing prowess exceeded my production skills for several years, retail sales at farmers markets gave us a much-needed leg up on profitability. In 1984, as Denesse became obviously burdened by the stress of acute hospital work, I invited her to join the farming business, praying we could make ends meet. She did so and we have never looked back. The best sales person on the planet is certain her work providing fresh organic produce is of greater benefit to the health of our community than were any of her varied nursing endeavors. Not much later, I began reading about organic agriculture, just as my unease was mounting over the need to apply more chemical fertility and pest control inputs to my farm each year, attempting to match the previous season's crop performance. Something was amiss; the resiliency of my farm system was backpedaling. After several years of experimentation, T & D Willey Farms achieved Certified Organic status in 1987 but our knowledge was shallow, quality inputs were scarce and competent technical advice hard to come by; the University and larger farming community laughed at us. An ever-expanding community of growers dedicated to biological farming, and uniquely willing to share successes and failures with each other, gradually bootstrapped what has become the fastest growing segment of today's American food marketplace. We would like to believe that biologically intensive agriculture has reached a critical mass, poised to capture the innovation momentum from a toxic chemical industry that has dominated food production since the WWII era.

People often refer to me as an organic "pioneer", probably because I look like a gold rush prospector. Thirty years ago organic produce was difficult to grow but fairly easy to sell for a good price. In addition to small numbers of high-volume farmers markets, Mom and Pop organic grocers sprouted in cities, towns and neighborhoods

all across the country. Evangelistic organic retailers passionately educated customers one-by-one, convincing them to safeguard the planet and their family's wellbeing by paying more for food grown without toxics. The more entrepreneurially aggressive among these grew into chains, such as Wellspring Grocery of North Carolina, Bread & Circus of Massachusetts, Mrs. Gooch's Natural Foods Markets of Los Angeles, Bread of Life of Northern California, and Fresh Fields Markets in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Austin-based Whole Foods Market, a rather modest concern at the time, began its West Coast expansion in 1989, opening a Palo Alto store. We began selling vegetables to Whole Foods shortly thereafter. Growing some 25 crops, over four seasons, lent itself to biological and economic stability as we continued our farmers market retail presence and built a quality reputation for our T&D Willey label among an expanding number of regional organic grocers across the nation. Over the next decade, employing a practice common in American industry, Whole Foods Market bought out every one of the aforementioned regional organic grocers, and displaced or acquired important individual retailers in many markets. Birds of a feather flock together, and this new national retailer, now boasting hundreds of stores, took on Safeway's model, which found consolidating purchases from multi-thousand-acre farms like Cal-Organics and Earthbound more efficient. Foundational organic family farmers, having enjoyed supplier relationships with local Whole Foods stores for a decade, gradually became accustomed to viewing themselves in photos prominently displayed above produce bins that no longer stocked fruits and vegetables from their farms. After journalist Michael Pollen took Whole Foods' CEO John Mackey to task on this issue, in a 2006 exchange of public letters, stores increased purchases from local organic farms.

Before the new millennium, organic certification in this country was the purview of private organizations and several individual states. In 1971, Robert Rodale of Organic Farming and Gardening magazine kick started one of our nation's earliest

