

**Oral History Interview of
Steve Close**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
June 27, 2013
Amarillo, Texas**

**Part of the:
*American Agriculture Movement Interviews***

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Interview Series Background:

The American Agriculture Movement grew out of the populist agrarian protests of the late 1970s. Officially chartered in August of 1977, it remains active. Materials in the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library reflect principally its formation, the tractorcade protests of 1977-1979, and the farm and rural suicide hotline prevention efforts of the 1980s. Materials include oral history interviews, photographs, video and film, and miscellaneous papers.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Steve Close, a Colorado farmer and active member of the American Agriculture Movement. Steve discusses farming in Walsh, Colorado and the Farm Crisis of the 1970s. He recounts the various farm strikes and protests of the movement and remembers his involvement in the D.C Tractorcade of 1979. Close voices both the regrets and triumphs of AAM, and its impact on farming in America.

Length of Interview: 02:43:31

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Let me say, as we get started, this is Andy Wilkinson. It's the twenty-seventh of June, 2013. I'm at the home of Steve Close in Amarillo, Texas. It's midmorning—ten o'clock or something like that—and we're going to be talking about Steve's career in agriculture and other things and his time in the American Agriculture movement. Yes, back to Gerald [McCathern]. Not only did he get us some photographs—a neighbor of his in Hereford, I guess, had taken some video with a very old kind of video format, but we were able to find someone to digitize it to where we could read it. And he shot, copied programs off television, including news reports from here and Amarillo and elsewhere about the tractorcades and even about the altercation at McAllen Bridge. It was really interesting footage so we got all that digitized and available to look at, and all of his photos which are a ton of them. And as I told you when we talked on the phone, I've interviewed all the ones that were still living in Campo. And we have interviewed a number of other people around the country with the movement.

Is that her way of saying help me up on the chair? For the tape, we're talking about a pet poodle who's blind, not somebody else.

Steve Close (SC):

Well she can get up on the chair but she's spoiled—

AW:

Oh and wants the help.

SC:

Yeah, she can get up by herself, [but] she's kind of like the rest of us.

AW:

Steve, you said you were born in Enid before we turned the tape on—

SC:

Yes sir.

AW:

What was your date of birth?

SC:

January 6, 1940.

AW:

Great. You grew up in Enid?

SC:

Graduated from high school in Enid. Spent three years in the army. Got out in May 8, 1961. Went back and started at Phillips University that fall and got married in 1963 to a woman from Colorado. Her dad had an [farming] operation. We weren't farmers in Enid.

AW:

What did your folks do in Enid?

SC:

My pop was an Air Force civilian out of Vance Air Force Base.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

My mom was a homemaker. Earlier, back in the forties, they had their own business, but he went back to work for the Air Force probably—oh, around 1949 or '50, somewhere along in there. But we weren't farmers. My family before had been. My great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather were both Civil War veterans and they came from Carroll County Ohio back to Kansas in probably 1867, something like that. And I think that my great-great-grandpa got a pension from the U.S. Government because he was wounded in action. A wooden—steel—or iron cannon ball hit him in the side and he never really recovered. He died in 1871. So, my great-grandpa had a sister, and she married a man that lived down on the port, and they went down there. And they were mostly wheat farmers, I think, in the early day. They bought—they had about a thousand acres or something in Anderson County up in Conroe. And I think my pop was born—I don't know—he says in Cut and Shoot, which is just across the loop east of Conroe. And they were cotton farmers then, and they farmed—I don't know—probably in Texas, maybe for fifteen years. But the Depression began to get agriculture long before it got everybody else, which is usually the case. And by the early twenties, cotton was so cheap. My grandpa told me one time that they sent a trainload of cotton back to New York and when it got there and they sold it, it wouldn't pay the freight to get it there. So they retreated to Kansas. They had farms up there. My great-grandpa had some holdings. I don't know that they were really rich or anything. But he had land in Harris County and land in—let's see—Chanute, Kansas. I think that's Wilson County, probably. So they retreated back there and farmed for a few years. But he had four kids and they broke the land up and 'course we all know what happens in farm families when they break their holdings up. Nobody can make a living on the partial that's left, and that's what happened to them. Then you get into the twenties and thirties and they just kept retreating, and finally he traded his farms. I think he had a couple of quarters up in Wilson County—Buffalo, Kansas, I think, and traded them for the commercial hotel down in Medford, Oklahoma, and the Depression kept getting worse and people quit travelling or staying and pretty quick they were in

Enid. So they made a home there and my granddad was a carpenter. He seemed to make it all right. So they'd been farmers, but—

AW:

But you didn't get raised in the farm.

SC:

I didn't get raised on the farm. I was raised in town. The woman that I married then, her folks farmed out in Baca County, Colorado up in Springfield.

AW:

What were their names? What was her maiden name?

SC:

Her maiden name was Current. Ray Current was her pop.

AW:

Like electrical current?

SC:

Yeah, C-U-R-R-E-N-T. So he had this surgery in 1964. He had a lung collapse. They said he had been in the old hen house sometime when he was a kid and the spores affected him. So when he got sick we moved up there and I helped. That's when my introduction to farming—1964. So I stayed up there a couple years, then I went back to school and went a semester and then went back and helped him harvest in '66.

AW:

Were they growing broomcorn? Were they growing wheat?

SC:

Well broomcorn was about done by then. He was mostly a milo and wheat farmer. They're kind of in the edges of the Comanche National Grassland.

AW:

Um-hm. Right.

SC:

A lot of the farmers up there had permits to run cattle on government land.

AW:

So they do some dry land and run some cows?

SC:

He ran cattle. I don't know—he kept about one hundred cows around all the time and then he'd buy some yearlings and get into this government program that they had. So that was my introduction to actual farming and, you know, I wasn't a great farmer. He wasn't an irrigated farmer. He did dry land. I was a pretty good tractor driver and understood long hours and so that was my—(AW laughs)—that was my contribution to it. I wasn't real smart about—but he was a good teacher, you know. I learned quite a bit the first year I was up there, in '64. It rained a half inch the day that I got there, on the third of June, and it never rained again until Election Day.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

November the seventh or whatever it was. Milo got up—oh, I don't know—maybe ten or twelve inches high and it had a little old head on it about two inches long.

AW:

Was it even worth running the—

SC:

Putting cattle in on it.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Oh it was kind of a bad winter, you know. The government programs made us plant, so we had to plant ten acres, so we listed ten pounds of wheat per acre which was their requirement. [We] made as deep of ridges as we could, you know, trying to hold the ground, but by Christmastime it had pretty well blown flat again, so we relisted it. Then, I don't know, the spring was a little better. Then in 1965, I woke up one morning about the middle of June, looked out the window west and there was nothing but water. I couldn't believe it. (AW laughs) So I went outside—we had a rain gauge pretty close down there between the houses. I went down there and looked at that rain gauge and it was empty. I thought, Oh, there's got to be something wrong. I took it out of the stand and it was full.

AW:

It just looked empty.

SC:

Six or eight inches. Oh, you know, it was tremendous rain. Probably had eight inches all across that country. It washed out the bridges on 287 south of Springfield, south Lamar. I mean, we had another one just like that about a month later, and another one like it about a month later. It rained twenty-seven inches or something like that, if I remember, in 1965 and—

AW:

Almost double your annual.

SC:

About a half inch. So there's your average, see, fourteen inches. Anyway, that was my introduction to farming.

AW:

What direction out of Springfield was your—

SC:

They lived about twenty miles southwest called the Eddler Community.

AW:

Ok, yeah.

SC:

Little old—probably about ten miles north of Campo and eight or nine miles west. Somewhere in there.

AW:

Yeah I drove—I was out at Kim early in June and I drove north of there because I went through Springfield.

SC:

Went through Pritchett?

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

We were maybe eight or nine miles southeast of Pritchett and about twenty miles southwest of Springfield.

AW:

Yeah, yeah.

SC:

He had a pretty nice dry land farm. It was developed by an old man named Oliver Pennington [who] came from Kansas back in the twenties. And in that country, if you had water, you could grow anything. Good land, just sparse water. Down where the shoulders are, in Campo, why, there's a band of sand that kind of makes a semi-circle from Pritchett, down across there.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Probably ties into the dry Cimarron part of the river out there in eastern Baca County. They raised some good road crop south of us.

AW:

Yeah. Was anyone irrigated around your father-in-law's place?

SC:

Just a few. There was a guy named Burk, I think, that came from Tulia, Texas up there. The Texans were the ones that kind of started irrigation in Baca County. They thought it was just like Hereford. I mean, it's in the Ogallala Aquifer so they came up there and the land was much cheaper than it was down here. But the only problem is that this is about thirty-five hundred feet above sea level and up there it's about forty-five hundred—maybe a little more in places. And the Ogallala is a little bit harder to penetrate. It's kind of fractious. It's not a continuous deal, so you might drill one place—

AW:

Get some water and in another place nothing.

SC:

A thousand gallon well and then you might not find another one close, so it was kind of touch and go. I'm a water-witcher.

AW:

Uh-huh.

SC:

I witched and drilled test holes and we probably had a little water on his place but—I don't know. The wells were a lot cheaper back then but it still cost probably ten grand and he just wasn't—

AW:

Is it deep there when you find it?

SC:

Oh yeah. Yeah, we're up there probably drilling a 500 foot hole and probably pumping from 275 then, and it's probably worse now because the Ogallala is shrinking or so they say.

AW:

I don't know about in Baca County but it's certainly—all out here it's shrinking.

SC:

Yeah their's is shrinking.

AW:

Just as an aside, at the Southwest Collection we have a really great collection of books on water-witching. In case you're—

SC:

Well, it's kind of an interesting phenomenon.

AW:

It is interesting.

SC:

You know, everybody can't do it. And I could take a couple of welding rods and I can find sure lines and I found water most of the places—anywhere we drilled that I picked, why, there was a little, I mean—I bought a place that [had] a little acreage out by Walsh, back in the early seventies in Wichita. A house well there that was thirty gallons a minute, which is not bad for a house well.

AW:

No. Yeah, I've seen it work. I don't understand it, but I've certainly seen it work.

SC:

I don't know either. There's just something about it—magic.

AW:

Yeah. So you said in passing there, you said that you'd bought a little land out by Walsh. Had you gone into farming on your own and not with your father-in-law?

SC:

Well, when I lived over there with my in-laws, he encouraged me to get a few hogs on my own so I went up to sale and I bought—oh, fifteen or twenty weaning pigs. They told me how to soak grain for them and stuff and I kind of learned to do that. So when I had my own place east of Walsh, why, I built me some pens and oh boy. The pharmacist up in Walsh had an irrigated place out east of Walsh and he had them seven and a half acre corners and he had gave me a couple of those corners to run hogs on. So I had as many as two or three hundred hogs, you know—

AW:

On the corners?

CS:

—In different stages, yeah. We raised potatoes for a couple of years. Planted about ten acres, and boy that makes a lot of potatoes. And we rigged us up a cooker and cooked a ton of potatoes every day and fed them to the hogs. Pretty interesting.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

So I just kind of dabbled in it, you know, from the time—I worked for the Defense Department. Oh, I went to work, I think, December of '66. I went and worked for the Air Force over in Enid and worked at Vance Air Force Base. And then I went up to Kansas City and worked in the Defense Personnel Support Center. They buy the perishable food. Sent millions of pounds of beef over to Vietnam back in the mid—well, I was there in '68, '69, then they rented that office up there and I went down to Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas. And it was an army chemical manufacturing plant—germ warfare.

AW:

Wow.

