

**Oral History Interview of
David Senter**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
January 5, 2014
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**

**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:

David Senter discusses his early experiences in farming, which led to his involvement in the American Agriculture Movement and politics in general. Senter also recalls various protests, including the Tractorcade to Washington D.C. The interview also covers Farm Aid and current farming trends.

Length of Interview: 01:46:23

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Andy Wilkinson, the fifth day of January, 2014, with David Senter, in the—I would say the beautiful Garden Wyndham Hotel at Oklahoma City, and it's in the morning. We're going to talk a little bit about David Senter and about the American Ag Movement and maybe about anything else that strikes our fancy. Let me get a little archival information to start with, beginning with your date of birth.

David Senter (DS):

Yeah, I was born June 10, 1948.

AW:

You are a mere sixteen days older than myself. Where at?

DS:

I was born in Fort Worth.

AW:

Fort Worth?

DS:

Yeah.

AW:

Where did you grow up?

DS:

I grew up on a farm between Burleson and Crowley, so that's just south of Fort Worth. Ten, twelve miles.

AW:

Had your folks been farming that country for some time?

DS:

Yes.

AW:

Your grandfather's—

DS:

My grandfather— we farmed the land where my grandfather owned and farm[ed], where my dad

was raised, born and raised, and my great-granddaddy homesteaded just south of there in Johnson County. Same county, but at Alvarado, he homesteaded there in 1850 and came from Humboldt, Tennessee. He used to drive a herd of sheep and goats to Central Texas and sell 'em each year. And so he liked the country through there.

AW:
Yeah.

DS:
And so he decided— he drove a herd down and then stayed.

AW:
And I remember from past visits over the telephone you grew up farming, as well.

DS:
That's correct.

AW:
And you went into farming.

DS:
Yes.

AW:
Did you go to college; you go in the military?

DS:
Well, I planned on going to college, I planned on going to Stephenville, to Tarleton, but the year I graduated from high school, a thousand acre farm that joined my dad's that had a rock house, nice house, on it came available, and I had an opportunity so I made a choice. I'd probably never have a chance for this kind of operation again, so I decided to rent the farm and not go to college.

AW:
And that was during the peaks— 1968, the peak, or right after that— you graduated in '66.

DS:
That's correct.

AW:
So you'd have been— this was a time when Vietnam was ramping up, you wound up not going

in the military or—

DS:

That's correct. I had a classification of 3C, which is what farmers were classed as. And so they would've had to have been drafting, seems like maybe thirty-five-year-olds before the 3C would've come in, and so I avoided the draft. I had a lot of friends that went. Some of them—they were different after the war, but of course in our area, it was not like a lot of the big college towns and what-have-you where there was a lot of anti-war sentiment or protest. We just didn't see any of that around where we was at.

AW:

Yeah. What high school did you graduate from?

DS:

Burleson.

AW:

Burleson. What kind of farming operation did you grow up on? And what did you start in on when you came onto that thousand acres after high school?

DS:

I grew up— my dad, he always raised cotton. And he would raise oats, and he would raise some hay, and he always had a few beef cattle.

AW:

And he fed the oats?

DS:

And he fed the oats to fatten out calves that he would sell, but he always summer-fallowed a percent of the farm. He would plant like vetch or winter peas on it, and then plough it under. And so he never bought any commercial fertilizer.

AW:

That strikes me as being fairly—

DS:

Never used any insecticides or anything else. He'd buy ladybugs when we got boll weevils in the cotton, and they'd come in boxes and I remember riding around the edge of the field, turning these lady bugs loose, which would go eat the eggs, but that's just the normal in that area, how people farm.

AW:

Well, that wasn't normal everywhere for that time of the year, because I remember on the Plains, people— there were not ladybugs up there, people used insecticides. What was different about the culture of farming that your father came from?

DS:

The culture that he came from— it was pretty much— all the farmers that I knew of were pretty much the same. In other words, they'd have [been] pretty much self-sufficient. They would raise enough hogs to kill, to have their own ham and bacon and what have you. They'd have their own beef, house chickens, have the eggs, and then— my granddaddy, they used to say he'd walk across the cotton field, and if he found over six sprigs of grass in a row of cotton, he'd go back, tell the boys, "it's time to sharpen the hoes." So just very good farmers.

AW:

Yeah. Well, it's very interesting that you would say that, my grandfather grew up in— near Denton. He ran a farm when I was a little kid, out by Slaton. He carried a hoe and car when he ran his rural mail route in the morning, and if he saw a weed in someone else's farm, he'd stop the car and go out and chop it. (laughs)

DS:

Yeah because you didn't want it to go to seed.

AW:

Yeah. You know, and that's a whole different attitude than what I saw around me. Then the cotton would've been the cash crop?

DS:

Cotton would've been the cash crop. But the oats, that was the big business for my dad. People that had horses all over a large area would buy oats from Dad, and so we would deliver them to horse farms all over the area. And so he had a good market that way to sell oats, and then he'd put up what seed we needed, and then also enough to fatten out a few calves.

AW:

Well— so when you were going to your farming operation as a very young person, eighteen-year-old—

DS:

I rented my first farm when I was fifteen, still in high school.

AW:

Fifteen? So before these thousand acres became available—

DS:

Yeah, and it was a little sixty-acre farm where the guy retired, and I raised cotton on it.

AW:

What— did you run the same kind of operation then when you expanded your operations after high school as what your father was running, or did you farm— different?

DS:

No, I was in farming during the time when there was all kinds of advertising and the farm magazines were pushing “increase your yields,” and the fertilizer, the chemicals, even into the [Earl L.] Butz years, when he was Secretary of Ag, saying, Plow up the turn-rows, and we’ll never be able to produce enough food again, you know. So I did start to use fertilizer and insecticides on my wheat first, not so much cotton. But eventually, we were spraying for insects in cotton, too, because it seems like when you start that, you kill the good insects, and then you’ve got a bigger problem with everything else, so it’s— you break the...

AW:

It’s kind of a one-way street, isn’t it?

DS:

— cycle. Yes.

AW:

Yeah, and then along with that, the other things that eat up those insects, the birds and other— Well, okay, so this is 1966? What changed between 1966 and I would guess 1977, when the Farm Crisis began to come to a head— what changed in America or in farming that helped this develop?

DS:

Well, during that period, there were numerous farmers that had a hundred acres or two hundred acres that were retiring. And so as those farms came available, then everybody pretty much that was farming— except my dad, he just stayed two hundred and fifty acres and kept that. But you know, you rent more land, all of a sudden, I’ve got to have another tractor, go to six-row equipment instead of four. And so you know, you get into that cycle to where you’re getting bigger, you’re getting bigger, it takes more money, you have more risk, and so that whole process was playing out, and prices were not real good— in the sixties.

AW:

So the prices weren't going up to help make up for the difference of this added debt and the increase in capital investment that you were—

DS:

That's correct. And then, in— I guess it was— what year did Russia make the big wheat purchases? Seventy—

AW:

—two or three?

DS:

Two and three, maybe over a two-year period.

AW:

Yeah. Because it was about same time as the Arab oil embargo of '73.

DS:

Because '74, prices really pushed on up.

AW:

On wheat?

DS:

On wheat. And so a lot of— a lot of people began— we planted a lot more wheat as the prices strengthened then instead of oats or instead of— cut back on cotton some. There was quite a bit of grain sorghum grown around, and I did use that as a rotational crop sometimes, grain sorghum. But—

AW:

Did you use it as a fallback? I know on the Plains, it's what we plant when cotton gets hailed out, or it's too late— is that the same way it was treated in your country?

