

**Oral History Interview of
Harvey Joe Sanner**

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

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

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library**

15th and Detroit | 806.742.3749 | <http://swco.ttu.edu>

Copyright and Usage Information:

An oral history release form was signed by Harvey Joe Sanner on January 5, 2014. This transfers all rights of this interview to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.

This oral history transcript is protected by U.S. copyright law. By viewing this document, the researcher agrees to abide by the fair use standards of U.S. Copyright Law (1976) and its amendments. This interview may be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes only. Any reproduction or transmission of this protected item beyond fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the Southwest Collection. Please contact Southwest Collection Reference staff for further information.

Preferred Citation for this Document:

Sanner, Harvey Joe Oral History Interview, January 5, 2014. Interview by Andy Wilkinson, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses almost 6000 oral history interviews dating back to the late 1940s. The historians who conduct these interviews seek to uncover the personal narratives of individuals living on the South Plains and beyond. These interviews should be considered a primary source document that does not implicate the final verified narrative of any event. These are recollections dependent upon an individual's memory and experiences. The views expressed in these interviews are those only of the people speaking and do not reflect the views of the Southwest Collection or Texas Tech University.

Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

Consult the Southwest Collection website for more information.

<http://swco.ttu.edu/Reference/policies.php>

Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: N/A

Audio Metadata: 44.1k/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Elissa Stroman

Editor(s): Leah Blackwell

Final Editor: Andy Wilkinson

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 Harvey Joe Sanner, Arkansas farmer and activist in the American Agriculture Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s. Mr. Sanner discusses the Farm Crisis, the birth of the American Agriculture Movement and its changes as an organization over the years.

Length of Interview: 01:23:18

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Basic Introductions	5	00:00:00
Farming in Arkansas	8	00:05:00
The Farm Crisis and the 1977 Farm Act	11	00:11:35
<i>Structure of Agriculture</i> Report	15	00:21:50
The Birth of AAM	20	00:35:00
Five Basic Commodities of Agriculture	23	00:45:20
How AAM Changed	26	00:50:50
“21 st Century Commission on Production Agriculture”	30	01:01:35
How AAM Changed Harvey Joe Sanner	32	01:07:40
Current Politics	35	01:14:49

Keywords

AAM, Arkansas agriculture, politics, The Farm Crisis

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

There's what we need to do. Sometimes buttons get pushed the wrong direction. This is Andy Wilkinson. It's the fifth of January. Now Harvey, do you go by Harvey Joe?

Harvey Joe Sanner (HJS):

Havey Joe is what everyone calls me.

AW:

Sanner?

HJS:

Sanner.

AW and HJS:

S-a-n-n-e-r.

AW:

And we are at the beautiful airport Wyndham Hotel in Oklahoma City after a weekend of American Ag Movement reunion and conference. I guess it's kind of an all-in-one convention. You've been doing this a lot of years. Haven't you?

HJS:

Since 1977. That's when the movement got started in Colorado. In Arkansas, that winter, opened up what everyone called or referred to as a strike office. And it happened all over our state, I guess most other states. We rented an old abandoned service station, put in a phone line and a coffee pot, and farmers started meeting and gathering and it went from there. We had them practically in every town of any size in Arkansas—Delta anyway, had an office. Do you just want me to just kind of give my view of what happened and why?

AW:

Let me get a little bit of stuff before that. Just so I don't forget to do it. What's your date of birth?

HJS:

Third, thirty-first, forty-three. Nineteen forty-three.

AW:

March 31, 1943.

HJS:

I'm seventy. I was born in Des Arc, Arkansas.

AW:

Spell Des Arc.

HJS:

It's two different words. D-e-s A-r-c. It's about sixty miles east of Little Rock and about ninety miles west of Memphis.

AW:

And since you still live there, I'm going to assume that you grew up there.

HJS:

I did. Yeah. I'm living within a mile of where I was born. Been there my whole life. Other than a jaunt to California after high school and up to Michigan worked in a factory some, and then back home. I've been there ever since. Since '63.

AW:

What did your folks do?

HJS:

Farmed. My dad was a farmer, my grandfather was a farmer. I'm not sure about generations before that.

AW:

But at least two generations back did farming?

HJS:

Yes.

AW:

Did you spend time in the military?

HJS:

No, never did go to the military.

AW:

What about college?

HJS:

No, graduated high school.

AW:

And you mentioned California.