SC:

Oh, we made millions of them 2.75 W.P. rockets that they fired off in Vietnam. Anyway, they ripped me out of that job and that kind of aggravated me so I moved back to Walsh. My ex is a registered nurse and they always could have used her there, you know. She'd worked there years before so she had a ready-made job. I went back and worked on the feedlot for a while. Then eventually I went to work for the Welfare Department. Then I got a real estate license, and that's how I really got into farming. We had this big twenty-five hundred acre monstrosity listed, and some friends of mine were managing for the owners that lived in Denver. They were custom-farming everything, and the guys in Denver thought it was costing too much so they wanted to rent it to somebody. So I got an old partner of mine and another guy from Walsh and we signed a one-year lease. And, I don't know, we harvested the wheat for them and did the summer preparation work and stuff. We made about ten grand apiece so we kind of liked it. Then one guy wanted to drop out so me and my partner Lloyd (pauses) Lloyd Hebbert—we signed the lease agreement and leased that place.

AW:

What year was that?

SC:

Oh, in '77—just in the summer of '77—before the Ag Movement started. So when the Ag Movement started I really was a bona fide farmer. Lloyd was a lanky old cowboy [who had] never hardly been out of Baca County. You know, just one of them good old boys, and he did the cattle and a lot of the farming. 'Course a lot of it was irrigated, so we both worked together. He had a couple of boys and I had a boy. He had a brother that worked for us so we started farming this big old place. And I remember telling the guy at the big table in the café over in Springfield one time, I said, "There ain't nothing wrong with three dollar and fifty cent milo." (Laughs.) He said, "You're out of your mind." He said, "Wait till fall," and he said, "You'll find out." So I didn't really get to wait for fall because, after we put a pencil to what we were doing and everything and really got acquainted with the inputs and what we were going to get, why, I could see that we were in for more than what we bargained for. So when they called for the meeting in Springfield, why, I'd already visited with some of my neighbors that farmed over—we farmed right in between Walsh and Springfield and Vilas. And I'd already talked to them and they kind of told me what the real truth was and then I could see it.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

You know, we got spoiled because—I can't remember what wheat was back in the sixties when I was helping my father-in-law but I think it was about, I don't know, \$2.40 or something. I can't

remember. But by 1975, I went out and helped him plant and we had a truckload of seed wheat that we kind of forgot about. It was parked out by his round top with the tarp on it and all—I remembered that. I took that to town and sold it two or three weeks after harvest and I think it brought \$5.75 a bushel. So, you know the people that were farming then, they said, Wow. This is such a change. Maybe we can really make it.

Anyhow, that didn't last long, you know. And the price went back down. I was in it then by '77, and we were working and trying to make it work, and I could see that it wasn't going to happen. So when the Ag Movement came along, we were prime prospects because we were tenant farmers—underfinanced. I didn't have much money. I think I borrowed ten thousand dollars from my father-in-law then to get going, and Lloyd had a little bit of money but we were always strapped. And the bank up there that was backing us a little bit—they kind of got into trouble. I guess everybody was getting into trouble. Then they transferred all their loans to the Farmers Home Administration. That's where we wound up getting our financing from—probably from 1978 on. Somewhere like that.

AW:

How do you spell Lloyd's last name?

SC:

H-E-B-B-E-R-D, L-L-O-Y-D.

AW:

H-E-B-B-E-R-D.

SC:

Yeah.

AW:

So the local bank you were dealing with sold the notes to FMHA?

SC:

Um—

AW:

Or is that just where you got the refinance?

SC:

I think they just put us there. I think that bank went into receivership or something. First National Bank in Springfield—I think that they kind of went under, if I remember writing. A lot of us wound up at the Farmers Home Administration.

AW:

How was the initial meeting described or promoted to folks in Baca County?

SC:

You mean—oh, for American Ag?

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Oh, I don't know. There were several hundred people in the Springfield gym, and—

AW:

No, but I mean how did they know about it? How did people tell people about it, and what was the—? How did they describe what was about to happen or why are we getting together? How did you—?

SC:

Farm strike.

AW:

And so that was, We're going to have a farm strike?

SC:

Yeah, I think they might have printed something in the paper. I've got some old strike bulletins—you've seen them. The ones that were in Lubbock—they're ones that I took from the Springfield office that are actually authentic bulletins from 1977. That's the real thing. And we talked about it around the county. The Bitners were from Walsh, Gene and Darrel and Alvin were from Campo, and there were—I can't remember who else, but Lynn Bitner was Bud's older brother and he ran a feed lot over in Walsh—Eastern Oklahoma Cattle Company—and I think he and Darrel were friends. He was pretty influential around the county, you know. He knew a lot of people and all of the old timers—you know, a lot of those from the Depression days—were still left there. Lynn had a lot—he was a well-respected man, and Bud was too for that matter. He was younger than Lynn. He'd been the superintendent of schools in Vilas and he opened a country farm store or something in Walsh—a supply store. Dick Lamm was the Governor of Colorado then. He knew Dick Lamm and he was a Colorado Highway Commissioner in those years. He got killed in a car wreck in 1984 which—

AW:

Lynn did?

SC:

No, Bud.

AW:

Bud.

SC:

Lynn—I don't know—he passed away several years ago. He stayed through most of the hard times.

AW:

So, let me see if I understand this—if I have this correct in my mind. This movement was pretty much grassroots. It wasn't a person who came along to organize things, of course.

SC:

It was a spontaneous—

AW:

And a lot of people—

SC:

-grassroots deal. You know at the coffee shops in Walsh and Campo and Springfield, the guys were talking, You know, we need to go to this meeting. And when it actually came down to it, I'm guessing that—I don't know—about three-fourths of the farmers in the county showed up at the high school in Springfield that day.

AW:

What time of year was it?

SC:

September the seventh, I think. I can't remember.

AW:

September seventh, '77?

SC:

Yeah. I've heard people say the exact date but I don't remember. I just know it was somewhere along about that time.

AW:

That's a pretty strong representation to show up for a meeting like that.

SC:

Well, it's just an indication about the situation and how, you know—rich farmers have really never had much of a problem. If they've had enough land, it was paid for. Most farmers don't cost account. They just know that they go out there and put a million dollars in the operation this year and they get a million and eighty thousand back. Well, they made eighty thousand dollars and they buy a new pick-up and go watch the kids play basketball in the wintertime and everything is fine. And that caught most of them but the ones that are a little more on the periphery, that have to borrow more money and are a little more at risk, why, they're the ones that were suffering then. Of course, most of them are gone now. I doubt if there are many marginal farmers left. And I was one, you know. Me and Lloyd, we worked like dogs—probably a hundred hours a week. But we just weren't real smart. There's plenty of people up in Baca County that have lasted and done well and I'm all for them but we weren't among them. Anyway, they can call us the whiners if they want to (AW laughs), which is probably what they think. You know, people that don't know what they're doing and need to go out of business—that's what they've always said. But I guess it just is indicative of this pervasive movement during the time I've been alive. I think that probably, in 1940, 25 percent of the people, or maybe more, were rural. And now I don't know whether it's 1 [percent] or not. You know, it's just been a pervasive and persistent movement.

AW:

Well you'd think—you know, when you mention that folks would say, Well if you aren't any good you ought to go out of business—but there's a counterpoint to that, and that is how even in the late 1970's, much less today, would a person who's not a farmer become a farmer? I mean, there's no way to do that. The economics don't permit.

SC:

If you win the lottery—

AW:

(laughs) Right.

SC:

If you win the lottery and had ten million dollars, you could farm until it was gone. That's the old joke.

AW:

What was that first meeting like?

SC:

I think Gene introduced it.

AW:

Gene Schroder?

SC:

Gene Schroder. And he said, basically, that we're controlled by government entities that suppress our price down to the world clearing markets. There's businesses besides the government whose goal is to keep cheap food for the American people and if we don't do something we're going to lose our way of life and we need to inform them and tell them what's happening so that they'll really know what's going on. He said "They're ignorant." He said, "People in town don't know that milk at 45 cents for a half gallon is an unusual bargain. He said, "Given the state of affairs, they out to be paying several dollars a gallon for milk and they're not. Cornflakes cost \$1.50 a box or something like that, and there's nickel's worth of wheat in there. Bread's the same way." He said what we need to do is inform the American people so that they can see that we're in dire straits and need help and then our grievances will be addressed. So he got up and that was his statement. I don't remember Darrel saying—

AW:

His brother Darrel?

SC:

No, his father Darrel.

AW:

Oh, Darrel was Eugene's father.

SC:

Yeah Darrel was the father. Darrel's pretty cerebral and not as affable as Gene. I don't know that he has that much a say. But Jerry Wright—he was from Walsh—and Jerry is a firebrand—and he got up and he encouraged us. And Alvin got up—and he's an old time—he could have been a preacher in any day, you know. But he said, "If you think that you're going to get something done, call people that you know that live in other states. If you don't know anybody, look up a state that's the same letter as your last name (AW laughs) and call somebody and talk to them, and tell them what we're trying to start." So that was our initial deal. About ten days later or something—why, maybe two weeks later—we had a big meeting at the Rex Baxter building, I think, here in Amarillo. Let's see, there was a guy named [Reagan V.] Brown—the Texas Agriculture Commissioner, the Colorado Agriculture Commissioner, and other people I don't

know—don't remember who. But Bud Bitner— (unintelligible) — but there were probably—I don't know—I bet you there were sixty-five hundred people in that building.

AW:

Including the Ag commissioners from both states?

SC:

Both states were there. I can't remember the guy from Colorado's name but I do remember—I can't quite think of his name. It starts with an H. Anyway, they spoke and we had a little parade through town; had a little farm equipment and stuff. That was my first introduction to farm equipment—moving downtown. We started downtown, went out Third Street to the fairgrounds and had our big meeting. My brother-in-law and my sister came over from Wakita, Oklahoma—they were farmers—and brought some of their neighbors with them. I mean, there were people from everywhere [who] came to that meeting. So we left there and then we started getting calls up in Springfield. The word started spreading. We had this little building on the south edge of town by the tracks and it had a telephone in there. Somebody tried to be there to man that phone 24 hours a day. We did that, then pretty quick we—Darrel—I think Darrel and Lynn were the money behind the beginnings of the movement. I'm not sure, but they were the ones that financed the initial thing, I believe. Anyway, pretty quick we rented an old grocery store in front on Main Street in Springfield, and pretty quick—it had fifty phones in it. It looked like an Indian call center. (AW laughs) I mean, people started calling in by the dozens, you know. Some of them would give us information and some of them would want to hear more and some of them would want somebody to come speak at a meeting. That's how I got started. So I went down to Wakita with Don Self—I forget who else went down to Wakita with us—and that's where I made one of my first fatal errors. We were talking to one of my brother-in-law's neighbors and she said, "Well what about this strike?" She said, "What if I don't plant wheat and somebody else does plant wheat? What happens to me?" I said, "Gee, that's what matches are for." (AW laughs) That was the wrong approach. It didn't take me long to learn that that wasn't going to cut the mustard, so I kind of had to quit that line of thinking. You ought to shut that off a minute.

AW:

Yeah, I will.

[pause in recording]

AW:

So you said you figured out—

SC:

Oh yeah. That was the wrong thing to say, you know. People are not going to do that—

AW:

That's someone who's saying, Well, how does that affect me if I'm a part of it and other people aren't? But what about—was there opposition in Springfield and Baca County, or in places—did you have people—farmers—that said, This is the wrong thing to do. I don't want to—?

SC:

There were, and that's one of the big mistakes that we made is that we were a little arrogant to begin with. And if we came out and you heard our spiel about low prices and government controls and et cetera, and if you didn't buy that pretty quick we didn't have much time for you. I remember one example—real poignant in my memory. A friend of mine—let's see—Melvin Swanson—he was a pretty big farmer there and he'd been a GMC auto dealer. I mean he was a nice guy, really smart—a local, born and raised there. He came to the meetings and he was kind of with us. F.M. Swanson was his name. And Mel, he was pretty smart and he was trying to reason this thing out to see how a farm strike was going to work. And of course, in retrospect, a farm strike wasn't going to work, but I guess it was just a good calling card to get it started. People like Mel that had money and farmed a lot of land and were respected in their communities—we probably needed to be just a little more patient with them and we needed to get our—what we were saying—a little more smooth.

