The History of the Organic Movement in the United States (Project Title)

Topic Proposal (Include a brief lit review, propose what you are going to do, and say why the topic interests you):

The organic food/farming movement has undergone fundamental changes over its 70+ year history. The origins of the movement were largely based on a holistic ethic conceptualizing the farm as an organism. This ethos ran contrary to the development of industrial styled agriculture beginning in the 1920's. A recent historical review of the organic movement by J. Heckman (2007) compartmentalized the historical development of the U.S. organic movement into four major phases: Concept development (1900-1940); polarization (1940-1978; recognition (1979-1990); and accommodation (1990-present). A second paper titled: “Organic Agriculture” (Lotter 2003) details the development of organic agriculture in the context of agroecological principles and describes the evidence for lessened environmental impact compared to conventional agriculture.

The development of organic practices and ethos can be traced back to the writing’s of Sir Albert Howard. In his book “An Agricultural Testament” (1972), Sir Howard describes a style of agriculture based on natural principles stressing what he called “The Law of Return”, or the recycling of nutrients. The term organic farming was coined by Walter Northbourne, a biodynamic farmer.

What I propose to do in this project is to develop a historical review of U.S. organic agriculture including: biographical sketches of the major players and how organic agriculture has developed juxtaposed to industrial or “conventional” agriculture. I expect that my research will also lead me to develop and present a brief summary of the biodynamic movement as well.

I am interested in this topic is because I am a student of history and believe that making decisions as to where we want to go is best accomplished when we have a solid understanding of where we have been. Furthermore I find the evolution of organic agriculture from its roots as a philosophy of farming into a commodity label to be a fascinating process, especially in the context of the new certification schemes that are being developed (e.g. certified naturally grown).

Literature Cited (Please provide 2-5 citations):