DS:

No, it was— those that planted it, that was—

AW:

They intended to plant it.

DS:

They intended to plant it. And of course, back then, you know, you wouldn't make but thirty, forty bushels of corn, and you could do better with milo, because it would stand the drought better. And the dairies used it—

AW:

So this was all dry land?

DS:

It was all dry land.

AW:

And dairies bought the milo?

DS:

Yeah. So that was kind of all playing out in the early to mid-seventies, and then when the prices then started collapsing again because production was increasing again. And so it was— farmers were in a pretty tight squeeze. But in '77, '78, it was not the worst years of farming. It was not nearly as bad as the mid-eighties. A lot of times, it appears to me in history that movements or what have you, is ahead of the curve. It's a year or two or three before—

AW:

The canaries in the coal mine, sort of.

DS:

Correct. Yeah, that kind of a deal, and that's kind of what was taking place because farmers could afford to travel and do things, and—but I tell you, by the mid-eighties—

AW:

You couldn't take your tractor to Washington, could you?

DS:

No. No. You couldn't. We got— I guess there was about three thousand came in '85 for a parity march, but that's the biggest group that we could get, because so many was just already in foreclosure, in trouble and they just couldn't leave.

AW:

What—what brought you to the American Ag Movement, or to any kind of a movement having to do with farming? What affected you?

DS:

I was always involved in community. I was on the volunteer fire department in Crowley, helped start the Johnson County Sheriff's Department Reserve, because the county couldn't afford two-men teams, these officers were out by themselves, so we started the reserves so they'd have someone with them. And then in '75 I guess— let me think— no, '74, we lived in Burleson, my wife, and kids, and I, and I was always going to the coffee shop and always complaining about something the city was doing or not doing. And so one of the guys there said, "I wish you'd just shut up. If you don't like the way things have been run, why don't you file and run for city council?" I said, "Okay, I will." So I went down and filed, to, one, beat the mayor Pro Tem, and so I was on the city council for three years there in Burleson. Seventy-seven was the last year of— no, '78 was the last year I was on the city council, but I was involved in AAM, and that's why I didn't continue.

AW:

So you had a history, unlike a lot of the farmers I've talked to who became active in the movement, many of them did not have much of a participation history, but you did. You were already used to doing something in the political realm to address issues.

DS:

And my dad— he served on the Crowley School Board for thirty-something years, always on church board, so— go for the— help work the concession stand maybe at the softball/baseball games at nights for the kids. Open a gym up for skating for kids or volleyball, my dad would be there to open a door, so I grew up with community involvement like that, if you will. And I was— one morning I was listening to WBAP, and then they was advertising that there was going to be a farm rally, American Agriculture Movement at Texas Stadium.

AW:

And this is nineteen?

DS:

Seventy-seven.

AW:

Seventy-seven.

DS:

And so they said Alvin Jenkins is going to be speaking, of course, I didn't know who he was. They was also going to have country music and Bill Anderson, there was a whole— whole list of country singers came and did a concert. So I called George Wilma, good friend of mine, we farmed a lot of— I'd help him strip cotton, and he'd help me and when we was harvesting grain,

we'd run combines together, and so I called him and I said, "Let's go to this farm meeting."

AW:

Just keep talking, I'm— (Andy picks up audio recording device)

DS:

Okay. I said, "Let's go to this farm meeting." So he said, "Okay, when is it?" So I told him, so we went over and we heard speeches, some of the music, and we was talking on the way back and said, you know, what he's saying is exactly right. Our costs keep going up, and the prices we get for our product is not keeping up. We're not going to lose our farms tomorrow or next year, but in time, we're going to be at risk. And so we need better policies. We need to get paid for our product. So the next day, they had a tractorcade in Dallas at some combines, tractors and stuff, so we watched that and it was great.

AW:

You went to watch it, but you didn't participate?

DS:

No, no. It was great. So I went back home, and made a few calls. And I rented the— got the bank meeting room available, and we just started calling local farmers and said, "We're going to have a farm meeting and talk about what's going on, talk about the American Agriculture Movement Thursday night." Eighty people showed up. Couldn't believe it— standing room only.

AW:

So other people were perceiving the same thing that you and George—

DS:

And also, two TV crews out of Fort Worth came, NBC and CBS, and then a reporter from the Star Telegram—Worth Wren— showed up too. And so there wasn't any leader or anything else, I got the room, so I welcomed everybody, and then George and I gave a report on what we had heard and saw, and said, "Do we want to be a part of this? Do we want to get involved? Do we want to demand fair prices?" It was a unanimous, "Yes, we do." And so, well, what do we want to do? And I said, "Well, I heard up there that there were counties— that there were people organizing, and they're driving their tractors to the courthouse square and having a rally."

AW:

In their county?

DS:

In their county, and having a speech. Well, that's a good idea. When do we want to do it? So

everybody was throwing out, said, "We think we can do it in a week." And so this one farmer said, "I'll bring my flatbed truck and park it; then speakers can get up on it." Another one said, "Well, I'll go down and talk to the city of Cleburne, and work it out with the police." And then somebody else was going to get a hold of the congressman and the state reps, the mayor, and then the John Deere dealer said, "Well, you can bring your tractors in and stage them on my— at my dealership if you want to, and we can all go from there."

AW:

And this is all a couple of weeks of the event in Dallas at the Texas Stadium?

DS:

Week and a half.

AW:

Week and a half?

DS:

Ten days. And we had—

AW:

Pretty fast.

DS:

I'm guessing we had a hundred tractors and pick-ups— big crowd. They had to block the street off; the street was full of people, speeches. State Rep showed up; the person running for congress in the Sixth District showed up to voice support. But by then, we had gotten information that December the fourteenth was the strike day, that's when we'd go into the state capitals.

AW:

And what time of the year was this that you were at the—

DS:

November.

AW:

Of '77?

DS:

Seventy-seven. And so about a month—in other words, in ten days, we did our— the county. But then it happened in Hill County, Hillsboro. It was happening in other places. But we would—

we'd go support them. And then they would come in and support what we were doing and meetings, and it was just kind of— really bubbling.

AW:

Was it exciting?

DS:

Yeah, it was. And— I don't— I don't really know how or why I ended up the spokesperson, because there [weren't] any leaders. I remember there was a bunch— you know you have key farmers out of the different communities. And so there were several key farmers from around Mansfield, from Cleburne, from Alvarado, from Grandview, and I was from Burleson, you know that— standing up there and all the media wanted to interview. And so I looked this way, well hell, these guys would step back and I'd look this way and they'd step back and just left me standing up there in front.

AW:

(laughs) So by default you got the—

DS:

(laughs) Yeah. But then December the fourteenth, we went— I guess we hauled eight tractors from our county to Austin, and when we got there, we couldn't believe how many farmers they was coming in from West Texas, they was coming in from South Texas, black lands there around Austin— I mean, they was coming in from all over. And I have no idea how many was there, but it was a bunch. And we drove from Round Rock to Austin, and then up to the Capitol, and the Governor, the Governor— John Hill was there. He was the Attorney General. Governor Briscoe.

AW:

Yeah, Dolph Briscoe.

DS:

Dolph Briscoe was on the steps, greeting farmers. Matter of fact, his wife— Janey, I think was her name, she invited much of us to the governor's mansion for chili.