And some stuff reminds me of a movie we saw called *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. And there's a sheik in Yemen that has this vision—he's probably an Oxford educated or something because he speaks like an Englishman—but he wants to dam up a river in Yemen. And he says, "I want to make this green for my people so that there's water and food and stuff for them and for generations down the way," but when he gets his project started and he gets his salmon over there, someone unleashes the dam and it washes all out. And he said, "I just assumed that they would see my vision and see what I was trying to do but I was wrong, and I should've been more careful and I should have got their input." And that's what we should have done. You know, we couldn't afford to leave people behind. And there were a lot of people that were substantial farmers that had a lot to lose by not cropping or doing those kinds of things and we left a lot of those behind, I think, that probably should have been with us. Of course some of them came back later. I don't think that Melvin Swanson was ever one of our big supporters ever, after that, but guys like him shouldn't have been left behind, you know. We should have cultivated them and that would have taken the vision away. Of course the Schrodgers were pretty substantial people. They were and I think the Bitners were. You know, there were plenty of substantial farmers with us, but we shouldn't have left anybody behind, really. We should've cultivated them all and stayed with them and been patient in explaining what we were trying to do—that we weren't going to come down and burn them out if they raised a wheat crop—that we were just trying to get noticed so that people would understand our problem. Then it didn't take me very long to understand that, that was really was the problem, because we had this big blow-out at Texas Stadium, in December of 1977. Probably you've heard about it.

AW:

Yeah but tell me about it from your point of view.

SC:

Well, I was one of the organizers to start with.

AW:

Really?

SC:

So they print up a bunch of tickets, and Darrel's brother, Dale Schroder—him and his wife and me and several other people—I think Alvin's—somebody's brother-in-law—Keith—I can't remember Keith's last name—but they sent us to Dallas two or three weeks before this thing was going to take place, and we were the ones that were supposed to put everything together. So I contacted—there was a guy named Bert Rose, I think, that was an executive with Texas Stadium with the Dallas Cowboys, and I contacted him and we made arrangements to rent Texas Stadium. And I'm a Willie Nelson fan, so I had Keith call Willie Nelson's representatives and they wanted forty grand.

AW:

For Willie?

SC:

For Willie to show up. And we said my, my. You know, the Schroder's weren't for that and they were kind of bankrolling this thing, so they didn't want to do that. So we get to Dallas and we're on the radio. I go to WBAP out in Fort Worth and we have TV and Jerry Wright, the firebrand—he's down there with us and he drives a tractor out on [Interstate Highway] 635—out there on the west edge—and I mean they backed traffic up clear around to Plano with one tractor.

AW:

With one tractor? (Laughs)

SC:

So we're making the news and we got a guy from—let me get this card. I think I'll—

AW:

Okay.

SC:

Here was our presentation. You know, people come out of the woodwork for a movement like this. They're always calling you with information. They know people, they want you to do this and that; they want you to sell something for them. But somebody hooked us up with this guy named Little Richie Johnson. He was from Albuquerque, which—Belen is just south of there I think. Anyhow, Little Richie was pretty well known in the music business and he started calling. He had a guy helping that had been around for years—a guy named Sid Light. And this is the bill that we came up with and these are people that were going to perform for us at this deal. You can see her—

AW:

Yeah, Janie Fricke.

SC:

I parked her car for her. That was one of my responsibilities, was outside the stadium controlling the parking, and Janie was part of the Hurshel Wiginton Quartet then. But she had a '77 Ford Thunderbird, and I remember it because her license plate on the back was "Janie F" So I parked her car for her and this was the lineup.

AW:

Yeah, this is a great lineup.

SC:

Oh, I think we were charging twenty dollars for a ticket. Something like that.

AW:

Twelve at the gate and ten at in advance.

SC:

Oh, I mean noon to midnight, there was more entertainment than you could imagine. But we were so naïve about promotions that we didn't know what to do, so we carried these around Dallas. My God, there's millions of people down there and we were carrying these little cards and posters and being on the radio a little bit and with very little promotion—I don't know, about two weeks before it, Larry Mahan had a couple of representatives come over and talk to us. They wanted ten thousand dollars up front, which we wouldn't spring for. But it would have probably made us a hundred if we would have engaged in it but we didn't. So anyhow, the way this deal wound up, we had a hospitality suite set up down at one end of the stadium at the second level. The bar bill for the two days that we were there was twenty-five thousand dollars. These people went there for twenty-five grand. Anyhow, we probably sold twenty thousand tickets or something like that and we lost all of our pictures. Alvin made their money for them the next

year by having a tractor raffle that he promoted across the country and they got their money back. Somewhere there's a tape of this—

AW:
Really?

SC:
That the Schrodgers still have of this deal. But I mean there's some good entertainment. The Dallas Cowboys, they never showed up.

AW:
They didn't?

SC:
These three that agreed—

AW:
Yeah, Danny White, Tom Henderson, Bob Breunig—

SC:
They never showed. But Kitty Wells, Little David Wilkins, Little Jimmy Dickens—I mean those are legitimate—Bill Anderson—

AW:
Jim Ed Brown, yeah.

SC:
Johnny's Brother—

AW:
Yeah, and Johnny Duncan.

SC:
I mean it was good music.

AW:
How in the world did you get Pig Robbins? I mean, all he ever did was sit in the studio in Nashville and make hit records, you know, playing piano.

SC:

But he was—I think he played something. He was a guitarist or—

AW:

A piano player. Well, but I mean, just being able to get him out of the studio in Nashville is a big deal.

SC:

Well that's the dude that Little Richie and Sid Light. Sid was an old—I think an old Jewish guy. And he was very articulate, very smart, a MENSA member.

AW:

You lost money on it, but did it give you any publicity?

SC:

Well, here was our plan: we had fifty tractors on the field with a flag from every state. And the way that it ended, we drove those tractors out, whatever the second day was—

AW:

December second.

SC:

We drove those tractors out and they were ostensibly on their way to Washington. Actually we didn't take but a few to Washington. But we loaded them up on trucks and me and one of my neighbors and two or three other farmers that owned tractors, we had this little caravan and we went to Washington. So that on the day of the strike, which was December the seventh that year—I think—whatever day it was that we were calling the strike for—we were going to drive these to the capital. So we had already had arrangements and we took some tractors from Dallas back there and we knew some farmers in Maryland and we had a bunch of tractors out on Highway fifty on the east side of D.C. So on the appropriate day—which I don't remember when it was—December the seventh—I've got a strike bulletin in there that'll tell you—but on that day, every state capital had tractors go to it. And we took those tractors to the Capitol, drove them to the Rotunda, drove them to the Washington Monument—and we had a stage set up and Senator Dole was on the stage, and I walked across the stage and introduced myself, gave him our five demands that we wanted, and so that was how that ended up. The various states had their own deals. Colorado people went to Denver, Oklahoma City people, they—everybody went around. They went to every capital—well, not every one, but, you know, where there were farmers.

AW:

Right. How did you wind up—I mean it would seem obvious that Bob Dole, being from a farming state, would be a good choice, but how did you wind up getting him to be the one that—did he volunteer for it?

SC:

I don't know. I think he volunteered. He was pretty smart and I think that he saw the handwriting on the wall because there were a lot of Kansas people beginning to get into this. Of course you know Walsh isn't very far from Kansas—

AW:

No, it's not.

SC:

And people from—well, like the ones that are still in the movement now. Larry is from Kansas. He was around back in the early day and I think Senator Dole saw the handwriting, so he wanted to be there, because the next—

[tending to dog]

AW:

Well did you get to spend much time with Dole?

SC:

No. No, I just got to walk across the stage, introduce myself, told him these were the demands, handed them to him, he spoke. That's all I remember. Then we kind of stood down from there. I flew back to Denver and my neighbor brought my pick-up back in a few days. And I don't remember what happened right away after that. You know we were kind of taking a break for Christmas and seeing what happened. Plenty of people were speaking. I already had made a trip up to South Dakota to spend a couple weeks up there and people were going other places. I mean, we were getting a lot of calls. You can't imagine. Sitting there in what we called the Strike Office in Springfield—my God there were fifty phones, and there could be thirty or forty of them busy at one time. We had a lot of people taking calls, and of course everybody wanted to talk to Gene, wanted to talk to Darrel, wanted to talk to Alvin because they're the ones that could articulate things the best.

AW:

Right.

SC:

It took the rest of us a while to catch up on the story but it was an unusual time. You know, somebody—they'd want to know how it was going to work, and course we really didn't know at the time and we'd tell them, Well, you know, we're going to try this, and we'll work it out and see what happens. I'd go tell them what Gene, Darrel and Bud had figured out for us to tell them, then I'd add what my own personal experiences were that I knew to be true. You know, just tried to be as positive about things as possible.

AW:

Is it fair to say that there was an optimism on the part of the people joining in on this that something could be done? And I don't mean optimism in terms of Pollyanna, but—

SC:

Well here's what we thought—or I think. This is what I thought. I don't know what they thought, but I think—I thought at the time that all that needed to be done was just people needed to be aware, that as soon as they knew what the problem was, that they'd take some steps and fix it. My God, all we had to do was raise the price of wheat a dollar, and corn and milo—get that up there a little bit and have it match the growing cost of equipment and other inputs, and we weren't going to be in any trouble. And here's where I got my rude awakening. While we were back in Washington we had a delegates meeting. I wasn't a delegate because Gene represented Colorado pretty well, but I got to go to the meeting and we went to the White House. Actually we walked in the front gate and I think we went to the west wing, and we had this meeting with Stuart Eizenstat. He was Carter's Domestic Affairs Advisor. I sat on the same side of the table as he did. And Bud and some of the others—I mean there were probably 18 of us that went to this meeting. And Bud is a very articulate, well-spoken man and he laid out the problems. And I mean he had experience because we already confronted the Secretary of Agriculture over in Wichita earlier in the deal. I kind of missed that because we took buses and went to Wichita and had a big meeting over there with Bob—oh, the Minnesotan who was the Secretary of Agriculture—

AW:

Last name starts with a B too, right? Bob—Berg something, or—?

SC:

Bergland.

AW:

Yeah, Bergland.

SC:

Yeah. Anyhow, Bud had some experience in laying this out. Very articulate. Anyway, we go to the White House and we're drinking coffee off this fine china and had some Danish that you can't buy in Amarillo, and some stuff like that.

AW:

Yeah. (Laughs)

SC:

Anyway, Bud was presented his arguments, and one of the other guys presented what he thought was arguments, and I looked down at Stuart Eizenstat and he wasn't taking any notes, and it dawned on me that he knew everything that we already knew. There was no news to him. He knew what farm prices were like, he knew what equipment cost, he knew what the government was going to do about it, what USDA's attitude about storage levels and programs and stuff was. They already knew, and they weren't going to do nothing about it, so—

AW:

So the idea of "just let them know and they'll fix it" was out the window?

SC:

Yeah, (laughs) it did it for me. I don't know what anybody else thought, but I realized then that they already knew what the problems were—what we perceived the problems were—and they didn't perceive them as problems and they weren't going to do anything. You know, they were going to let it stay—I think in '78 we had a farm bill coming up, if I remember right, and they were going to do nothing, and he—Stuart—sat there stony-faced and

[phone rings, tape is paused]

AW:

Oh it's all right. No problem.

SC:

Well, we go back to Springfield, and things are dying down for the winter. I mean we got nothing going. The tractorcades that were springing up in the fall had kind of backed down. They had this big one in, I think, Statesboro, Georgia or somewhere. Tommy Kersey was a Georgia farmer that was pretty prominent in the early days—him and his brother Leighton—and they had a big tractorcade down there which gave us the idea that we could do some stuff like that.

AW:

So the first real tractorcade was in Georgia?

SC:

Well, I'm not sure. You know, they had farm equipment here in Amarillo back in—

AW:

Yeah. My understanding was that the very first tractor protest of any size was here in Amarillo.

SC:

I think that's probably right. You know, nobody really knew much. I think this deal here was maybe September the sixteenth or something—

AW:

Of '77?