efforts to certify organic farms which evolved into California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). I served on its Certification Standards Committee in the late 1980s, when vigorous debates amongst farmer members honed rapidly evolving, high-integrity standards. These served as the template for California Organic Food Acts of 1979 and 1990. Our community also hotly deliberated the wisdom of nationalizing organic certification under the USDA's authority. Proponents argued that harmonized national standards, enforced by a trusted federal agency, would foster greater public trust and facilitate reciprocity in international trade with countries whose organic standards were nationalized. Detractors contended that a USDA bureaucracy, clearly under Food Inc.'s spell, would be a vexing venue where our grass roots movement was likely to lose control. Under Vermont Senator Leahy's sponsorship, the Organic Foods Production Act was written into federal law as part of 1990's Farm Bill. A decade-long process of crafting comprehensive organic standards ensued, the responsibility of USDA staff advised by the National Organic Standards Board, made up of fifteen public volunteers, appointed from various organic community constituencies. For better or for worse, our federal government took full control of organic certification in 2002. Since that time, inspections have become increasingly paperwork focused, check-the-box affairs, versus walking a farm to observe an Organic System Plan's on the ground implementation. All certifiers must now operate as accredited agents of USDA's National Organic Program (NOP), legally enjoined to determine an organic operation's adherence to minimum federal standards, no more or less. NOP standards, unfortunately in my opinion, were established as a "ceiling" and not a "floor", preventing any certifier from imposing any standard beyond the minimum. This encourages a culture of mediocrity within which growers surpassing minimal standards have no way to distinguish themselves in the marketplace. Prior to NOP a few certifiers, CCOF being one, could maintain reputations for being more stringent, enforcing the spirit of organic law, not just the letter. This translated into some economic value for farms

adhering to higher standards. Today, the only reason to choose one certifier over another is cost.

It's a lot easier to throw vegetables in a box and sell directly to the public than to put milk in a bottle and do the same. However, three indispensable reasons underlie our farm's remarkable financial success over three-and-one-half decades: Certified Organic status, a T&D Willey Farms proprietary label, and marketing our own products. We did this in Los Angeles farmers markets for nearly 20 years, in the wholesale arena for the farm's entire history, and through a CSA serving as many as 800 families in communities local to our farm for a dozen years. As a farmer assumes more of the responsibilities and costs of distribution, he or she gains an appreciation for the too easily vilified "middleman's" role and value. Communicating who we are, how we grow people's food and why became a major focus of our efforts to distinguish T&D Willey Farms over the decades. Every box shipped from our farm includes a note (like this one) discussing some topic of importance to food and agriculture. These make us the most well-known, and hopefully beloved, farmers in every produce department. Until several months ago, when our CSA was sold to a community organization, we published this newsletter to accompany our vegetables in hundreds of weekly boxes. All this takes an immense amount of effort and time, but translates into customer recognition and loyalty.

Jack and Anne Lazor's Butterworks Farm, reputedly Vermont's "Original Organic Dairy", was founded about the same time we started T&D Willey Farms. Early on, they peddled yogurt and cottage cheese from door to door, eventually establishing a coveted reputation for branded products from a 45-cow Jersey herd in retail outlets along the East Coast. Willeys and Lazors, who became established wholesalers when a nascent organic marketplace considered farms of our scale legitimate suppliers, now see themselves as little leaguers playing in the majors. A few days ago, Jack told me his yogurt had been, earlier this year, summarily removed from New York City and

Washington DC Whole Foods Market shelves after a quarter century, without so much as a notice. “We are heroes here in Vermont and people buy our stuff. But the farther we get from home, the more folks out there are just ‘value shopping’”, stated Jack, who vows to henceforth sell all Butterworks product in-state. I don’t think Jack and Anne prioritize net income as highly as do Denesse and I, but things are going well enough at Butterworks that Daughter Christine and husband Collin Mahoney are assuming the reins. We can’t boast that.

Fairfield, Iowans Susan and Francis Thicke, who ran a credible 2010 campaign for his state’s Secretary of Agriculture, milk 90 Certified Organic Jerseys grazing on Radiance Dairy’s 236 acres that are divided into 60 paddocks. NOSB member Francis told me all their milk is sold (\$4/half and \$7/gal.) to three groceries and a score of restaurants within a five-mile radius of the farm, “so our prices don’t go up and down with the fluctuations of national markets.” He does admit the money pit for dairies like his is the cost of processing equipment to pasteurize, bottle, make cheese or yogurt. He got away with \$100,000 in used equipment, but believes any that’s yet serviceable has now been shipped off to South America. Look to pay three to five times that amount for new equipment, warns Francis. Their distinctive, locally marketed product earns Susan and Francis enough to pay bills and enjoy a modest, steady income.

