

## Urbana woman's family motto: 'Farming without harming'

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URBANA — Growing up on the family farm near Sidell in the 1950s, Carol Goodall Wock logged many miles in the summers, walking her father's bean fields and cutting corn stalks.

"It wasn't fun," said Wock, 78, of Urbana. "But that was what farm kids did."

The oldest of four children, Wock never imagined that later in life she'd be involved in the farming of that land.

"Oh, it never occurred to me," Wock said with a chuckle, explaining that in those days a woman got involved in farming by marrying a farmer.

After graduating from college, she headed northeast in 1960, where she spent five decades earning two master's degrees, getting married, teaching special ed, gardening and studying horticulture.

When her husband died, she decided to move back home — to the 220 acres of family farm ground she'd inherited. It was closer to her brother, the late Charles Goodall, who introduced her to the Prairie Rivers Network, where he was a board member.

Impressed the more she found out about the organization that advocates for clean water and healthy rivers in Illinois, Wock decided last year to donate half of her 220 acres to the non-profit. The other half will be a legacy gift to the network — with one caveat.

She wants all the corn, soybeans and wheat on the land to be farmed organically.

Going organic was a goal she and her brother shared.

A fifth-generation farmer, UI graduate, conservationist and co-founder of Stand Up to Coal, Mr. Goodall was slowly pursuing a transition to organic farming on his own acreage prior to July 2013, when he died of complications from multiple myeloma.

Wock said he was experimenting with cover crops, which are planted in the fall to grow through the winter months and add nutrients to the soil, stopping erosion from wind and water. One field was converted to all-organic methods before his death.

"He was going to do it a field at a time, just to be kind to the guy who was farming for him," Wock said. "And (Mr. Goodall) was very committed."

### Like brother, like sister

In February 2012, Wock went with her brother to an organic farming conference in Wisconsin. By chance, she met local farm manager Steve Myers, director of Busey Ag Services.

"That was the auspicious beginning," Wock said. "I knew immediately that I wanted to convert to organic. I was just very uncomfortable with the use of chemicals, so it was a quick decision on my part."

Shortly afterward, sitting at Wock's kitchen table, Myers recalls, she asked him to help convert her 220 acres to organic methods.

"I believe that the chemicals are so harmful to mankind, to nature and all the creatures in nature that I just didn't want to be part of that," said Wock, whose mother's cousin helped invent the herbicide 2,4-D.

Myers said he asked how important income was to her. Wock replied: important.

"I knew at that point, it wasn't some whimsical attempt at this and it had to be economic. Carol was not a wealthy person reaching out to do some test-case kumbaya," he said. "Eventually, at some point, Carol had the 'audacity' to go ahead and commit, because it's not for the faint of heart."

A little more than a year later, Wock lost her brother, but not her commitment to their shared dream.

By 2015, her entire 220 acres of corn, soybeans and wheat near Sidell were certified organic by the USDA after a three-year process that forbids the use of genetically modified organisms, chemical fertilizers and weed killers and other unapproved practices.

Her brother "would be thrilled," Wock said, adding that he always used the phrase "organic farming is farming without harming."

### **Transforming donation**

Now in its 50th year, Prairie Rivers has more than 1,000 members, mostly in the Champaign-Urbana area, including those involved in the 1967 grassroots effort to stop a proposed Army Corps of Engineers dam project that would have flooded a portion of Robert Allerton Park near Monticello.

"They are longtime supporters," said Carol Hays, PRN's executive director. "It's neat that they cut their teeth on that experience and have continued to support us as we've become less an activist group and more of a professional environmental organization."

The network takes no government money and survives via private grants and monetary donations, not farmland.

But Wock's unique donation "really sets us up for the next 50 years in a lot of ways," said Robert Hirschfeld, water policy specialist with Prairie Rivers. "This is such a huge benefit for us, because it allows us to explore and take on new work that may not be funded by larger institutions and foundations that have particular interests."

He values Wock's gift at \$3 million, based on going prices for prime farmland.

Annual proceeds from the crops on the land will support PRN, and the stipulation that the land be farmed organically fits well with the organization's goals.

According to PRN, agricultural land covers about 75 percent of Illinois. More than half of that is planted in soybeans and corn, so the network is reaching out to farmers and ranchers to partner with them in protecting their soil and the state's watersheds and waterways while reducing agricultural runoff.

One way is through a new initiative, Regenerate Illinois. Hays said it engages farmers who are either interested in regenerative farming practices that are protective of the land.

"And because they are protective of the land, they protect water," she said.

### **'She is so passionate'**

When Myers attended his first organic farming conference, where he met Wock, he was in search of bottom-line numbers from organic farmers.

"We come from a numbers world, and the frustrating part then was people couldn't tell me their numbers," he said. "I understand the draw and appeal to growing crops organically from a fundamental standpoint, but if you're going to communicate effectively, eventually you will get to the question about economics. I want to know what the economics are."

Since then, the industry has continued to evolve, he said. Organic no longer comes with the stigma of sacrificing profitability.

"There are ups and downs and ins and outs like any industry, but right now, it can be quite lucrative," Myers said.

Consumer demand for organic products has recorded double-digit growth almost yearly since the 1990s, according to the Organic Trade Association, expanding from a \$3.6 billion industry in 1997 to \$43.3 billion in 2015. But it's still a small percentage of the overall food market, according to the USDA, which reports that organic sales account for just 4-plus percent of total U.S. food sales.

Myers said Wock wants everyone to grow organic, which he says won't happen unless consumers demand it. He has told Wock her 220 acres could be a sort of role model.

"If the consumer leads the charge and says 'This is how I want to buy my wheat bread' ... the farmer has a long, long history of responding to something economic," he said. "If you can show them a different way to do business that can be just as profitable ... that's what will be a long-term win for everyone."

What Wock is trying to do, he says, is about evolution, not revolution.

"She is so passionate about it," he said. "She challenges me. ... And it's been a fun ride with her."



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