HJS:

I went out after I got out of high school in '61. In that fall, I went to California and worked in a broom factory of all places. Looked for a job about six weeks, walked every day looking for a job and finally found one. Worked for a handy man did odds and ends to live. Worked out there in a broom factory for about seven months, got homesick, came back. Went up to Michigan, went to work. I ran a fork lift in a factory up there and then worked on a blueberry farm during the day. I had two jobs. And so then after I came back home and got on cotton picker, my daddy wanted me to come home and run them. He had two one-row cotton pickers, one on a H and a M Farmall. And he wanted me to come back and drive a picker that fall. And I did—

AW:

And they picked one row?

HJS:

One row at a time. Now they pick six. I guess—I don't know if you'd call it an epiphany or what it was, but I was picking cotton one day and was making a good cotton crop, it was a beautiful fall day, and it just came to me, This is where you want to be. And I never have strayed since. I was comfortable. Now a lot of people spend a lot of time wanting to go here and not knowing what their career choices were going to be. And I decided, of course at that time, I didn't have a whole lot of obligations. And Daddy was footing the bills, and I was able to hunt and fish. And so it seemed like a good choice. And I went into business on my own in 1967. Got a FHA loan. I'd already been working with him and bought one tractor. I bought another tractor and rented about four hundred acres of land.

AW:

When you say you went into business for your own, you mean farming business?

HJS:

Yes, farming business. And I farmed until '93. Then turned it over to my son then and I've been full time doing political work and some work for different civic groups.

AW:

You know when you were in California and in the broom factory that kind of connected you to the Colorado American ag people. Broom Corn was a huge thing around Campo and Springfield.

HJS:

Yeah. When I got to California, I had never heard of Broomcorn. And I didn't know what Broomcorn was until I found that job in that broom factory out there. I never had seen it grown; didn't even know what it was.

AW:

Well then, well before we get to the AAM and farm crisis—what kind of farming were you doing? What were your crops, and what sort of operation did you have?

HJS:

Daddy had a small operation at that time. At that time, two or three hundred acre farm was a big farm. We're talking about the early 1960s. And it was cotton and soybeans. Cotton was the primary crop, not acreage wise, but cotton was the money crop. And people over a period of a few years, say ten years in my particular area, you'd go to a landlord and rent a farm. You'd want to know how many acres of beans am I going to have to plant to get this cotton. Ten years later, how much cotton am I going to have to farm to get the soybeans. Because soybeans finally got to be worth something, especially in '73. And cotton got more difficult to grow. We went through a period of a several cold wet springs, wet falls, and cotton pretty-well left our area.

AW:

Now you are far enough north—there is some issue with the growing season, is there not?

HJS:

Not really. They've had cotton plumb up in the Bootheel of Missouri, which is 150 miles north of me.

AW:

'Cause your elevation is not that high.

HJS:

Right. We are kind in a delta on the White River where I grew up—White River bottom, which is a tributary of the Arkansas, Arkansas and of course and then the Mississippi. Our seasons were cold and wet. Our soil was really heavier. It was better suited to rice and soybean production than it was cotton production. You'd find little sandy ridges around bayous and slews would make good cotton and the heavier soil you'd go to soybean, corn, or some other crop. So we did some double cropping back then. Grew wheat, have a wheat crop and then plant soybeans when you'd harvest the wheat.

AW:

So you were not planting winter wheat?

HJS:

Yes.

AW:

Oh you were?

HJS:

Yes. Winter wheat, but we'd go in and harvest it. Back then, the varieties, before they changed much, it would be mid-June.

AW:

And you'd cut the wheat?

HJS:

Cut the wheat and plant soybeans.

AW:

And the soybeans. You'd harvest in—

HJS:

October. November. Normally you'd have a reduced yield normally on double-cropping like that. 'Cause you'd be a little later than you should be. But if you got some decent rain fall, you could make a pretty good soybean crop behind wheat. And some of the guys that later on started doing more irrigation in that area, they could irrigate those lake beans and make a good wheat crop and a good soybean crop.

AW:

Now was yours irrigated?

HJS:

No, not at that time. No, later on I started growing rice in 1979. And of course that was irrigated. And we were just getting into more soybean irrigation back then. And now, practically the biggest part of it now is irrigated.

AW:

Is it irrigated from wells or from the river?