AW:

So he wasn't there to shoo you away or sic the state patrol, he was—

DS:

He was there welcoming.

AW:

To meet and greet.

DS:

Yeah.

AW:

Was that the kind of receptions you were getting— reception you were getting a local courthouses as well?

DS:

Yes. It was. It was all very— very positive and there was little pushback. Now, there was some grumbling amongst Farm Bureau, farmers, saying, “Well, all you need to do is stay home and work.” And it’d be okay—

AW:

So there was already a division between AAM— who were going to be in the AAM and who were going to be in the Farm Bureau, the existing—

DS:

Yeah.

AW:

What about other agriculture trade associations, like corn growers and sorghum growers and cattle feeders? Had they even shown their heads at this point?

DS:

Not the commodity groups. But National Farmer’s Union, their members was very active with AAM. And a lot of Farmer’s Union members became AAM members, but they continued to be Farmer’s union members, same with NFO.

AW:

What about the co-ops?

DS:

The co-ops didn’t have a choice at that time other than to be supportive, because those co-op boards, they had a lot of AAM people on their board of directors, and so the co-ops, you know, they were very supportive and some of them contributed money if there was going to be a trip or fuel, or— but the co-ops were okay then.

AW:

Okay, so you get Dolph Briscoe saying howdy, come on in— that's almost like a protest without getting somebody to protest— what happens after that?

DS:

Then the next— we were having weekly meetings. We actually end up in and rent— a vacant office space in Burleson, and by then, Texas is kind of organizing the different areas. We had five—

AW:

The regions. Yeah.

DS:

Five— five districts, we called them. And I was heading up District Three, which was the Dallas-Fort Worth, east to the Red River, that area. And then there was South Texas, Central, West, but that's kind of how things were beginning to come together. And it was mostly for communication, because we just couldn't run every week, drive all the way to Lubbock to go to a meeting, so we were having our own. But somebody would always go to these other meetings so they'd come back and report on, well, here's how many was there, here's what they were talking about, and so we've had to make sure that we had that communication. Then plans started to be made for farmers to go Washington. Fly to Washington or drive. And going to do it the first week Congress reconvened—

AW:

In '78.

DS:

In '78. And so we did that. So we started collecting donations from local businesses, gins, equipment dealers. Putting together a pot of money to help pay plane tickets for our county. And we ended up with— we had about eighty or ninety people go. We almost had a 727 full.

AW:

From Texas or from your district?

DS:

From my county, from my area.

AW:

That's pretty remarkable.

DS:

It was.

AW:

So Texas could've filled five airplanes.

DS:

Oh, yeah. Probably they did more than that. We had no idea who else was going to be in D.C.

AW:

So the communication was still pretty—

DS:

It was by phone—

AW:

— hit and miss, yeah.

DS:

Or people that attended meetings and giving reports, that'd how it was.

AW:

So when you talk about grassroots, this was truly grassroots. There was no central coordination to speak of—

DS:

None. No approval if you planned to go do something, you just did it. And so it was— there was one farmer, Bill Arnold, good friend of mine, I still see him when I go to Texas— he was a really good guy— hardworking guy. He'd never flown. So we was on our way to D.C, and some of us were half asleep, what have you. And he looked out the plane window and he looked again and he said, "Dam-nation, have they had a snow here, it covered all the trees!" It was the clouds.

[laughter] And so everybody laughed, you know. And so we got to D.C., and we knew the rally was going to be, like, two o'clock in the afternoon on the steps of the Capitol. We walked around the Capitol, and we couldn't believe it. There was probably fifty-thousand farmers there. They were just everywhere.

AW:

What'd it feel like to see that?

DS:

Well. Big knot come up in your throat, you know— kind of made the hairs stand up on the neck a little bit. And then you'd see on jackets what Michigan, California, Oklahoma, wow. So you're looking, and there's just this sea of farmers, caps and hats, pretty amazing. And I'll tell you what— when that many showed up, it was no problem getting politicians to come out there, to welcome the group and speak.

AW:

So you got another welcome in Washington?

DS:

Yeah, like Kent Hance.

AW:

Because he'd just gotten elected to George Mahon's old seat.

DS:

And Tom Harkin was already there, he was out welcoming us. [Tom] Daschle from South Dakota. [Dan] Glickman from Kansas, [Berkley] Bedell from Iowa, [Harold] Volkmer from Missouri, and just a long list of— Charlie Rose from North Carolina. We had John Conyers, black congressman from Detroit. He was out there working with the farmers. Encouraging us up.

AW:

Was it bipartisan?

DS:

Yes. Yes it was.

AW:

So what was the message? And how did you deliver the message in D.C. at that first rally?

DS:

Everybody after the speeches, everybody was told, go see your own congressman and both senators to say we need a new policy. And of course, we was demanding parity prices—

AW:

Parity was the watchword, was it not?

DS:

It was the watchword, and we was demanding parity prices, which we believed would index

what we received for our product to what the input costs invested in the economy was going on. So we viewed that as kind of the cost of living adjustment for farmers, like they have cost-of-living adjustment for wages in some cases. And labeling imports—

AW:

That was on the list already. Country of origin.

DS:

From day one.

AW:

So the topics were parity, country of origin—

DS:

Fair trade, not free trade. Trade became a bigger issue when we got to the eighties, when they first started talking about the GATT negotiations and the WTO, but fair trade was part of it. And then in '78, after that trip to D.C.—

AW:

What was the reception like when you went to the individual—

DS:

Very good. Very good. There was— there was not a lot of pushback. The members felt like they had just passed the new farm bill the year before. And so they figured they was off the hook 'till '81.

AW:

The members of Congress?

DS:

The members of Congress. But—

AW:

So it was easy to smile and pat you on the back.

DS:

But we pushed them very hard. And matter of fact, we ended up in '78, Bob Dole from Kansas introduced flexible parity bill. And that legislation was: if you planted fifty percent, you'd get ninety percent parity loan rates. And if you planted sixty percent, you'd get eighty, if you planted seventy— in other words, it ratcheted down to where you would have fifty percent loan rate if

you planted—

AW:

Fence row to fence row.

DS:

Yeah. And so—

AW:

And that was an attempt to balance surplus?

DS:

Let the price move production, instead of just constantly overproducing and shoving market prices down.

AW:

Flexible parity— how was that received by farmers?

DS:

It was received by farmers pretty well, because everybody— nobody was required to do anything. They could make their own decision each year. And so it was received pretty good. That legislation passed the Senate twice on voice votes. It was defeated in the House. The reason it was defeated in the House— Jimmy Carter, his economic advisor— oh, what was his name? Was it Lynn Taft?

AW:

I just don't remember. [Charles Schultze was Chairperson of the Council of Economic Advisers]

DS:

I don't either. But the economic advisor advised him against supporting this, because this might affect inflation by a point or two. And so Carter came out against it, put the arm on Jim Wright, and Jim Wright went on the House floor, and argued passionately to defeat the bill, and it was defeated on the House floor. Farmers then— we turned attention back to the country. We went back home to regroup, and so everybody in their own way decided, we're going to turn the heat up. And so that's when— on an almost-daily basis, across the country, different ones, there would be a blockade of a bakery somewhere, just different actions. Stopping trains in some places.

AW:

So it was, in a sense, the defeat of the flexible parity, was sort of like the straw that broke that

camel's back?