SC:

Yeah, I can't even remember—

AW:

So this thing in Georgia would have been early '78 or late '77—

SC:

No, it was in '77 because that's what made them excited when I was negotiating with Texas Stadium.

AW:

Um-hm. Oh, got it. So before the December.

SC:

It happened the same time.

AW:

Oh, got it.

SC:

So we decided that's what we needed to do. Of course I was the leg man. You know, I can follow instructions and Bud usually told me what to do—him or Gene—and I'd try to get it done, and then in '78 we had this "pick-up cade." Everybody drove to Washington in 1978—in the early months, I don't remember when. But I think when Carter gave his State of the Union speech that year it was snowing, and in the State of the Union speech he said, "I saw my fellow farmers standing in the snow as I drove," so he saw us up there. We were there and as far as I know, that's the only direct financial deal that we ever got out. They passed the disaster aid bill

then and we collected—I don't know—sixteen or eighteen thousand dollars on our twenty-five hundred acres. That ain't much, but that's about the only time I can remember anything from the government, was that disaster payment—

AW:

Seventy-eight?

SC:

-that they ran through in 1978. Nothing else. But we did intimidate them a little bit. Lots of farmers up there, I don't know; there were thousands then that drove in. I was down in Alabama speaking—at Clanton, Alabama, and I drove up with the people that had held the meeting down there. It was pretty interesting and exciting.

AW:

But that's a long time before the '79?

SC:

Yeah, that's the year before.

AW:

Yeah, so what transpires for that year—for '78?

SC:

Well, I don't know. It was kind of a weak year. I don't know whether we knew what to do or not, but Kip Bitner was the brother of Bud and Lynn and so Kip and I and Gene's wife—I can't believe I can't remember her name—

AW:

Yeah I should know it too. I just talked to her—just saw her.

SC:

Laurie.

AW:

Laurie.

SC:

We decided that we would go up to Denver and negotiate with the people that sold food and get them to let us put—see this is our notion of still informing the public. So we were going to go up and negotiate with them and see if we could put a card table up there in their store and hand out

literature telling them where their food comes, why it costs this, why that costs that. So we go up to Denver and we pick out—oh, a meat processing company in King Soopers and several other things and Safeway. The general manager of the region and Safeway said, “Hell, we’re not interested in that.” He said, “We’re not going to bother our customers with frivolous stuff like that.” And I said “Gee, you know, it sure would be nice if you’d let us do it. But if you don’t, I mean, who knows what the consequences might be.”

Well, the truth was that we had about four hundred tractors in a creek out by Byers, Colorado—somewhere out in there—and we were ready for them. So they don’t negotiate. I mean, I gave him every chance. I met with him two or three different times, me a Lori and a couple of the other guys—I don’t remember who all was with us—and he was intractable. So that morning at about eight or nine o’clock, I said, “Well, I’m giving you one last chance. Would you agree to let us do that or not?” And he said, “No, I’m sorry, Bud.” And so I said, “Okay.” I went out to the pay phone out in the hall and dialed a number. And he said, “You didn’t just call for tractors, did you?” (AW laughs) I said, “Who knows.” Anyway, the Safeway compound was at I-70 and—oh, I can’t remember—one of the big intersections on the—

AW:

On the east side.

SC:

On the east side of—

AW:

Yeah, I can see it in my mind’s eye right now—out by the mattress company.

SC:

Yeah. Anyway, their compound was there so, pretty quick here come the combine tractors down Highway 70. They exit onto— I’m going to look that up because that’s important.

AW:

Yeah, I can almost call it for you.

SC:

I’ve got a good map of Denver. I mean, it’s such a prominent street here on this east edge of Denver.

AW:

Not Havana.

SC:

No it's further west than that.

AW:

Not Colorado Boulevard.

SC:

Yeah.

AW:

Was it Colorado Boulevard?

SC:

That's it. I-70 and Colorado Boulevard. So we get off on the exit, we go across to I-70, come back down on the street that runs a block south of their compound, circled the compound, and I'm in the second tractor—the first one is probably an 8820 John Deere. You know, a big four wheel drive. He circles in and we start in the deal and the guard runs out and they drop that little wooden gate. He splinters that gate. (AW laughs) We get about—I don't know—about 110 tractors inside their compound. Everybody turns off the tractor, locks it, gets out, locks the doors and walks out the gate, and there they sit. I mean they can't even go to the bathroom.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

So here come the police. Oh my God, it's a terrible deal. So we got a great big four wheeler sitting in their gate. The other one is sitting in the other and blocking all that off and cops come—oh, one other thing. One of the local guys has got a pretty new John Deere tractor with a nice cab on it and they're spraying him with mace and stuff. But he has a prosthetic left arm, but they don't know it. So one of the cops jumps up on the platform by the tractor door, grabs him by the arm, pulls and the arm comes off (laughter), falls backwards, and there he stands, making them look like horses rears. And they're spraying everybody with mace that's close to them. They arrest three or four people and take them to their local—you know, the precinct station—

AW:

Yeah, the holding—

SC:

You know, it's on Colorado Boulevard somewhere down in there. And we stay there for—I don't know—maybe six hours, something like that. Finally, here comes the district manager for

Safeway, and he said, "Okay." He said, "Take the tractors out." He said, "I've got a written permission. You can come into our stores, set up a table, hand out literature and talk to our customers." I said, "That's all we ever wanted." So, I don't know. Of course there's some lapse there. We had them blocked off probably for eight hours. And at the end of their runs—Rapid City is the end of their chain on the north—

AW:

Of Safeway?

SC:

Yeah, it's about—I don't know. I was stationed up there in the army. I think it was about three hundred miles up there. They're running out of stuff, because when you stop that movement—

AW:

For eight hours—

SC:

That's it. So we learned a good lesson there, but they did too. So they agreed to let us in the stores and we did very little of it.

AW:

And what about King Soopers. Did they agree at all?

SC:

They let us.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Yeah, they agreed right away. They didn't have a problem with it. They realized that we weren't hostile and that we wouldn't—weren't going to go in there and hassle their customers. You know, we were friendly. Farmers have always been friendly. We never did anything—we've had a few things done to us, like down in McAllen, but I don't know that we've really ever done anything to anybody that I can remember. We were always congenial and try to get along.

AW:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SC:

But that was one time we were primed for them because we'd sent out letters earlier, a couple of weeks before, asking for permission, and when they didn't respond to us, why, then we contacted them in person and that was the way that turned out. It was really kind of fun in a way. But we had a few people that went to jail and we had to get us a legal fund figured out for them. Oh, [for] some of them it took six or eight months before everything was settled. But I don't think anybody spent a long time in jail. I went down and negotiated some of the release for some of them pretty early. You know, it was late that same day, and so it didn't work out real bad. One or two guys that assaulted—you know, that were fighting back—I think they probably had the most problems.

AW:

Um-hm. Yeah. Yeah.

SC:

And then the police had a problem because the guy's arm (AW laughs)—I think they wound up giving him some money to settle a liability claim on that. But that was one thing that we did in '78, and then we kind of backed off a little bit. You know, some people would do some things in some places, and I think the fact that it—I mean, we were still going around talking at meetings through '78. I can't remember everywhere I went but I started off earlier in the year in Alabama because I went from there up to Washington. But, people—oh, we did some around Springfield. I took Eugene's combine. They lived down by Campo. He had an old John Deere 95, I think, and we took that sucker up on [US Highway] 287, parked it across the lanes and cut the hydraulic lines on it so you couldn't raise it—couldn't move it. Then we had a little confrontation on the south edge of town. We took a bunch of tractors and blocked 287 for a few hours. One of the funny things up in Denver though—the police called a towing truck to come out (AW laughs), and here's this great big John Deere four wheeler sitting there. So they back up to the four wheeler, they hook it up to the hitch on the back and he sets the hydraulics on that thing and it pulls the truck to the ground, and raises the front wheels off, and he just is quick enough to keep it from turning his truck over. (Phone rings). I've got to take this.

AW:

Sure, that's all right.

SC:

(Aside) Hello?

SC:

I do a little insurance work, insurance adjusting work. I was filing a claim down in Clarendon where a truck ran a car off the road and we're trying to take care of the lady. Give her some money.

AW:

Yeah, I've been dealing with insurance adjusters for the last several weeks. A wind storm blew the neighbor's tree down into my back yard.

SC:

They need to pay you money.

AW:

Oh, my insurance is taking care of it there.

SC:

They'll subrogate it and collect it from the other people.

AW:

Yeah, probably. The big problem is most everything that I had smashed was—by the time you depreciate it and take away my deductible there's just not much left, you know, fences and that kind of thing.

SC:

You need to get your—I don't know. I guess you can do a replacement cost for personal property.

AW:

Yeah, the fence is the big thing.

SC:

But the rest of it, you depreciate it. That's a shame. Oh, well. Who knew?

AW:

Yeah, that's it. We need a new fence anyway so it's time to fix one. (Aside) I'm getting tired of sitting on that bag. So, back to Springfield. Oh, you were talking about the tow truck. The Denver tow truck.

SC:

Yeah, it raised the front wheels off the ground. That tow truck was no going to reach—you know, I don't know what those tractors weigh, but, probably—

AW:

(Laughs) You couldn't tow one with a tow truck.

SC:

Probably seventy-five thousand pounds. You ain't going to tow one so they gave that up. Maybe that's what made them decide to negotiate.

AW:

When we're done with this interview here in a bit, remind me to tell you a Denver tow truck incident that you will find very—

SC:

Humorous?

AW:

Very interesting, yeah.

SC:

Well anyway, that started off—

AW:

So, why the blockade in Springfield, on the highway?

SC:

I don't know. We just wanted to do something. (AW laughs) Things were dying down and we wanted to—around the country, they had a rolling protest down here west of Amarillo on I-40, and various places around the country people were doing stuff.

AW:

Yeah, they did one in Lubbock, a rolling around the Loop.

SC:

Yeah, Texans were pretty innovative back then. They caught on real quick and we wanted to be there with them. Of course, you know, eventually, other places were going to take over this Ag Movement, because there was too few of us in Springfield. We were too little, we'd get credit for being the catalyst, and the Schrodgers and the Bitners and Alvin, Jerry Wright—they get credit for

thinking it up and having the gumption to get it started. We get credit for all of that, but, you know, there was a point when we couldn't nurture it anymore. And the Texans and the Kansans and Nebraskans—they picked it up. I mean, there's thousands more farmers in those places than in Colorado, so that's what made it move on. That's what led the—I'm pretty sure that somebody in Texas had the idea for the tractorcade in 1979. Could've been—

AW:

Alvin Meek maybe? Gerald McCathern?

SC:

Well, it could be Gerald, or—I don't know whether Marvin—

AW:

I mean Marvin Meek.

SC:

I don't know whether he thought of it or not, but somebody down there had the idea, and they came up to see us and of course we were all in favor of it. And we started collecting money, and trying to figure out how we'd do it and what timeframe we were working in. I met the guy that drove a tractor to Washington in 1969. He was from Illinois or Indiana. I can't remember where. But he came down to Dallas when we had our big deal down there and he drove a tractor to Washington then, protesting low farm prices and high equipment prices and stuff. The numbers of people that are involved in this—I mean, this is a monumental undertaking.

AW:

Yeah, just that one event alone, the tractorcade was staggering in terms of the number of people.

SC:

Yeah. I realized that Martin Luther King drew one hundred thousand people, or—I don't remember how many people were in Washington for those get-togethers, and he drew a lot of people where he went. But on the other hand, there were probably thirty or forty million blacks in the United States that were easily identifiable to that cause. And there were probably about that many other Anglos and other people that were identifiable with it and the number of people that we had was small. You know, I think they figured then that—

AW:

So the percentage of people that could be involved in the cause—that got involved with the cause was far greater amongst farm people.