HJS:

Both. If you are fortunate enough to live on a bayou or river where you can pump water, it's much cheaper than pulling it out of the ground. In some areas of Arkansas, not where I am

because I'm close to the river. But some areas, we're really having some aquifer depletion problems. And there's some major pumping stations under construction now to take water out of the White River and out of the Arkansas River and irrigate a bunch of farm land. Because they're having the same problem as West Texas and Nebraska and us about an aquifer being depleted. But right in my particular area, we don't have that much water aquifer. We get a recharge from the river. And water, as far as availability, it's not an issue where I live. Not an issue like it is twenty miles away, in some of what they call the "grand prairie" where it's rice production, heavy rice production that's been going on for 100 years. And that's aquifer is steadily being depleted. So there's a move underway to replenish it or halt it, stop it from going any further. Because now they're putting wells—you know the first aquifer that was irrigated was the alluvial, and the one below that was the sparta. And that's where our potable water comes from, our drinking water.

AW:

How deep is that aquifer?

HJS:

They're going down now well over one thousand feet into the sparta. I don't know just where the sparta ends, probably within a couple hundred feet I'm guessing you start getting down into what you call the sparta.

AW:

But people are drilling a thousand feet to get—

HJS:

Yes. And wells now in the same area where a well twenty years ago would cost ten or fifteen thousand dollars, they're spending over one hundred thousand dollars now to put down a well.

AW:

I would guess, drawing a parallel to where I live in West Texas, that sparta aquifer is probably not a rechargeable aquifer.

HJS:

That's what they say. Once it's depleted and the weight of the earth is all on it, it collapses, and the formation changes and it's hard to recover. It doesn't replenish itself once it's been depleted. And that's the big concern down there. But budget problems for one thing, especially with the attitude in Washington now against earmarks, congressional ads they call them, to fund those kinds of projects, it's been near impossible to get funding for these two major projects that's going on in Arkansas. But as part of that project, there's a tremendous amount of on-farm storage that's been constructed. I mean reservoirs, to hold water. And practically every farm that

irrigates now has got what's called a Tailwater Recovery System. Once you run the water through the field for irrigate or flood irrigate, you pick it up and use it again.

AW:

That's especially important in rice where you use lots of—but you probably don't do that with cotton or beans?

HJS:

Well, all of it.

AW:

So you can recover water even from that? Wow.

HJS:

Yes. When it goes out and runs in a ditch, they've got a relay set up there, hooked to a piece of underground pipe that may carry it back over here a half-mile and put it back top of the field again. One old boy I was telling someone earlier this morning, the first tailwater recovery system I ever saw around home, a guy told me he used his irrigation water so many times it wasn't wet anymore.

AW:

You've got another advantage over there. You've got gravity. You know out in the plains, we don't have it. It's all flat. (both laugh) Well now, without me putting words in your mouth, I'm guessing that the farm crisis that propelled you into an activist role outside of running a six-row stripper was not precipitated by Mother Nature.

HJS:

No, it was precipitated by price on farm policy that looked like it was destined to drive prices lower, pulling more support away from agriculture. Lowering loan rates, target prices, whatever—

AW:

Walk us through, with dates, the crisis.

HJS:

Well in '77, there was a new farm bill being enacted called the '77 Farm Act, just as Jimmy Carter came to town. And it was going to take away quite a bit of the safety net. And that's the way we've always described what farm program we've had, as a safety net. It was a combination of support rates—you know where you'd harvest a crop and put it in your bin or cotton and you'd go get a loan, what's called a loan—CCC [Commodity Credit Corporation] loan and take

the money and pay your bills with it. Then when you could market that crop through the next year and pay that loan back to the government. And we had something called deficiency payments. If prices fell below a certain stage, below this target price, a farmer would qualify for deficiency payments to help make up the difference. Well the '77 Farm Bill was going to reduce that level of support. And about that time, inflation, it was a combination of that and inflation. Prices were going up on equipment and everything else rapidly.

AW:

Yeah, America, and the world, was undergoing a really big burst of inflation at that time.

HJS:

In 1973 was the so-called "world food shortage." And we had the embargo later on against Russia.

AW:

And the Arabs embargoed us on oil.

HJS:

Yes. A whole combination of those things, and it just scarred the devil out of people. Some parts of agriculture were doing fairly well at that time. But the movement got started in Colorado—wheat guys and all. And a lot of people could kind of see the writing on the wall. Hey with these prices going up, tractor, production price going up like they are, and support coming away from it. We're headed for a crisis.

AW:

So you could see that from where you in Arkansas. How did you hear about what people were doing in Colorado?