DS:

Yes. That's when realization set in that it's going to take a lot more than just asking and them doing the right thing. We would organize around Fort Worth and have a tractorcade, and we'd go— we went to a flour mill. And all we asked from the different businesses was— just make a statement supporting farmers. We'll shake hands and congratulate you, and we'll go on down the road, you know, we're just trying to build support, and trying to make sure everybody knows what we contribute in the way of jobs and to the economy. And then—but if a business would say, get off my damn property, well then, hell, we'd just blockade 'em for a while, two or three days. We'd usually plan it so it'd be on a weekend, it was hard to get a judge to get a court order to make you move.

AW:

Was that— when these events would occur, these sort of spontaneous grassroots actions— was the communication such throughout the members— I guess you didn't really have members of the AAM at the time, but participants— were those things widely-shared and well-known? In other words, would one spark something else some other place?

DS:

Yes. Yes. It would. And we also— by then, we had established phone trees.

AW:

What's a phone tree?

DS:

Well, I'd call five people—

AW:

They'd call five people.

DS:

They'd call five; they'd call five.

AW:

Kind of the way you do in Sunday school, let somebody know— somebody know when someone's sick.

DS:

So in an hour you can touch a lot of people. For instance, on that, we decided not to go down to

the McAllen bridge, but a bunch of South Texans— a lot of farmers went down to the McAllen bridge and was going down to protest imports coming in from Mexico. And Othal Brand was the mayor of McAllen. But Brand and Company was a big importer of produce. And we had been told that he would bring this stuff out of Mexico with “grown in America labels” on it.

AW:

(knock on door) Hold on just a second, let me stop this. (brief pause)

DS:

And so Othal Brand had it set up where when the farmers— about two hundred and fifty farmers got on the bridge, the Mexican Federales blocked the Mexican side, the police on the U.S. side, they fired tear gas on the bridge—

AW:

So this was the McAllen police—

DS:

With billy clubs, and injured a lot of farmers and put them all in jail.

AW:

What time— what was the date, the month and year? That was before the tractorcade—

DS:

That was probably March or April of '78. It would be a lot of coverage in some of the newspapers, AAM reporters.

AW:

Was that the first real pushback? I mean, with armed force.

DS:

Other than small little incidences that happened around places, that was the first major showdown. Then people started— the one phone call gets made, and some of the farmers that was not on the bridge, they was calling. And so I got a call like at 5:00—5:15 in the afternoon about what had happened. So here goes the phone tree. Seven o'clock, eight of us get in a motor home heading to McAllen.

AW:

That's the day of the event?

DS:

The day of the event. Two hours after I got the call, eight of us was heading to McAllen. Bruce Miller that's here, they hit the road from Michigan, hell they got to Texarkana, thought they were nearly there, they was halfway. (laughs) And people's flying in, driving in from all over the country. So by the next day, two-thousand farmers have showed up and there was twice that many on the road. So we— they said, you can't go behind the jail, well hell— we just circled the jail. Every police car, we took the valve stems out of the tires—

AW:

Of the police car?

DS:

Every police car had a flat except one that didn't slow down enough where we could catch it.

AW:

Were there tractors as well, or just—

DS:

The locals had brought some tractors, and it was getting— they refused to let them out, and even some that had been clubbed pretty bad didn't even get medical attention. So it was getting pretty testy, so John Hill, the Attorney General showed up trying to work things out. News media was pouring in there. So finally a ultimatum was given. You have four hours to release all these farmers.

AW:

Who gave the ultimatum?

DS:

We all got together, the leaders from the different states, people was there and figured out, okay, this is what we need to do. So there was a lot of different ideas. We didn't really plan this, but the Georgia group, Layton Kersey, his brother Tommy was in jail. And Tommy was the Georgia leader. Layton went and got on an 806 International, started it up, drove it up on the steps in front of the glass doors going into this jail, and he was revving it up, and he'd make the front wheels jump off the ground once in a while, just sitting there.

AW:

That's pretty dramatic.

DS:

You could see the officers with the guns drawn; it was a very tense time. But the Attorney

General, Brand, Othal Brand, he backed down. And they ended up— they was going to require like a two hundred dollar fine against each one, but they waved all of that and just released everybody. And then as soon as everybody got released, everybody— and this was like three thousand now— everybody went straight to the bridge. And on it— and the TV cameras and all was with us. And a Brand and Company truck got caught up in all of us on the bridge, and the farmers were on it, holding up a sack of onions, and it said, “Grown in the USA.” And the truck was coming out of Mexico. And the TV cameras was filming away, and said, “This is why we’re doing it. This is why we’ve got to have enforcement of country of origin labeling.” And so then everybody heads back home, you know.

AW:

What was the reaction? That seems like the smoking gun. Did other people outside the Ag Movement say, “You’re right, we need to do something about this”?

DS:

Oh yeah, there was a lot of support. A lot of support. But you know, those kind of things were happening on a regular basis. It had gotten to the point to where whatever happened, if there was a problem, you’d have farmers from all over go and stand together. And so that’s pretty amazing how all that happened.

AW:

That must have been heart-warming and invigorating at the same time.

DS:

It was. Just to see farmers stand up. And then about September, there was a big meeting, and Gerald McCathern— the idea was talked about, thrown around— well, they didn’t listen to farmers, let’s see if they’ll listen to tractors, and so let’s take the tractors.

AW:

So Gerald was the first one to—

DS:

Gerald was elected Wagon Master.

AW:

But I mean, was he the first one to bring up the idea? Do you know?

DS:

I think he was. But you know, a tractorcade— we were having them everywhere.

AW:

Already. So it was like, let's take what we're doing and then just do it on a big—

DS:

And we'll all join together. I'm not sure who said, "Okay, let's all go driving to Washington," but—

AW:

Because there were tractorcades before Washington, right?

DS:

Absolutely.

AW:

So I would guess that that was something that people looked at and said, "Well, that's a great idea."

DS:

Oh, yeah. And it was an idea where all the different counties and communities, they came together and you'd have a— oh, equipment dealership say, "Well, I'll send a truck in case a tractor breaks down, we can load it up. I'll send a truck and that's my contribution." Others said, "Well, I'll send a fuel truck." So we got the diesel. Other said, "Well, I'll bring the propane because we know we'll need to fill up bottles for campers." There'd be a few propane tractors, probably, and you know, just kind of— other businesspeople, they'd have fundraisers and contributions, putting together a pool of the money for the different areas to go. And then the farmers were deciding if they could go.

AW:

Yeah, because they still had farms.

DS:

But in February, there's not much going on.

AW:

Right.

DS:

Or January, because it was January and February. Dairy farmers couldn't, for the most part.

AW:

And if you had many cattle, if you were calving, that's probably a difficult time of the year as well. Great. So— there were other tractorcades before the big—

DS:

All the time.

AW:

Yeah, and they were just— they were going on, as you say all the time. Were there any of those that were more notable than others in terms of developing support and/or opposition?

DS:

Well, I know we got press coverage around Dallas-Fort Worth when the tractorcade to Lubbock when it circled the entire loop around town. Because there was pictures, a night picture where you could see those flashing lights on the tractors as far as you could see. It must have been made from a helicopter or something. There were some pretty dramatic events like that. They had some big tractorcades in Georgia. They actually went to Plains, Georgia, when Jimmy Carter was there, was President, and he'd gone to Plains, and they went to Plains and shut the whole town down. It was— it got— it was not very pretty.