SC:

Oh yeah. If every black person would have gone to Washington at that particular time, it probably would have fallen off into the Atlantic. But I don't know. It's just one of those evolving things and you just are reacting to the situations and trying to answer people's questions. We get to 1979 and they're on the mall up there for months. I stayed up there probably for two weeks and then Bud sent me back and I enrolled in the Colorado legislature as a lobbyist.

AW:

But you did go to D.C.?

SC:

I was the scout for the I-70 deal. I went ahead every day and found a place to park, arranged for fuel, and all that kind of stuff. I had two or three guys that worked with me.

AW:

When you were on I-70 and going ahead as a scout, did you ever contact the highway patrol or the police?

SC:

Oh yeah, you have to call them first.

AW:

And what was the reception like with officials, like the police and—I'm sure there were some toll roads that you had to deal with, or—?

SC:

No, not really.

AW:

No? No toll roads?

SC:

In Kansas, we got along just fine. We went across Kansas, people fed us everywhere we stopped and they were wonderful to us because we were in agriculture country. We get to Missouri, and they wouldn't let us go on I-70, so there we were. They parked us out on an access road southeast of Kansas City and there we were. So the leaders of the various factions were grumbling. And we actually wound up going to Columbia to the Missouri State Fairgrounds, staying there, after we stayed the night on the side of the road I think, or maybe—I can't remember. We either stayed one night in Kansas City on the road—and then went to Columbia.

So we get to Columbia and everybody's fighting. There's people that wanted to bust the blockade and get on I-70 and I said, "No, we got a goal, and our goal is to get to Washington by February the second"—or 3rd or whenever it was. So this is my heroic act. (AW laughs) I got up in front of all the people at the state fairgrounds and said, "Look, I understand that everybody has somebody that's leading their faction of this deal, but somebody has got to be in charge that will make decisions, and I'll volunteer to do that. And I'll get you to Washington if I have a unanimous vote that I can guide this tractorcade there." So they grumbled a little bit and finally they voted that I was the leader of it, so we got that settled and we made our way across Missouri, then went into St. Louis and got back on I-70 in Illinois, got to Greenville thirty or forty miles east of St. Louis, and I mean we got in this tremendous snow storm, one of those unbelievable ones. We parked at Greenville, I think on the airport. And of course there's hundreds of tractors by now, and lots of folks. And it snowed maybe twenty, twenty-five inches. I-70 is a tragedy. You know, there's trucks and cars on I-70 for two hundred miles. So we get the John Deeres with the front end blades on them and we plow the airport, we go downtown and plow the streets. They love us. So we get out of Greenville after the weather cleared up a little bit, and I mean there's still trucks and cars all over I-70 every way. Anyway, we get across Missouri—

AW:
Illinois?

SC:

Yeah, we get across Illinois, and get to Indiana, and we have a little trouble in Indiana. Their state law enforcement is not highway patrol. They're state police and they had a little different deal. So we're negotiating with a guy that was a TV hero. He got some felon out of an attic somewhere one time years before and this is the guy that I'm negotiating with. They were pretty nice to us, really. So we get through Terre Haute and we had one little wreck. You know, the tractors are pretty intimidating to these motorists. So we get through Terre Haute with that one little accident, get to Indianapolis and it's snowing pretty bad there, and we go to the—let's see—the Indianapolis Raceway Park, and it ain't where they hold the Indianapolis 500. It's a snowmobile and a little car deal but there's big acres and it's flat so we park there.

Then the next place—we're getting into the Smokies on the east end there, finally getting into the mountains, and we parked at a mall the next night. Then the next night we get into West Virginia, I think. I don't remember my timeline real well. We're in Morgantown and there ain't much of a place to park but I find a state park east of Morgantown, and Stan Debord and the Nebraska people that joined us in Indianapolis, they follow my directions and go there. But Gene takes the other part of it on across the mountains and they get in a snowstorm and they're in bad shape and Laurie's in a RV and she goes to the—what's the deal at the side of the road?

AW:

The bar ditch?

SC:

No, the—

AW:

Oh, the barrier? The—

SC:

She goes to the barrier. She almost goes off the highway, out there in the mountains. I don't know what the reasoning was but, anyhow, when I was standing, trying to get them to turn, they just went right underneath me and went right on. Gerald covers that in his book because he was there too. Anyway, we get into—let's see—Frostburg, and then we go to Frederick, Maryland, and that's our staging point that kind of gets us across the country there. They were about—I don't know, maybe forty miles northwest of D.C. then, or maybe not quite that far. Anyhow, it was pretty interesting, lining up fuel and getting groceries. Other than in Missouri that the governor wouldn't let us on the interstate, we didn't have a lot of trouble. They guided people around us pretty well. We got some decent news coverage. I don't remember the highway patrol ever being much of an issue, you know. Well, we had a lot of sympathy.

AW:

Yeah, people I've talked to on other routes said that, actually, the highway patrol and police were not the issue. They did have some issues with toll roads.

SC:

Oh yeah. The ones that came up from the south, they were on the interstate down there in Virginia and they wouldn't let them pay a deal. They wanted them to go through individually so they'd paid it with pennies.

AW:

Oh, yeah. (Laughs)

SC:

I think that was Clifford Hamilton from Lubbock. I think that was Clifford's idea. His code name was Pitchfork, and he drove the lead tractor for that bunch of people. Everybody had their times. I don't remember anything really tough. I mean, we had to talk to the people and explain and stuff and I don't think a lot of them, when we were talking to them originally, I don't think they realized just how big this deal was. I mean, we had hundreds of tractors. We were stretched out

for miles, you know—seven, eight, ten miles at a stretch. Lots of people. Laurie had the kids that she schooled, taught school—

AW:

Tractor school.

SC:

—along the way. Oh, we bought a lot of fuel. I don't know where all the groceries came from. They'd bring us stuff, and people would go into town and shop. Oh, it was quite an undertaking.

AW:

What was it like when you got to D.C. initially? Because there was some resistance other than that—

SC:

Oh, you mean that day?

AW:

Yeah, well—

SC:

Well, I went on in to D.C. since I was in my pick-up. I got a place to stay, oh, I don't know, five or six blocks south of the Capitol. And I was monitoring everybody as they came in and trying to keep track of things. I don't know whether they really believed it or not. You know, we were driving around, watching and looking, and pretty quick on Highway 66, from the west, you begin to see lights and then you begin to see things from the south, and our guys were a little later. Stan Debord and Nebraska guys, they'd gone over to Greenville, Maryland, on the northeast side of D.C., and they were coming in on Highway 50, and I think they had no idea in the way of what was happening to them.

Oh, it was just chaotic that day. I was trying to be everywhere, and trying to keep things moving and keep everybody informed, and the Kerseys, they had a tractor on that south route. They'd drive that sucker across that 14th Street Bridge, drive it up to USDA—I forget whether it's Constitution Avenue or what. They drive it up to USDA, and it's got double pillars out front. They drove the tractor up to the front door, took log chains (laughs), chained the tractor to the pillars and walked away. Somebody overturned an old tractor at the intersection west of them and set it on fire, oh, pretty quick. They told me that every law officer in the district was called into duty. I mean, helicopters were flying, police cars were going. It was just an unbelievable situation. And they were trying to chase the crowds—I mean, there were beginning to be a lot of people there too. I was over by the Capitol a little later and the south side of it, and there were six or eight of those little Honda 90 motorcycles that they used for patrol, and they parked them in a

row and here comes this John Deere four wheel drive, and he just runs over all the little motorcycles. (Laughs)

AW:

Oh really? Hadn't heard that one.

SC:

Well, the Capitol sits there facing west, and then behind it is a parking lot. I can't remember—our offices were over there later on 2nd Street I think, just a block or so west. The court's here, the Library of Congress was there, and then we had an office just adjacent there, two or three blocks away. But, oh, it was wild. They start to bring out the mace and start macing people and I had to go to the police station two or three different times and try to negotiate and get them out and we were pretty successful. The one guy from Texas got shot in the eye by a bullet—

AW:

I haven't heard that story.

SC:

A rubber bullet, I think.

AW:

Oh a rubber bullet, okay.

SC:

That was a long time getting that deal settled. I don't know what finally happened. I can't remember his name but somebody will.

AW:

But earlier you'd said you were there only a couple of weeks before you were sent back to—

SC:

After they kind of got things straightened around, why, they got everybody on the mall, and then they brought all of their sanitation trucks and buses and they lined it up from the reflection pool—

AW:

Reflecting pool, yeah.

SC:

—clear to 14th Street. The whole thing was bound in. And of course the farmers, you know, they'd get two or three tractors and they'd make a run towards the deals like they were going to get out. I mean, it just set those cops off. They just went wild. Of course the farmers were fooling them. Somebody drove a little old four tractor down into the reflecting pool. There's a picture of that somewhere, I know. Then, I don't know, two or three days later was the big monumental snowstorm, and they let some of the big tractors out we hauled doctors and nurses around. One of the things that did happen to me, there was an editorial writer for the *Washington Post* named Causey—Bill Causey, I think, or something like that. C-A-U-S-E-Y. And he wrote this very caustic editorial about the farmers that were so selfish and so inconsiderate and stuff to come in there and upset—I mean, they gave every federal worker the day off that day. Of course they couldn't get in anyway, probably. But he wrote this scathing editorial, so the next day I called him and he agreed to meet with me, so we go up to their offices. In fact, I saw Bob Woodward up there. He still worked there then. I didn't meet him but Causey pointed him out to me. He was two or three desks away. Anyway, we talked a while. I kind of explained why we were there, what was happening in a country in which people in Washington—you know, the civilians, they got no idea. The government knows, but the citizens didn't know. And so he wrote a nice retraction a couple days later telling how he had misunderstood what our goals were and what kind of people we were and after we visited for a couple of hours, why, he felt a lot better about it. He gave me a belt buckle that I've still got.

AW:

Really?

SC:

A *Washington Post* belt buckle. I wish he'd introduced me to Bob Woodward, in retrospect, but I did get to see him at work. But some guys stayed on the mall for a long time—months. And we did some re-seeding. I guess you've heard all of those stories because a lot of the Texas guys were involved with that. Bud sent me back to Colorado. We had legislative proposals in Kansas, Texas, Nebraska, and—let's see—Kansas, Texas, Nebraska, and Colorado for what we were calling the Interstate Grain Compact. And what we were trying to do was to get them to set up a board that would market our wheat for us and try to get us to where we could compete with—

AW:

To make it competitive with—?

SC:

Well, we just wanted it to be competitive on the market. Here's our problem: we got a bunch of people together that had wheat and we hauled wheat by the truckload and we hauled it to the port of Houston until we had enough bushels to fill an international—I forget what they call those—

the offers that come out from there. But every time that we would bid on one, somebody else would bid—the Japanese government! I mean, we couldn't bid against the Japanese government. If we bid three dollars and a nickel, they'd bid three dollars and three cents. I mean, there were no—they had billions of dollars backing them up and here's the American farmer and we got a government that—you know, the CCC loan rate in effect at that time was so low that it really was below any market clearing levels really. So we wanted the Interstate Green Compact to kind of put grain together and get us in a position to where we could compete.

Well, I was in Colorado pretty well by myself, and I got it passed in Colorado. There was a guy named Walt Younglund. I think he was the Ag Committee Chairman in the House. He was a farmer for northeastern Colorado and he was kind of sympathetic to us. And we passed it in Colorado; they passed it in Texas. But they had a lobbying firm in Texas to pass it, and they left me in Colorado by myself. I stayed up in Denver, I don't know, most of three months up there until the vote got filed. That was kind of an experience in itself. Anyway, we got it passed several places, but what they wouldn't approve was the check off to fund it. So without money backing it, why, all it was, was just a—you know—

AW:

Sort of a token.

SC:

Yeah, just a token deal. But anyway, we got some notoriety out of it and we made some of the big grain companies come up and defend themselves. There were other lobbyists from, oh, ADM and other places came up and argued against it.

AW:

Continental, Cargill and all those people?