While visiting farmer friends Nash Huber and Patty McManus on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula this August, I couldn’t help but admire a modest, pastured dairy across the street from their home, Dungeness Valley Creamery, milking 60 Jerseys. After serious thought while a WSU student, Jeff and Debbie Brown’s daughter Sarah decided she wished to succeed her parents in the family business. However, selling conventional milk through Darigold coop did not provide enough margin for Sarah to purchase farm assets her folks needed for retirement. Responding to local residents’ repeated pleas for unpasteurized farm milk, the Browns took a leap of faith into the “raw milk” world nine years ago. Sarah and husband Ryan McCarthy now directly

market conventional raw Jersey milk from a lovely on-farm dairy shop (\$6.67/gal.), through a score of mom and pop organic retailers up and down the I-5 corridor, and a similar number of community drop sites. Sarah told me last week that the real risks of contamination are balanced by the fierce loyalty of raw milk enthusiasts. Marketing raw fluid milk products only, Dungeness' equipment needs are minimal, a milk tank and a used bottler fills the bill, but these and the farm store are housed in a recently constructed \$250,000 building. The Browns are now comfortably retired and the younger McCarthys earn a steady, if modest living.

It may be presumptuous for a truck gardener to suggest that dairy folk hang out their own shingle to become intimate with customers. A decade ago, Certified Organic status may have been a sufficient enough distinction to guarantee price premiums commensurate to the risks and costs that high-integrity, grass-based organic dairy operators shoulder. No longer. Costco just muscled Whole Foods out of their long held position as the nation's largest retailer of organics, and Walmart's dramatic entry into the game indicates that commodification of Certified Organic is on the horizon, if not already on top of us. As we meet, fireworks explode in Stowe, Vermont at the NOSB's semi-annual meeting where so-called organic "purists" rail against the inclusion of hydroponics and automatic renewal of synthetic inputs, much to the aggravation of "pragmatists" who embrace big organics as all good. How rigorously is the Pasture Rule that organizations like yours fought so valiantly for over a decade to define and encode into NOP law being enforced by the nation's certifiers? If indeed it is not, what sort of economic damage is that exacting on members of your community who in good faith adhere to both its letter and spirit? We must do our utmost best to protect the value and integrity of our Certified Organic label, without being naive about where things are headed, or unprepared.

I was invited to speak here today because of my public opposition to Whole Foods Market's new, proprietary "Responsibly Grown" produce rating scheme which

puts conventional fruits and vegetables, grown without a short list of organophosphate pesticides, on a level playing field with Certified Organic products. CEO John Mackey asserts organic has gone “stale”, as his Whole Foods Market seeks to reward conventional suppliers for efforts to improve soil health, food safety, labor practices, water conservation, waste reduction, and recycling, while minimizing the importance of their continued use of most pesticides. Certified Organic farmers, whose adherence to NOP law achieves many of “Responsibly Grown”’s stated goals, in addition to using *no* toxic pesticides, is shortchanged in this rating system. Organic growers often find their fruits and vegetables rated equal to, or lower than, conventional produce on Whole Foods Market store shelves. I understand many of you are being pressured by large buyers to pursue costly, time-consuming Animal Welfare Approved and Non GMO Verified labels, when these issues are more than adequately covered by your Certified Organic status.

We can go along to get along with the corporatization of our organic marketplace, or we can oppose it. Organic dairy folk who pledge themselves to the highest standards of grass, soil and animal stewardship cannot be rewarded for such efforts by commingling superior quality milk products in pools with mediocre producers or in marketplaces valuing their product as a mere commodity. Ultimately, those who drink your milk or eat my vegetables are the only constituency that can guarantee us a fair livelihood. Certified Organic’s crystal ball is murky, but my bet is on a future focused on intimacy with our customers. We can distinguish ourselves by producing food of the highest quality and integrity, educate people about the true costs and value of biologically intensive agriculture, tell our authentic stories like no one else can, and assembling communities supportive of our noble land stewardship efforts. These challenges are immense, but they always were and likely always will be.