AW:

In what way?

DS:

Well, I mean, it was a pretty big confrontation between police and the farmers that were there. Of course, you know, the Secret Service, they protect the President, and so— there was some things, you know. Bob Bergland got egged when he came to Lubbock. And I think the same thing happened to him up in Colorado when he went to a meeting. He told me later, he said, "I should have kept that raincoat that had egg all over it, it could be in the Smithsonian, beside of your tractor!" (laughs) But yeah.

AW:

Well— I don't know what's next that we ought to talk about, probably the tractorcade itself. You were on it.

DS:

Yes.

AW:

We've had lots of interviews about the tractorcade. People love to talk about that. Things that I

think are real interesting, I mean, there are lots of discussions about the events, you know and funny stories and interesting stories. There are several things that really strike me as being— things that are maybe not covered as well. One would be the logistics of this. The second one would be the local receptions, both communities, but also it strikes me in listening to different accounts of the tractorcade, the movement of it, the officials in various states and agencies reacted awfully differently to it as well. And then once you got there, you know, it became sort of a de-facto community all of its own and how that organization worked. Those things really seem intriguing. Can we start with what it was like going along the road and how the communities—

DS:

Sure. There were a lot of logistical issues that we worked out as we went along, and we got better at it each day.

AW:

You didn't sit down in a big room with a giant table and plot this thing out like an army movement?

DS:

Actually, there was a United States map, and we said, "Okay, the southern route's going to be I-20, and here's where it's going to Atlanta, and up 85. Then I-40." And so we followed those interstates, 70, and then 80-90, and then they came together up North, and so all of them— so the routes were figured out. And then this map had a little deal on it, a hundred miles— or maybe it had the little—

AW:

Scale.

DS:

Scale. Took a wooden match, and we figured 100 miles a day, because some of the tractors were pretty slow, some of the old Cases— wasn't going to go over thirteen miles an hour, max. And so we figured, okay, 100 miles a day. And so we took that match along those routes, and drew a circle.

AW:

So you knew where you were—

DS:

So each one of these routes, they knew where their goal for that day, where it was going to be. And then also, whenever you joined the tractorcade, that was your place in line all the way.

AW:

And you stayed in that—

DS:

That spot.

AW:

Yeah.

DS:

And people would be sitting on the side of the road, come by, they'd just fall in, well, that was their spot. When we left— I joined my group in Fort Worth, but Clifford Hamilton was the first tractor. And he left Lubbock. Now, there was some other tractors. One had backed into the Pacific Ocean— they'd trucked it over there— and it was in line, so there was some New Mexico. There was some tractors further west, but the official tractorcade, they started [in] Lubbock. We started going under those overpasses over the Interstate. Hell, there's people up there with flags. You come to one, and they'd have a sheet, "Go Farmers," written on it. You'd see people out in the pastures, beside waving flags, and they'd put signs up, "We support you farmers." It was amazing. Every night, we never bought a meal after we left. But we figured we would be eating out. Every night the locals would come together, and you had a fish fry, a soup supper, chili. I mean, you had sandwiches; you had barbecue. Every night, the locals put on a big feed for us in some church hall, or in a convention center, or wherever. As we went on, it was bigger. And then these fuel trucks had come in from local— whether it was a co-op or local dealers, and they'd just go down the damn line, fueling every damn tractor up. Not charge a penny. They'd just fill them up. And so it was amazing how that worked. But the logistics got to be harder and harder, because by the time we got past Atlanta, we had to have a hundred acres to park all the tractors and trucks—

AW:

That's a big spot.

DS:

And campers That's a big spot. And we had to get people, and so when they'd start parking tractors, just park them, like this, with flags. Right here. Stop. Next one. And it would take— it would take some hours, just—

AW:

Just to stop and start.

DS:

Just to get them parked. And so finding them at some places, like— we parked at one of the racetrack parking lot, and then there was a big university parking lot in another place— a convention parking lot in Atlanta.

AW:

Right, so any kind of facilities, it would have—

DS:

But some of them was just out in a pasture. It was—

AW:

Did you have trouble arranging those? Were people accommodating, or—

DS:

Well— for the most part. For the most part. And we figured out pretty quick that there's going to have to be somebody down the line—

AW:

An advance.

DS:

A day or two on down there, beginning to work some of the stuff out. Because you can't just set—

AW:

You can't just show up in town and say, "Where do we park?"

DS:

Right. And so— but when we left South Carolina, going into North Carolina, we was all parked on the side of the interstate. And I drove a pick-up from the last vehicle to the first, and it's twenty-seven and a half miles. I mean, that's— that's the logistical problems to deal with.

AW:

And there are bound to have been a break-down or two—

DS:

Oh, there was. A great story. A farmer from Johnson County, close to Alvarado, he had a "H" Farmall he bought new in '49. He said, "I'm driving this one to Washington." First new tractor he ever bought in his life. And he had never been outside of the two-county area in his life. He

blew a head gasket on it, close to Longview, East Texas. So equipment truck comes around, loaded it up, I said, "He'll take your tractor back home for you." He said, "Hell, no. You're not taking this tractor home. This tractor's going to Washington." He said, "I need to borrow a pickup." So he got somebody pickup and went and found an International dealership, got a head gasket kit, he came back, got up on this truck—

AW:

This truck's moving?

DS:

And he made the driver get back up there and pull in to where his spot in line was. The tractorcade's moving. And he overhauled— put a new head gasket kit on that tractor, and when we got to Monroe, Louisiana, he started it up, backed it off that truck and went all the rest of the way to Washington with it.

AW:

That is a great story.

DS:

And I mean, it was just that kind of dedication. I mean, just—

AW:

What about— I heard also from various farmers that I've talked to that in some places, officials were accommodating either because they were sympathetic or accommodating because they saw the practical side of it, but in some places, it wasn't either case. They were not.

DS:

For the most part, the governors and the states were pretty cooperative. Some of the sheriffs, some of the locals were not accommodating. Like when we was crossing the Mississippi River bridge going into Jackson, Mississippi— no— Vicksburg. Right there on the river. That sheriff, he was there, and we had decided the best thing to do to work out was with the state troopers in each state, just to get them to assign somebody to be with us.

AW:

Because that would carry all through the state as opposed to having to make different arrangements. Yeah.

DS:

And then this officer could deal with his people if there was a problem. Anyway. The state

trooper was there, the sheriff said, "Look, it's against the law to drive tractors on the Interstate." And he says, "Soon as you come in to my county, you're going to get on the side roads. You ain't going on the Interstate." I said, "I really wish you'd change your mind about that, because stoplights and these little towns and everything. We've got big tractors; we've got lots of stuff here, and it's much safer for us to stay on the Interstate." No. So he gets into his sheriff's car and goes over the bridge because the trooper had said the tractors were on the bridge on the other side. So he goes over and he gets up on the bridge, and I guess he can just see tractor lights flashing. You hear the tires squealing, he comes backing off of the bridge. Wheels around, rolls the window down, and he says, "Get out of my damn county as fast as you can." And off down the road he went. And another time, Dan Taylor was in all of this, the Parity Hilton, his van with all that. We was in South Carolina. And I had a great visit with the governor. He said, "Anything we can do, just let us know. We support you farmers. Agriculture is the backbone of our state." Well, the weigh station is open. Dan, they go in with the Parity Hilton. It's overweight because it's single-axel and they got water tanks and food—

AW:

The fact that they're weighing them is pretty amazing.