SC:

Yeah they were all up there. Sent attorneys and here I was in my jeans and boots and Western shirt and my strike cap. But I knew my business probably better than they did. And Walt let me counter-argue against them, which probably is wrong, but he let me counter them, and I made them look petty because they're really bullies. Anyway, that took a lot of '79 and I don't remember what happened the rest of the year.

You know, I was trying to farm and we had this monumental blizzard in Colorado and that pretty well fixed me up. Me and Lloyd—we started out, I think, in '78. There was a deal called the Colorado Rural Rehabilitation Commission and it was a grant program from the feds that the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union kind of mentored, and they loaned money to little undercapitalized farmers for cattle. They loaned us forty thousand dollars the first year, and hell, we did good with the cattle. I bet you we made probably fifteen or twenty thousand dollars off of that loan, so the next year they gave us the same amount. That's really kind of what killed us,

because when the bank put us to Farmers Home Administration the guy that was new in there, he looked at our balance sheets of it he said, "Hey, the only thing wrong with you guys' program is you just don't have enough cattle." So we went from forty thousand to four hundred fifteen thousand dollars.

AW:

That's a big difference.

SC:

Oh, we had a buyer go out. They bought pears for us out in Four Corners country—

AW:

That's almost enough to run the market up in that area.

SC:

Anyway, we had a lot of cattle and then unfortunately on the twenty-ninth of October that year, just two days away from the winter insurance period—and nobody ever insures their cattle in the summertime—I mean, what can happen to it? Lightning would strike one or something but you're not going to lose any cattle. But we had this monumental blizzard up there and it blew—oh, the wind was about sixty-five miles an hour, snowed twenty-five or thirty inches, and I mean it killed cattle by the hundreds. And the ones that I didn't kill—they had thirty thousand head of cattle down on the Cimarron River.

AW:

Pushed down by the—?

SC:

Yeah, by the storm. But a lot of ours got caught out there, you know, on the fences and stuff, and we lost several hundred head, and then the snow was in our milo. We had a good milo crop. The snow got in the milo and the sun freezes a little crust on top, and the crust grabs the milo heads and pulls them to the ground as the snow melts. We had a terrible winter. We cut milo until Valentine's Day. Get out in the morning and cut for two or three hours and as soon as it warmed up, it was so muddy that we couldn't cut. We'd have to quit. We cut milo with Hesstons. You know what Hesstons are?

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Deals that go down the row, and curl— all them belts and stuff. I'm telling you, it'd make you wish you died an earlier death, but that's how we finished up and that kind of hurt us a little bit. Then you want to hear my personal story?

AW:

Yes.

SC:

About how they put me out of business?

AW:

Yes.

SC:

I've still got a letter or two I'll get for you whenever—

AW:

Yeah—no, because one of the things that, when I first started collecting histories about this, I didn't hear that much about the FMHA. But this last year, I've heard, particularly in Oklahoma, but also down in central Texas, about how aggressive FMHA was in singling out American Ag workers.

SC:

Yeah in Oklahoma Panhandle, Baca County specifically. Let me get a letter or two that I think I've still got.

AW:

Okay.

SC:

Do you need to use the restroom, or do you want a Coke?

AW:

I do, no, I do—

SC:

Here's the bathroom right there. Let me be sure—

AW:

Okay, I'll put this on hold.

[pause in recording]

SC:

This one is pretty good. February 20, '81. Well, after we had this terrible deal—

AW:

The blizzard?

SC:

We were just struggling all winter and they came down and they declared it a disaster area which qualifies you for ten years of low interest levels—a disaster program. And there was a guy named Chris Wysock or something like that, that was the county supervisor for Farm Home, and he was a young guy, sympathetic. He's the one that pushed us into that big cattle deal that probably killed us, but, I mean, his intentions were good. So they replace him with a guy named Keith Casselder, and he's a hatchet man set there on purpose. There's people up there that he put out of business—I mean farmers, landowners, that he forced into bankruptcy, and forced them to sell their land—maybe not go bankrupt but he forced them into selling.

I can't—there was just this one old man down in Campo. I'll try to think of his name. But he came out of there and was crying one time because he'd farmed all his life and now they were making him sell. Lloyd and I had been farming since '77. We called ourselves C and H Farms. We had a cattle brand, Lazy H C, that we used, and we had our bank account established and I wrote most of the checks. But, I mean, his kids could go over Tony's Market and buy us some charged cokes and candy and stuff and we paid the bill. And everything we did—it was a partnership. We split everything.

So, we go for our loans and here's the letter I get in February of '81. I mean, the bank has been giving us five thousand dollars a month, a little along, knowing that we're going to get this loan to catch up. But he says, "After careful consideration, we were unable to take favorable action on your application for Farmer's Home Administration Services. All the information that we have indicates that you're operating under a joint venture and/or undivided interest with Lloyd Hebbard. Under emergency and economic emergency loans, the individuals operating under this type are not eligible."

Well, what I should have done is got an attorney and attacked this right away, but I didn't. And Lloyd, God bless him—you know, he was the salt of the earth but ignorant as a fencepost because he stayed up there working his ass off all his life. He ain't ever been anywhere, he's not sophisticated, he believes people are honest, he believes that they'll do what they say they're going to do all that kind of stuff. So we didn't get excited about it.

But Gerald McCathern got a job in Washington as an advisor in the Ag Department. So we're having a meeting in Washington, not long after we got this letter. So I go to Washington and Gerald gets me an appointment with a guy named Brock at 7:30 one morning—that's the acting administrator of the loan program—and I go to his office. I've got this letter and some others, the originals, and I say, "Look, here's what's happening to us. You know, we've been doing this and this and this and here's how it worked, here's what this guy is doing to us and it ain't right, and it needs to be fixed." So he said, "Okay, do you want copies of these?" I said, "No, I trust you." So I get out of the meeting, I go back to the motel, and we finish up some business and at about eleven o'clock I'm at Washington National, flying out on the Texas International back to Amarillo. I get in here about 2:30, I get in my pick-up, by 4:30 that night I'm up there on the tractor front-end loader loading silage feeding my cattle. And here comes Lloyd. He's crying. I mean, here's a man—let's see, he's just maybe a year older than me, and I would have been forty. I was forty-one years old. I mean, here's a forty-something-year-old man crying, and as soon as I got off of the phone or got out of the meeting in Washington, the guy in Washington called this local man and he called Lloyd over and he said, "If you'll dissolve your partnership with Close, then we'll finance you in this venture. All of your commitments that we've made to you so far as far as loan values, you get all the equipment, get the contract, the lease agreements everything and we'll finance you for the long haul."

And he was crying because if he didn't do that, they were going to not finance us and we were—I mean, we were screwed. We had a combine that we'd bought and I had a pretty new tractor. We had some other equipment that we'd bought and I mean, we were in the toilet if we lose where we were farming because we had no other options. So I said well, "If that's really what you want me to do, then that's what we'll do." So in the next—I don't know—two or three weeks, why, we get the guys from Denver that lease the land, they come down and we had leased a ranch seventy-five hundred acres down south of Vilas and we get everything tidied up and Lloyd gets all the equipment. They gave him a twenty thousand dollar check for the work that he had already done that they owed us and I'm out of it.

So three days later, they cancelled the check. A month later, the county director calls Lloyd over and cuts him off. He's through. All they wanted to do was get me out of the picture and the reason they did this—I'm not a personal friend of Gary Hart, but I knew who he was and I was his election coordinator for his 1980 campaign. So I get him and we had a congressman named Ray Kogovsek from Colorado Springs and I get Ray and Gary to get on these Farmer's Home Administration people so we had a meeting in Springfield. The new man that's the hatchet guy—he's there. The old county supervisor that was a little more gentle with us, Gary Hart, Ray Kogovsek, the State Chairman of the Farmer's Home Administration and some other officials and a few other farmers we meet at the bank. Boy, do you think they were pissed. And they got even with me in spades because it didn't take them ninety days after that to wipe us out.

AW:

So getting rid of you, and then Lloyd, happened after that meeting?

SC:

They had the meeting. It was probably in January. This is their subsequent—this one's February the twentieth. After this, then probably by March—I don't remember when the meeting was in Washington that I went to but something like that. But that's how they put us out of business. The old farmer in Campo was named O'Malley—

AW:

O'Malley?

SC:

O'Malley. O-M-A-L-L-E-Y I think, and I'm pretty sure that they made him sell out. He was the one that came out of their offices crying that day. An old man lived in Baca County for sixty years and these people are driving him to the point that he's crying.

AW:

Yeah. Now, let me make sure that I have this clear in my head, because one of the things that struck me, listening to the Oklahoma folks talk about FMHA, was that, what it seemed like, was that FMHA and Oklahoma had a particularly vindictive head for the state. But it sounds like, after your description of the meeting in Washington, that the way the FMHA acted started at the top.

SC:

Oh yeah.

AW:

It wasn't a state by state issue?

SC:

It wasn't a state by state issue. They got people—it took me—I finally got a collateral release. I've got it somewhere because I knew I needed to keep it. But it took me years. I'll bet you that it was 1985 before I get a release of collateral. They prosecuted people for not being able to come up with the collateral. I mean me and Lloyd lost about four or five hundred head of cattle. Jesus, they're scattered all over, you know, twenty-five hundred square miles, basically. Of course a lot of them are dead in fencerows right there. And we accounted for a bunch of them, but weren't able to account for every one and the equipment and all of that stuff. I mean, they were tough on us. I was really glad to get released from being under the gun because they prosecuted people up in the panhandle. There was a retired air force colonel that lived up at the Guymon that was a speaker. I can't remember his name, but somebody will remember him. Dad gum. People up around him—I think they prosecuted some of them for not being able to come up with the collateral, which I understand that you need to.

AW:

Yeah if it's, in fact, a—

SC:

But when you've got—my God, we had a thousand head of cattle. And in a blizzard like that, you're just at a loss. I mean, we couldn't even get out of town. I wake up that morning and I hear this terrible whine, and I lived in a house that was pretty close to the west edge of town and the little TV repeater tower was up there and that's where the wind—

AW:

In Walsh?

SC:

No, this was in Springfield—

AW:

In Springfield?

SC:

-by that time. I lived in Walsh, but I moved to Springfield in '75. Anyway, I hear that whine and I go in there and pull up the local weather deal on the TV and it's broken. The wind gage is broken at sixty-five miles an hour. So I go outside—oh my God, it's snowing like hell so I think, Well I better get out to the farm. So I get dressed, get in my pick-up, I go down to highway 160, which is on the south edge of Springfield, and I turn east. There's a railroad track out there about a mile and there's improvements, you know, a building or two of implement dealership. As soon as I crossed the tracks and get away from the buildings, it's an absolute whiteout. It's a miracle that I got turned around and got back into town.

And that's what our cattle were having to deal with, you know. And we had them big old cows—they aspirate that supercharged air, and they just drown where they are because they're taking in so much water. Oh, I can't hardly—we tried to get the insurance bound, actually. The bank—they had somebody that they were binding insurance with but I didn't find out about until the next day. But the people we had insurance with, they were—their broker was Plains here in Amarillo and they wouldn't take it. I said, "You mean it's got to be a sunny day before we can get insurance?" And she just looked at me and turned away.

AW:

Yeah. Now—

SC:

I can't hardly think about seeing all them dead cattle. It just—I don't know. These guys were coming back from the war zones. They got every right to feel that bad because something like that has an effect on me. It's got to be unreal to come back from combat. Anyway, that pretty well put us out of business.

One other funny thing that happened though—during about a fifteen year period we were using Greeley Natural Gas, I think. And they got a class action suit against them because they were furnishing low-quality natural gas, and they proved it over a period of years. And I was living down here. I got remarried. And I think it was 1985. Lloyd called me up one day and they sent him a check for our part of the settlement. C and H Farms was who the check was to. Of course we didn't have all the money coming. Part of it went to these guys in Denver that owned it and had farmed it through custom workers before, but part of it was ours. So I said, "Lloyd, bring that check down here in Amarillo and we'll deposit it, take some of the money and we'll send them some." He said, "What if we don't send the right amount?" "They're not going to worry about five hundred or one thousand dollars. We'll just estimate." He said, "Oh, I don't want to do that." So he goes up to Denver. And the managing partner for these three guys is named Mark—Mike Burgamy. And Mike owned a fertilizer plant up in Brighton. So Lloyd and his girlfriend go up there and he's got this thirteen thousand dollar check. And he goes into Mike's office and he tells him that he's got the check and how do they want to work it and this and that and Mike says, "Can I see that?" Lloyd gives him the check. Mike walks over to the wall, moves the picture, puts the check in the safe, twists the dial, and walks out the door. So Lloyd goes back and sits down. He waits and he waits and finally his girlfriend said, "See what's going on." So Lloyd goes out to the secretary and she said, "Oh, he's gone for the day."

AW:

Good grief.

SC:

They got him for 20,735 dollars by cancelling the check. He never got that back. And they get him for the \$13,000 after that. And old Mike—he's a graduate of the Air Force Academy. You'd think that a guy with that kind of credentials would have a little integrity but I guess they don't.

AW:

Now this Mike was one of the partners?

SC:

He's one of the three guys that owned this place that we farmed.

AW:

How could he cash a check that was made out to y'all?

SC:

I don't know. I don't know. You know, it's too much water under the bridge since then, and I was already living down here.

AW:

What is your point of view or your opinion about why FMHA was behaving this way across the board? What advantage did they get out of it?

SC:

Well, probably retaliation for criticism along the way and for exposing some of their obvious mistakes that they made. Just for instance, if you just take a look at their programs that started with the soil bank, under the Eisenhower Administration—and I'm no specialist on farm policy but I do know how this deal worked. And I think in 1959 they came up with the soil bank. So doctors and lawyers went out here in this part of the country and they took all the land that was Dust Bowl country that was—you know the top soil was blown away. And we quit farming it because it wasn't worth it.

But they go out and break that stuff out and start farming it and then they put it in the soil bank and get a check for ten years on land that they probably paid fifty dollars an acre for. And they had the money to invest, so they'd go out and buy land, run a plow across it, turn it in for the soil bank and draw the money. It took them forty years, or twenty-five years anyway. The last time that this stuff came up in the mid-eighties, it had to be programmed land already. It already needed to be drawing a payment. You know, it had to be in the program and be tilled and historically farmed to qualify for the new CRP. But initially there were no requirements.

AW:

So you could buy anything?

SC:

Oh you could have bought concrete, run a one-way over it, and turned it in and been paid for ten years under the soil bank. Well that's stupidity. You know, they should have known better, that people would have taken the marginal—the mostly productive land.

AW:

Exactly.

SC:

I mean there ain't nobody in the county of Illinois going to put good corn ground into the soil bank at ninety dollars an acre when they can consistently raise one hundred bushel of corn on it. Ain't going to happen. But they just made those kinds of mistakes. And some of their conservation programs, their lake and wetlands programs, and things like that, that people found

out that it had such a—oh, I don't know about stupid, but ill-found requirements and stuff. And you start exposing the weaknesses of them and the fact that so many of them in agriculture came from the industry, and I think a lot of them came from academia. The people in Washington and USDA, the agronomists and experts came from academia. They might or might not. I think Bob Bergland farmed at one time, and I'm pretty sure John Block was a farmer, and probably some others. Bureaucracy back there is almost immovable. I don't know that Congress can pass a provision and a farm bill and get them to enable it. I'm not sure that they can make them do it. You know, there's stumbling blocks at every opportunity just like this guy here. You know, he knew we weren't a limited partnership or whatever you call it. He knew better than that. I mean, we'd been a partnership for five years and historically had worked as a partnership, and all I need to do is get an attorney then I could probably done it but. But farmers are—especially then—were a little naïve, trusting. I think they thought that the USDA was there to help them.

AW:

Well you would think that. (Laughs) The Department of Agriculture—I mean, you would think that—

SC:

And occasionally they would. My ex-mother-in-law, she's passed away but she worked at the ASCS office in Springfield for twenty years and I know that she did her best to help the farmers understand what the programs were, and help them figure out what was the best way to attack it, what to put in, set aside, and how to do this and that. And then when the program changed, which they have several times, I know that she did her best. And the supervisor, another lady up there was just as agreeable. I mean they never tried to hurt nobody.

But you get above there and get to the establishment up in the states and the national level, why, the politics takes over and they have long term goals. I don't know what—I don't know if they fear shortfall crops on a multiyear basis. I don't know if that's one of the things that drives them or whether it's the industry itself. I know that ADM has more influence on Ag policy than the first half a million farmers and the mechanical companies and stuff—the stuff that they let them spread around or don't let them spread around—the regulations. I've just always felt like the USDA was pretty much a hazard. I can't think of the good that they've done. You know, you think back about their acreage programs and certain classes of farmers were able to take advantage of the program and get big money. I mean they—under pressure, why, they cut down the—oh, the CRP program for instance. I think they maxed out that payment to fifty thousand dollars so they just go in and sign up their sons and daughters and everybody else and spread it around if they got enough acres so that everyone is getting the payment anyway. And they've always had ways for the smarter, bigger people than the—probably the company farms are the ones that get the most out of this.

I don't know whether it's changed much or not. I haven't kept up on Ag policy. I know there hasn't been a set-aside program for a long time. I was looking at Fox News the other day and he

said they've got this option to pay people that are not even farmers. And I guess it's a deal where if you have a third rent to pay, they can make a direct payment to the lessor instead of it coming from you, but they were criticizing that direct payment to people that were not even farming that could draw money. And that's what they've always accused us of, is how many hogs are we not going to raise this year? Or, how much wheat are we not going to plant? And that hadn't even been a factor for, I don't know, thirty-five years probably. They haven't had a set-aside program so I don't know.

AW:

So when you dissolved the—when the partnership was dissolved, you were out of farming?

SC:

I was out of farming.

AW:

You told me on the phone that one of the things you did was, you went back to school, motivated partly because of this experience.

SC:

I wondered—I mean, how could we have had such great support in the country, and I mean, we didn't get membership down the line. Of course I realized then that Farmers Union and Farm Bureau—and then they've got insurance programs and there's a reason for that, because that keeps the base of people over the long haul. We never even thought of that, but in '82—let's see, in 1980 when American Ag went mostly to American Ag Inc., the Texans were pretty much instrumental in incorporation. And I think it was for financial reasons, so that we'd have an accounting and nobody could misuse the money, and there were probably some other benefits. We had—

AW:

And you can't borrow money if you're not incorporated pretty much, you know—

SC:

We had this attorney, Deloss McKnight, in Arkansas, that was helping him, and so they incorporated and Laurie and Gene encouraged me to run and be the Colorado delegate. So I did and they elected me and I started organizing in Colorado, and I had about one hundred twenty families that paid two hundred dollars a year. I mean they had a twenty thousand dollar budget or something like that. Oh, we're not to the Political Action Committee yet though. There's more to that story. Anyway, I get these families up in Colorado that are members of American Ag Inc. and they're all paying me, and I have meetings and I put out a little newsletter from Springfield. I kept, you know, getting new members and going around the state. And I got five hundred dollars

a month that I drew out of it for my salaries as delegate. Of course I thought I was doing all right because I was collecting twenty-something, spending most of the money for promotion, so I didn't feel bad about taking that kind of money out. I wasn't doing much else.

And then Gene and a friend of mine up there, Cecil George—Treva Haney was the secretary. Her and her husband Lloyd farm out by Pritchett. She'd always been the secretary treasurer. I don't think any one of them were members of American Ag Inc., but they told Treva to quit writing me checks, so she did. So I was living down here part-time. I had a house up in Springfield but I spent some time down there. I was still travelling, doing a little speaking from place to place. I went up to Canada one time. And Kip and I went out—the week that they went to the bridge in McAllen—Kip and I were in California at the Visalia Equipment Show and some other places trying to meet with Caesar Chavez. He never would see us. Sent one of his assistants down and we talked for a while, but he thought we were the enemy still.

Anyway, I had this good little organization going up in there and they cut me off. It kind of aggravated me so, at the end of '82, I told them to elect somebody else. And, I mean, nobody else had the energy. Or, you know, they were all farming and couldn't do nothing so it just died out then. So I came down here and started selling farm equipment. Did pretty decent. Remarried in '85 but I still ran the conventions. I ran one in '80, one in '82—we skipped '81 because the '80 one was right before Christmas, so the next year we waited till after Christmas. So it was '80 and then January of '82. In '83 we had another one in Nashville, and I think in '84—'85 we moved to Oklahoma City for it. And I chaired part of it in those years, but, I mean, I wasn't farming no more. It just didn't have the same, you know, the camaraderie. I mean, they still liked me, but I wasn't a farmer, so it was a little different deal.

But after '85, why, I dropped out didn't have much to do with it them for twenty years. They had some troubles and things changed and they had arguments and stuff that nobody could settle.

And, I don't know, Gene and Darrel, they kind of absented themselves from it because they were involved with alcohol [production]. Didn't like AAM Inc. anyway because they didn't like the incorporation part. Alvin, I don't know, he went back to selling gasoline, and Bud got killed in 1984. He was really the driving force behind a lot of it. He built the alcohol plant up at Walsh, a good one, a big one, and after he died, why, it kind of fell apart. Oh, you know, things just disintegrated. I don't know what sort of a legal suit they won and got money.

I know that in '81 we went to southern Missouri, over in the boot heel. Wayne Cryts had his soy beans in that CCC loan and we took two hundred forty thousand bushels out of it underneath the eye of the FBI. They took a picture of everybody that drove a truck out of there. I was right in the driver's seat, me and a bunch of other guys that went there. But Alvin was there. Gene was there. They supported Wayne. A lot of the Texas guys, especially from Central and East Texas supported Wayne. They had his trial over in Arkansas. I forget where—west of Little Rock, and they finally wound up changing the law based on his experience. What his problem was—he had his CCC loan soy beans in this elevator down there and the elevator went bankrupt.

AW:
Right.

SC:
So the federal judge just took the soy beans as the elevator's collateral, which they weren't.

AW:
No, they belonged to Cryts.

SC:
They belonged to Wayne. All he had to do was come up with the money and pay the loan and the beans were his, but the judge wasn't seeing it that way and Wayne spent several months in jail and had hard times. I mean, it's been rough on him. I don't know—he's a—

AW:
Is he still alive?

SC:
Um-hm, yeah. Unusual to be under that kind of pressure for so long. I think he quit farming and got a job at the school and kind of drew back his claws. I haven't seen him for a long time. But a lot of the East Texas guys stayed in Arkansas with him. They supported him for months over there—Cheney and some others.

AW:
Fred Brock? Is that right? I can't remember Fred's—

SC:
From East Texas?

AW:
Well he's more from around Austin. No, Fred Lundgren.

SC:
Oh yeah. Freddie Lundgren, yeah.

AW:
Well, what—you got your degree in sociology?

SC:

Yeah. In '84 I decided that I just didn't know enough to put this into perspective so I went down and took a sociology class, and then I went and took another one, you know going at night. It wasn't a big deal and I kind of enjoyed it. And pretty quick I had eight—nine hours, so the guy—the head of the sociology department—he said, "Why don't you go ahead with this?" So he gave me a degree plan. I had to take leveling hours because my Bachelor's was in education. Anyway, I finally got about twenty hours. I was working and I was sick of it and I had a paper that was due. It was late. I just said, "To heck with it." So he called me up. He said, "You're too good at this to quit." He said, "You've got to finish this up." He said, "I'll tell you—I'll give you ninety days to finish the paper. I'll give you a B, and then you can go ahead and finish." I guess I knew he was right, so I said, "Okay." So between '87 and '88 I finished up, got all my hours done. I had to take forty-two hours and I was glad that I did. It gives me a different perspective.

AW:

That's the thing that, I guess, I'm really interested in. Having stepped back in some ways, and taking a different view through the education and the sociology, looking back on this experience with the Ag Movement and strike and the tractorcades and the whole thing, what has changed in your perspective on it today? How do you look at it today that's different than, perhaps, you looked at it then?