DS:

This officer says, "I'm impounding this truck." I said, "No, that's not a good idea." So we go back and forth and he says, "Look, this truck's impounded. It's overweight. Period." I said, "Well, look, we have made a decision when we started to Washington, that if anything like this happens, we're just going to stop our tractors. And not in one lane. We're going to block all four lanes, both directions of this interstate until we get this worked out. We don't want any trouble." Besides, we had one of those phones on each route, where you look at your book and you plug in a code, and then you could make a long-distance call. Big phone. We had one on each route, and we was going to— the plan was if it got bad anywhere—

AW:

All the routes?

DS:

—you called the other routes, and all east-west interstates in the United States would be shut down. And—

AW:

Changes your leverage.

DS:

So I got— I asked, "Can I use your phone? I need to call the governor's office." So anyway, I

used the phone, I called the governor's office, I finally got to the Governor, and he says, "How is everything going? I understand you've got a lot of tractors." And I said, "Yes sir, but we've got a little problem here." "Well, what kind of problem?" I said, "One of your state troopers, your weights and measures impounded one of our trucks, and he says he's not going to release it." Governor says, "Let me talk to him." So I said, "Sir, the governor wants to talk to you." "Yeah, the governor my ass," you know. He was just going like this, and I hand him the phone, in a little bit he's going, "Oh, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I completely understand, sir." He hangs the phone up, doesn't say a word. Goes out the door, squeals his tires, and goes down, and puts the "closed" sign up on the weigh station. Closes the gate down there, and then just roars off up the interstate. And then the sergeant that was with me from the state troopers, he said, "Mr. Senter, I think you boys are free to go now." (both laughs) And then the next little fracas that we had— Mel Cherry, he's such a great guy, but World War II, you know, he said, "We need to season these boys up a little bit before we get to D.C. because we don't know what the police are going to do; so we need to just test them a little bit."

AW:

Talking about your tractor?

DS:

Yeah, our tractorcade.

AW:

Yeah.

DS:

And so there was a tollbooth in Petersburg, Virginia. And I went up there, wanted to just let the tractors go through, count them and just pay one lump sum. They wouldn't agree to it. Spread out, shut the whole thing down. Backed traffic up ten miles, and the farmers climbed out of the tractors, dig for their change— one by one, and then they'd have to get back up, start up again, and so finally, after a long time, they put out this box that said, "farmers free" on it. But we counted the vehicles and paid them anyway.

AW:

Paid them anyway.

DS:

Anyway. But. Mel, he was really happy about that.

AW:

And you eventually get to Washington, we have a lot of discussion and interviews about it,

things that went on there. Last night we were talking, after the dinner meeting, and I remember asking the group at the table something that I still find very interesting, is that— here are all these tractors and all these farmers who have not necessarily been treated well by the police and the municipal authorities in Washington, D.C.— that were being ignored by the President, if that's correct to—

DS:

That is correct.

AW:

Big snowstorm comes in and the farmers wind up working with the police and the municipal authorities to help solve some serious issues of getting doctors and nurses and firefighters and policemen to work and all that sort of thing. And— first of all, it's remarkable when you think about it, when there's a revolution of some kind, even though it's a peaceable revolution, that the two sides come together to work out a problem. How did that occur? Was it spontaneous, did one side go to the other?

DS:

Well, there was a police command post there in the compound, the Mall, where farmers were all locked in. But the farmer—I mean, you could see there was city buses stuck in the snow, there was cars not able to move, and so—

AW:

This was a huge snow, too—

DS:

It was over two feet. And it was a wet snow, too. Heavy snow. And so they could see there's a problem. One of the farmers and I— I don't know which one it was, but a lot of them had dozer blades in front. And so said, "Hey, I'd be glad to go clear this street for you if you'll— if it's okay to leave the compound."

AW:

Because by that time the police had sealed the compound, and weren't allowing the tractors to leave, right?

DS:

That's correct. And so the order [had] come down from the chief of police— [Robert W.] Klotz was his name— and said, "Let any of the farmers out that wants to move snow and help dig the city out." Well then, emergency vehicles couldn't go, the ambulances, so all of a sudden, then there was some discussion about, "Can we send tractors to firehouses and hospitals?" And they

said sure.

AW:

So the municipal authorities are asking the farmers?

DS:

That's correct. The farmers said, "Sure, we're glad." Most of the farmers had C.B. radios in their tractors that they communicated with on the trip. You'd see a little group of two or three tractors get together over here with the farmers around and off they'd go. The policemen would hang on the side of the tractor and tell them where to go. And then all of a sudden doctors couldn't get in, and a lady having a baby couldn't get to the hospital and she's in a tractor cab, and the kid's about to die. Driver in the tractor said, "Wait a minute, ma'am, just don't do this yet. Hold on, I'll have you at the hospital in a little bit." But yeah, it was a big plow. Snow— actually dug the paralyzed city out. And even some of them went on out to the suburbs, Montgomery County, PG [Prince George] County, and they worked a few days.

AW:

Did it change attitudes on either side of the line, this period of cooperative work?

DS:

It helped for the attitude from the police. But of course, the police— they had gotten acquainted with and got to know farmers because they was on duty every day and the farmers were around and they'd share coffee. There was a good rapport building, but this really went out to the public, because the public, a lot of them was ticked off because of the traffic problems we caused. And so this really helped public opinion, if you will.

AW:

Did it change any of the attitudes at the time in the Congress, on Capitol Hill?

DS:

Well, there was floor speeches— I mean, there was a lot of kudos to the farmers, thanks for helping D.C. So there was a lot of good will generated.

AW:

But nobody introduced a new flexible parity bill.

DS:

No.

AW:

All right. We've got not very much time. I know we're not going to get everything done today. So before we get out of here today, I want to parle a little bit with you about trying to figure out some times to get together, but there are a couple of things that you mentioned over the last day and a half or so that really struck me that I was hoping to get on the tape today. One would be the Texas State Democratic Convention, and all that issue with Jim Wright. Can you just start from the beginning of that, talk about it? This would've been after the tractorcade, right?

DS:

No, no.

AW:

Oh it was before?

DS:

It was '78.

AW:

It was in '78?

DS:

It was in '78. It was before the tractorcade. And it was after Jim Wright led the opposition to the flexible parity bill on the House floor. We just decided that we have to engage—we need to engage at every level, and we thought, well, it'd be good if we could get some good farm policy in the Democratic platform and the Republican platform. And so we had people involved in both parties. Everybody kind of took that home, but in Texas, it was still a very Democratic state, and most all of us were in the Democratic Party then. And so we said, "Well, seems to me like Carl King had told us that you need to elect delegates, voting delegates your different precincts."

AW:

And who's Carl King?

DS:

Carl King was from Dimmitt, and he headed Texas Corn Growers for many years and founded American Corn Growers. Him and John Ford.

AW:

Oh, so you worked with John Ford?

DS:

Yes. But Carl, he passed away a couple of years ago, but he was a longtime political involved and longtime farm leader. But anyway, so I said, "How do you do that?" And he said, "Well, there is a meeting in each precinct at a certain time, and then you elect your delegates to go to the state convention." And he said, "A lot of times, one or two, they'll just make a list and say who's going and they don't really even need a vote anymore in a lot of these places, because same ones go every year." So we all worked in our individual precincts to find out when the meeting was, and our folks showed up and all got elected as voting delegates, seven hundred and something farmers.

AW:

Out of the state convention?

DS:

Out of the state. And it was twenty-some hundred total delegates. Biggest block.

AW:

So a third of the delegates were—

DS:

AAM.

AW:

AAM, that's remarkable.

DS:

It is. It is. And it was— it just blew the state politicians all away.

AW:

Because they weren't used to dealing with that.

DS:

And of course, they was falling over theirselves for AAM's endorsement and support when they realized the political clout going on here. In '78, that's when [Charles] Stenholm was elected, [Kent] Hance was elected, Marvin Leek was elected. There was a whole new generation of Texas political folks got elected then. Ralph Hall, [Lloyd] Doggett— anyway. And AAM supported all those guys when they got elected. It was pretty amazing, being on the stage, co-chair of the state convention, being the first one I'd ever attended.

AW:

You were co-chair the first time you ever attended the convention?

DS:

I was. Bill Hobby—

AW:

Tell that story you told me.

DS:

Bill Hobby and I were up on the stage, holding hands and doing a fist-bump up in the air, you know—

AW:

Yeah, as chairman and co-chairman.

DS:

He looks over at me, Lieutenant Governor Hobby and he says, “Who the hell are you?” And I said, “I’m the guy who’s going to chair this convention when you have to leave.” But we just worked it out so up on the stage, I’d give a thumbs up if it was something we wanted to support, or a thumbs down if we opposed it, and every one of those farmers jumped up and holler, aye or nay. We passed some really good stuff.

AW:

Well, what’s the story— you mentioned the story about Jim Wright.

DS:

Yeah. Well, when they introduced him, and of course, the meeting was in Fort Worth and that was his district. And he was Majority Leader at the time— no, yeah, he may have been. I guess he was Majority Leader of the House. And anyway, our guys all booed him. And it set him back big time in his state.

AW:

Yeah, his home state, his home party, and he’s getting booed.

DS:

In his hometown. And so I get pretty well drug off the stage, said, “Mr. Wright wants to see you right now.” So went to Green Oaks Inn, west side of Fort Worth, and we had a little private meeting. We finally— Jim said, “How about if from now on, let’s see what we can do to help each other, instead of seeing what we can do to each other.” And I said, “Well, that’s fine. I want

us to work together; there's a lot of things we can do together." So we shook hands. His staff, Jim's staff was not very happy about that, but over time we became great friends and worked together well. And if he'd continued being speaker through the '90 Farm Bill, we would've had a much better farm bill. Because he was going to do some things for us in the House. So that worked out.

AW:

Well— this is jumping 'way ahead, because again, I know we've got limited time this morning. How did Farm Aid come about? Where did the idea come from?

DS:

Well, in '85— that was in the heart of the latest farm crisis. Foreclosures—

AW:

And as you said the worst crisis— Harvey Joe said that earlier this morning— worst in the late seventies.

DS:

Yes. Penny auction sales AAM'ers were involved in—

AW:

Real quickly— was some of that backlash against what the AAM had already done? I got the sense in interviewing some Oklahoma farmers that there was some— especially with the Farmers Home Administration— there was some backlash they felt was directed toward AAM members in the eighties for activities from the late seventies.

DS:

Well, I'm sure there were some individual bankers, some farm credit folks that held a grudge over some stuff that had happened—

AW:

But it wasn't a systemic thing?

DS:

But a lot of the very active AAM farmers were the most financially stressed by then. It was not the ones— I mean, we had a lot in AAM that were financially secure, but most of the ones we had rented their land, didn't own it. Those that owned it had bought it during better years—

AW:

Paid a lot for it?

DS:

—in the seventies, and then the twenty percent interest rates, they was caught in a huge squeeze. But anyway, and then we had the Parity March in '85 in Washington, about three thousand farmers came. We carried crosses with a person's name on it that had committed suicide, or somebody had lost a farm, drove them in the ground outside the USDA. Put up a circus tent on the mall, congressmen, senators, came, spoke. There was like five or six congressional hearings all going at the same time, with just AAM people testifying. Both House and Senate. So it was a big deal. But all of that raised this issue, and Willie [Nelson]— of course, going down the road in his bus to state fairs and to all across the heartland, like he always did. And John Mellencamp living in Indiana, was seeing the farm foreclosures, and Neil Young on the road, but Bob Dylan called Willie. And Bob was doing the live— yeah, I guess it was Live Aid concert to help famine in Ethiopia, I believe. But anyway, the big concert in New York, and he called Willie and said, "You know, Willie, somebody needs to do something for America's farmers, because they produce the food that we've got to have to feed the world. And how's that going to happen if we put them all out of business?" And so Willie thought about it, he said— so he thought, well, I'm going to call John Mellencamp out in Indiana, he talked to John, he talked to Neil, and said, "Well, let's just do a concert, raise some money, raise the visibility, see what we can do." And so then Willie, he called Corky Jones, who was President of AAM. He called me, said, "Can you come to a meeting in Illinois to talk about having this farm aid concert?" And I said, "Sure." There was conversation about who else would be included, and there was a lot of farm crisis groups in the different states, so there was a network beginning to develop responding to the farm crisis. And so a lot of those people were invited, but also a Farm Bureau person, they was invited to come, too. So Corky and I went for AAM, and we had a meeting. We was shocked at Neil Young. He was so smart. He asked great questions, and you better know what you talking about when you visit with him, or he'll know that you're bullshitting him, you know. And so we decided that's a great idea, so let's do it. And then Champaign, Illinois was the first big event and they raised eight or nine million, and—

AW:

And this was '85?

DS:

September '85.

AW:

What has it been like working with that group of entertainers and other people on this common cause?

DS:

It's been great. And what I saw— and of course, AAM supported whole-heartedly Farm Aid and

getting started. Corky and I have both never missed a concert since '85. We was very involved in what they should be doing and saying in the early days. Farm Aid started off initially responding to the emergency—the crisis. Farmers were committing suicide, and we realized that urban areas, the cities, had a support network for families. They had food pantries and counseling and hotlines, but rural America didn't have any of that. And so Farm Aid had to start funding and creating a support network for families. We worked closely with the Council of Churches, provided funding, money for food pantries so that they could reach out to these rural communities. Set up hotlines, counseling for suicide prevention, and there was a lot of letters. I've read a lot of them; I've talked to farmers who was contemplating suicide and said, "We thought we was in this alone. We didn't think anybody cared." And all of a sudden, here's Willie Nelson and here's eighty thousand people on their feet and said, "All of a sudden, we realized we're not in this alone." And so lives were saved. Emergency medical. A few dollars to keep the lights turned on. There's no way Farm Aid could save any farms, but those families had to survive. And so—but as time went on, Willie said, "We've got to figure out how to put people back on the land."

AW:

So it goes from, "we've got a crisis," to "how do we deal with the human side of this?" Now, looking toward the future, "how do we get young farmers back into it?" That's an interesting development.

DS:

You know, it kind of started less of the crisis reaction, but then there was help starting farmers' markets so farmers could market directly. And then there was the connection with chefs. Farm Aid would bring famous chefs in, couple them with local farmers around these concerts—

AW:

So there was part of the local food—

DS:

The Food Channel, and what have you. And then all of a sudden now, you watch the Food Channel, I don't care which of the chefs it is, "Well, this farmer out here grows these herbs for me and I buy organic this, and what have you, and buy local, you know when you can." So they're making all this wonderful food, and for the first time we are actually increasing the number of farmers, but the increase is down here, in the twenty-acre, the fifty-acre, the hundred-acre. Growing local—

AW:

Something in an urban area—

DS:

And a lot of young. A lot of young families are among farmers. California— I guess, up in the Northeast.