SC:

Well, the people in agriculture are much different than they were thirty years ago. You know, thirty years ago we still had a lot of marginal family farmers that were renters that did custom work on the side. A lot of them worked in town to supplement, and they did stuff and were gradually getting away from that. The rural population has moved in town, and it's just a continuation of an exodus that started back during World War II when they started moving from the south to the north to go to work. And it's just been consistent since then, and the people in the country now are not the people that were there thirty years ago. You know, the people out there now are more skilled. They've got more money. They're better financed. They've got better equipment. They're people that have learned to market their grain. And it probably ain't as much fun out in the country anymore, but it's stabilized—maybe the way the government wants it. Because it'd be a lot more controllable like it is now than it was then. You know, when you had fifteen million people in the country, why, anything could happen. And now I don't know how many farms there are but I'll bet you there's not a million farmers in the country. And you get big like that, you're dependent upon certain things that the littler guys weren't. And the inputs are promoted differently than they were then. And I don't know—it's a more sophisticated situation than it was thirty years ago.

AW:

So this could—what happened in '77, '78, '79—couldn't happen today could it?

SC:

Unh-uh, it couldn't happen today. I mean, the few people that are on the farms—they've got too much to lose. They don't have as many complaints to start with. You know, they're well financed. A lot of them own most of the land that they farm. The tenant deal where somebody would give you a section of ground and let you go out and farm it on thirds. I don't think—there's not 10% of how it used to be. They don't do that anymore. The age of the landowners has changed. Thirty or forty years ago there was a bunch of aging farmers because the average age of farmers then was, like, fifty-something. But I'll bet you the average age of farmers now has gone down instead of going up, because the old people have died off and you've got younger, more stable businessmen running the farms.

AW:

I think we strayed off from one thing you were going to talk about—the Political Action Committee.

SC:

Oh. Yeah, this was kind of a—there was a guy named, I think, Sam White. He was kind of back in Washington for us like David Senter was. And he had a brother, I think, that worked for Martin Haley Companies 02:24:17. And Martin Haley Companies was a lobbying firm. And they came up with a proposition—I mean, we had some success lobbying people. They had a bean feed back then. They did for years. Even after I quit going to them, they had that cornbread and bean feed over there in one of the house—buildings or something. I mean, they'd get several hundred people to come over there and I think they did a good job of lobbying so they come up with this deal. Martin Haley wanted to help us lobby, so we had—I can't remember the guy's name. Joe-something that was one of the executives with him, and this guy named White that was—maybe his name was John White or something. It could have been Bob White. (Laughs) But that'd be too—

AW:

That would have been good.

SC:

Anyway, they came to our convention in St. Louis in 1982. And their proposition was to give them a little latitude, collect some money, form a political action committee—and that really started dividing us in a way, because Joe said—in one of those meetings, he said, “And if we see somebody with one of those ball caps on, we're going to take a baseball bat to them.” So—

AW:

Meaning—?

SC:

You know, the strike caps.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

Well, it didn't bother me any because I was in favor of the political action committee, but some of the people that may have teed them off. That really kind of struck them.

AW:

But the reason he said that was that he didn't want people looking like hicks.

SC:

No, he wanted them to come up there and be a little smoother than what we'd done before. He thought that what we had done was give a strong arm attitude to our previous trips up there. He just was trying to help us out but he made a lot of people mad. Anyway, we went ahead—let's see—Marvin probably was a proponent of the political action committee and some others—a lot of Texas guys. I know that Clifford [Hamilton] and all the guys up in here were for it. So we started it and I developed a spiel. I wasn't sure exactly how it happened, but I invented this scenario where somebody had come to the Martin Haley Company and wanted to know how they could help the farmers, and they formed a political action committee and they were going to put money into it and this and that, and they wanted farmers to participate. So that was my story, and I cleared it with them and they all thought that there was enough truth in it that it probably was all right. So I started going around speaking and raising money for the pack. They paid me two thousand dollars a month in expenses.

So, a guy that I knew over in Louisiana, east of Monroe—Richland Parish—well, no. Before that, we formed a finance committee and I was the National Vice President—or Vice Chairman for Finance, that was my title. And my job was to raise money. So I went over there and, speaking for the pack, I went over to Monroe. Sydney Free was the guy over there—he lived at Archibald, a little old tiny town there east of Monroe. He started taking me around the farmers that week. I came out of Monroe, got on the airplane to Dallas. I had ten thousand dollars in cash—probably a little more, twenty thousand dollars in checks, and probably another thirty thousand dollars in pledges for future payment. And I was just ecstatic because that was proving to me that the farmers were willing to put their money where their mouth was in a manner of speaking. So I'm talking to some of the people and there was this guy named Roy—crap, he was from—I got to think. My memory is getting away from me. You know when you get old?

AW:

I know. I know for a fact.

SC:

Oh, Bovina! Roy Roaming was his name. And Roy was the guy in 1979 that Martin Haley had engaged to lobbying Texas for the Interstate Grain Compact. So he was still kind of associated with them, I guess. But they got worried about me having the money and the checks that I had raised. I said, "What do you mean? I'm one of the original members of the American Ag Movement. I spent thousands of dollars of my own money. I've destroyed my marriage. I've destroyed my farming deal. I've given every ounce, almost, that I can give except blood, and you're worried about me having a little dab of cash that I raised on my own deal—"

AW:

But now this cash—this money wasn't for you, though.

SC:

No! It was for the Political Action Committee. Yeah, I wasn't going to take their money. You know, I had—I mean, the farthest thing from my mind. Anyway, they had Roy meet me in Dallas. He takes all the money and the checks and the pledges and stuff. I don't know what they ever did with them. Anyway, I go to East Bernard, down by Houston. And I had one little meeting down there one night, but still got several thousand dollars. And Marvin started coming around with me a little bit. The two of us would speak. He liked my story too, and he collaborated most of it. I mean, it was going to be successful. I mean, farmers are naïve. Then, they tended to be kind of isolationists because they're out there on their tractor by themselves and all that kind of stuff, but they're not dumb. And when they saw that we were really going to get something done, then they were ready to help us. So I'm having meetings around the country, and meetings in Colorado, and I think I raised ten thousand dollars up at Dumas one afternoon. And I travelled, and then we had this little blip in the deal.

There was a guy named Darrel Fillingim from Hico, Texas, and he was one of the Texas guys down there—a pretty nice man. And I think that Darrel was financing the newspaper—the *American Agriculture News*. And the people that were putting that paper out were from close to Hico. Micki and Alden Nellis are the people that were publishing the paper. Micki was a lady, and her husband Alden—A-L-D-E-N—they were the ones that were publishing the paper. And I mean, it had good circulation. And were getting a lot of mileage out of it. I wrote a column for them every week and they'd take stuff from Gene and Laurie—anybody that wanted to write something, they'd put it in the paper. They kept them up on the legislative news and all that stuff. I can't think of their little town, but it's right down by Hico. Hmm.

Anyway, we ran the meeting in Washington. Darrel was there and we were discussing the merits of the PAC and things like that, and Darrel was not exactly on board and he was questioning Marvin. And Marvin said something really offensive to him, like, you know, "If you weren't so

stupid you'd understand what's going on." (AW laughs) You know, something that was really offensive. Marvin thought that he was good enough friends with Darrel that he could say something like that to him and it wouldn't hurt him but what I think happened—I think it hurt Darrel's feelings bad enough, and I think Darrel was financing the paper, and I think he went back home and cut off the money and that stopped the paper. And the Schrodgers were against the PAC anyway, and they have great influence for a lot of people. You know, there's people that still talk about Alvin reverently because he worked hard and he was good. And if those kind of people are not for something, then it kind of hurts it and it just begins to die out.

You know, they quit calling me for meetings. I went over to Woodward one time and I'm on the speakers deal with their congressman, and of course the congressman ain't going to do nothing for the farmers, and I'm thinking that I've got a program that might do something for them but they're more—you know, the celebrity status of the lawmakers compared to me couldn't cut the mustard. I went up to Kansas one time at Scott City, I think, and there was a guy running for Governor of Kansas. And you know, nobody outside of western Kansas even knew his name. He wasn't going to get a thousand votes probably. But I went up to that meeting and they listened to him for an hour and then I had about fifteen minutes before they went home to make my plea for the PAC and it just started going like that, you know when some of the powers that be aren't behind it.

Again, you can't belittle or make people mad that you got to do business with. And what Marvin said to Darrel was not right, you know, and we paid the price for it. I don't know what would've happened if that one little incident in communication hadn't happened. You know, Darrel might have kept the paper going, the PAC might have started to be more successful and all of those things. Joe—the guy with Martin Haley—he died and then the guy White—Pat, or whatever his name was—he died in a year or two and things just kind of went to pot. But boy, we had a good thing going. We had some potential, and it just didn't materialize. Personalities—I guess after I quit going in '85 that the personalities kind of took over. Larry told me last week that at one point, I mean, since everybody apparently liked Alvin, he said, "Let's just put all our differences aside and let Alvin be the president of American Ag"—

AW:
Alvin Jenkins?

SC:
Yeah, or get back together, and so they're still trying to figure out their parity trust fund, because at one point after the lawsuit, as I understand it—I mean, I'm not—I don't have no information, but they told me that one time they had three hundred fifty thousand dollars in it and now it's got a hundred and fifty, so when they split up and people started going different ways—I think you need to go talk to Clifford Hamilton. He lives out northwest of Lubbock. Let's see, you go west of New Deal—

AW:

I think Clifford died didn't he? Last year?

SC:

I don't know. I never heard.

AW:

I think so.

SC:

Well, he's got a son—

AW:

A daughter too. The daughter was going to donate a bunch of his American Ag materials. But I met Clifford. I knew him, but he died last year.

SC:

Well I never even knew.

AW:

Yeah.

SC:

On the finance committee was me and Clifford and a guy named Ted Godfrey. Then there were three women—let's see, LaRue Stubblefield, Bev Warden and Ginger Hill. We were the finance committee. We ran the convention in 1982 in St. Louis. I don't know, I think we made thirty or forty thousand dollars for them.

AW:

Yeah Clifford—I would like to have talked to him but—

SC:

Well, he knew some of the B.S. that happened that I don't know about. Some—there was rumors of—somebody co-mingled the money.

AW

Would Larry Mitchell know this stuff too?

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SC:

Well, he wouldn't know as much as Larry Matlack would. Larry Matlack would know everything. I don't know whether he'll tell you or not, but he's in a position to know everything. And what's-his-name from east Texas that's one of the assistant—or one of the vice presidents now—I thought of his name while ago when you were talking about Freddy Lundgren.

AW:

Probably—let's see—not Craig Bryant? Craig is from—

SC:

Well, he'd know some. He'd know some, but let me see if I've got this guy's name on e-mail. I've got a (unintelligible) but I've got an e-mail with his name on it. Hm. Dad gum. He's a nice guy.

(long pause)

AW:

Yeah, David gets to Lubbock from time to time. He's got a son, I think, that's still affiliated with Texas Tech, maybe going to school.

SC:

Yeah, I think that's right.

AW:

So I'll get to see him. You've been talking now straight for about three hours, so I'm going to call a halt to it for the time being. I need a little time to process all this myself, but may I ask if we can have one copy of that poster—?

SC:

Oh yeah.

AW:

—to take for our collection, the December first and second? That's great.

SC:

Yeah, I gave—I sent a bunch of them to Larry, along with the strike bulletins that I had. I've kept them for all these years—

AW:

Well, you know, he may have given us one that I haven't seen.

SC:

But I got to thinking, when I die—is that off?

AW:

No it's on now. You want me to turn it off?

SC:

Yeah turn that off.

AW:

Well, I'm just going to stop the interview now and say thank you very much.

SC:

You're more than welcome. My pleasure. I didn't know I knew so much.

AW:

(Laughs) It's been very good.

End of Interview

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