AW:

We're actually seeing some of that in the Panhandle. A little bit of it. Not much. But it's almost like now there's two sets of farmers: there's still the commodity farmers and the boutique farmers.

DS:

That's correct.

AW:

Is the one going to have an impact, good or bad, on the other? Or are they going to have common ground?

DS:

Well, they should have common ground. But where there is a difficulty now is the commercial, larger farmers— they plant GMO, chemicals—

AW:

And the boutique farmers are adamantly opposed to GMOs, right?

DS:

They're organic.

AW:

Right.

DS:

And the interesting thing is: consumers do in fact make the ultimate decision. And when Cheerios—

AW:

Friday—

DS:

Yup. Just started making—

AW:

Two days ago.

DS:

— organic Cheerios, non-GMO Cheerios— see, that's where the chemical companies and the fertilizer companies and all— they kind of stoked this anti-boutique farming stuff through their dinners and meetings because it cuts into their business.

AW:

Sure.

DS:

But it should be looked at as they both can get along. They both have a similar interest in protecting the land and feeding the world.

AW:

Yeah. Harvey Joe and I were talking about this earlier— there are not enough boutique farmers or places where you could have a boutique farm to feed America, much less the world at large.

DS:

That's exactly right.

AW:

You've still got to have big stretches of land to generate lots of soybeans and wheat, right?

DS:

Absolutely. You do. But there's— but there's a place. But Farm Aid, the educational value that they provide now around each concert, it's almost like a Farm Aid week, where they go to schools, have programs in elementary schools, and then they have what's called the "farm yard." A big— it's like a county fair. They'll have demonstrations where kids can see how you milk a cow, make cheese, they can actually get a cup and plant a seed there to take home with them, the little kids. They have videos, they have— just all kinds of exhibits, what have you, working with whatever state they're in. And so it is a real— plus, you know, they sell out a concert in a few hours when tickets go on sale, and that's their main fundraiser where they grant out money. They just granted out five hundred and something thousand just within the last thirty days to groups, organizations all over the country. It's all in the web; it's all public information. Willie has signed every single check since Farm Aid was founded himself.

AW:

If we've got time— and there's a lot more to talk about in this— if you've got time right now for

the persons listening to this long time from now. It's just a little bit after eleven. We won't stay too much longer.

DS:

No, I was just seeing what time it is.

AW:

You were talking—you gave a great report yesterday about the Farm Bill. You used the phrase “permanent law.” What does that mean?

DS:

Permanent law is a combination of the 1938 act Farm Law that was passed under the Roosevelt Administration that established basic conservation programs because the Dust Bowl was fresh on everybody's mind. It also established programs so that you could control production so that you could make sure farmers got a fair, livable price for their products, and then the '49 act updated that and added some other commodities. So the permanent law is a combination of those. Every farm bill that we've had since 1949 is an amendment to the '38 and '49 act. Now, permanent law does not have any program for soybeans because we didn't grow them then, prior. But it has the framework for conservation spending, it has the framework for operation of CRP, it has a dairy program, it has wheat, cotton, rice, peanuts, all of those commodities in it. So that's what permanent law is. And without that, you could have every single year when Congress appropriates money to fund a program, you could have a different program.

AW:

Yeah. And after that each—

DS:

— that's stability.

AW:

— each grow— each production group would have to fend for themselves. So it'd be the zero-sum game of milk people fighting the cattle people fighting the bean people fighting the—

DS:

Correct, correct.

AW:

Without that framework, that overarching framework.

DS:

Correct.

AW:

All right, well— I think— I know you've got a drive and so have I, and we've got a lot more things I'd like to cover. So if it's all right, I'll say thanks and we'll talk about—

DS:

Absolutely.

AW:

Next time, all right?

DS:

I will figure out a time— either I'll see you somewhere else, or I'll figure out how to get out to Lubbock.

AW:

Well I— it's not impossible for me to get to D.C if I can marshal enough things to do in one spot to make it worth the university saying, "Okay, spend that money." I'm pretty conscious that we don't have a— as you well know— no unlimited budgets, public service—

DS:

Well you know, they have— Texas Tech— they have some kind of event in D.C. each year where the department heads all come up and—

AW:

Right. They're schmoozing politicians— they're not too interested in having to drag me along to—

DS:

No, but I was wondering if— if the university— we could do our deal but then you could maybe attend that reception they have for all their alumni and everything up there.

AW:

Yeah, that might be something. The other thing would be if we had a chance to sit down wherever we could find with some of the Farm Aid people. The logical one is Willie because he lives in Texas, but it really doesn't matter if we can find— and I understand there's an administration now of Farm Aid that's separate and apart from the—it's not Willie sitting down and doing the work, he's got a staff—

DS:

Yes.

AW:

Yeah.

DS:

And Carolyn Mugar, she's a wonderful lady who has been executive director since it was founded.

AW:

Yeah, I'd love to visit— where does she live? Where does she operate out of?

DS:

Cambridge, Massachusetts.

AW:

Massachusetts, okay. She would be a great one to talk to, too. It doesn't just have to be the stars.

DS:

Well, she knows from day one, and she knows the— she knows the AAM connection with Farm Aid's starting, and her and I are very close. We could work that out, and it might be possible to work it out sometime— to spend some time with Willie.

AW:

Yeah, well, of course that makes— and we all know for the same reason that it's important to have Willie sing in Farm Aid, in an archive, if you have an interview with Willie, people are going to say, "Oh!" Whereas if you mention Caroline's name, they go, "Who?" And so there's a— it helps to get the word out about the—the validity of the archival process. It would be good, and plus— it is interesting that the stimulus for it came from the performers, from those people. I don't think very many people outside would know that. They would think quite the opposite.

DS:

And also, to my knowledge, there is not— this is the longest continually-operating charitable operation in the country. I'm talking about like this because usually, the issues come and go each year. And whether it's Live Aid or whatever the different things are, but— you know.

AW:

Yeah, when was the last time "We Are The Children" concert?

DS:

1985— twenty-nine years, and every one of those entertainers and— it's just amazing to look at the list that has appeared through the years. Lot of them are already gone, like Ray Price and Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash. Bunch of those. But they pay all their expenses. They pay their band's room. In other words, they don't get paid to do any of this. They volunteer that time to this cause, and that's pretty amazing.

AW:

That's pretty amazing. And not all charity benefits are—in most cases in the charity business, let me put it this way—the entertainers or performers make some money from it at least to pay their bands, truck drivers and such.

DS:

And I think, if I'm correct— the last time I looked or asked, it was like 85 or 87 percent of what was raised is granted out.

AW:

That may be one of the best records in the country—

DS:

It is. It is. Whatever that top rating is for foundations, Farm Aid is in that tier.

AW:

That's pretty remarkable.

DS:

It is.

AW:

Yeah. Well—is this a good place to put a cork in it?

DS:

I think so.

AW:

Or a fork in it? Whichever one we—

DS:

Either one. (laughs) We put a cork in it last night.

AW:

I put it in early, you still haven't gotten your cork out yet. All right, thank you David, I really appreciate— it's been an enjoyable day and a half.

DS:

Okay.

End of interview.



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