HJS:

Just word of mouth and news articles. And what I saw that year, I had a small cotton crop, probably less than one hundred acres. And I made a bale maker which at that time was a fair yield but I lost money on it. So you could see, Hey it's not just enough like the economists were telling, to grow a good crop and be more efficient. You could still grow a good crop and wind up losing money. And with the production costs going, things got kind of crazy after '73, when the markets did what they did. I bought a brand new tractor in 1973 and '74 I was chisel plowing at night and I heard President Nixon on the radio in that tractor cab put the price controls on. And he referred to soybeans as fourteen dollars a bushel. Well they never were that high for farmers, they did run up twelve dollars on the market, but most farmers took a lot less than that. The next day those soybeans started back down and the bottom fell out of them. So you had all those factors coming together, with this new farm bill coming in. and with that inflation factor and the

fuel costs went through the roof. It was a combination of things, and I think people were scared, speakers started coming. We had some guys, Alvin Jenkins and others come from Colorado to Little Rock, Arkansas, and hold some meetings. And they said, If this combine costs you ten thousand last year, and this year it's twenty thousand, next year it's going to be forty thousand. And if we continue, in five years you're going to be paying a hundred thousand dollars for a combine and you're going to be selling wheat or soybeans for less money than you are now. And here are reports out of USDA projecting for the next ten years that prices were actually going to trend lower. So I think it scared the devil out of everybody.

AW:

Yeah, which is the essential problem for farmers is they're caught in the middle squeeze—prices they have no control over and production costs either.

HJS:

We are selling into a market that you have very little impact on, even cooperatively, if you form co-ops. You can have very little impact on that market, and you're buying from a market that you can have very little impact on too to hold your costs down. So you're caught in that situation. We're price takers, not price makers. And just a combination of those things. I think the movement here, at that time, the majority of the Arkansas farmers were maybe not in as dire straits. They [weren't] as dire as they became later. The mid-eighties—we had a farm crisis in the eighties that took more people off the land, family farmers off the land, than we'd lost since the Great Depression. Ironically, in the eighties, in the so-called farm crisis, and it was a crisis, we spent more money, the federal government did, on farm programs than they'd ever spent in the history of the nation in an effort to shore up the shortfall. But it wasn't enough. Ironically, you spend more money on a farm bill and still have more people go broke. That leaves some to say, There is no answer to this problem. Hell, just let them go broke. And there was an attitude in D.C. at that time in something called the Young Executive's Committee Report. All the young executives in USDA wrote a report, you've probably read of it. It recommended reducing farm numbers down, and they thought there were too many people still on farms. That was a labor resource that could be better used in the cities and the manufacturing industry and other areas. So part of it, I think, was by design. There was a certain group of thinking in Washington that we were providing too much support to agriculture, and of course everybody likes to talk about the free market and they thought we need to get back more of a free market concept and less price support. Because—

AW:

Just for a bit of overview, before we get into the particulars of the AAM, it's my understanding in the big overall picture that supports and government intervention into what would otherwise be a completely free market is geared towards the consumer. And by that, part of that is shoring

up things to keep consumer prices down, for instance milk. And we look at totalitarian regimes, they heavily subsidize daily commodities like bread and so forth.

HJS:

Cheap food policy, what we all refer to it. Keep food costs down as much as you can.

AW:

But that's only the short term part. The long term part is you keep food on the table. And so if you have a perfectly free market, it is perfectly likely that you might not have any food until the next year. And people say, Gosh we got to get back into farming. And the whole issue of support is we don't want to have a year where we are waiting for people to go back to farming. Right?

HJS:

I think that's why they call it the ASCS at that time, which is now the FSA. Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service. Stabilize the price, stabilize the rural economy where people can live through those periods of down time and drouth and floods and all the other thing. Have a conservation effort to conserve soil for later generations. And that's what it was designed to do. And you could argue with the effects of that—how effective it was. We always argued that the safety net, the problem was that it was just not strong enough.

AW:

Right. Not safe enough.

HJS:

It wasn't safe enough. It was too close to the floor. By the time you needed that safety net, you [were] already broke or bruised up or whatever. But without it—I will say this though, Andy. The farm situation would have been a whole lot worse. I know about how many dollars came into those rural counties and farm counties back during the years, and it was a lifesaver for a lot of people. What programs we had. But the people that thought you could just do away with farm program, I think, were very naïve. Now, after the movement, and again I think it was fear of what was coming, being able to see what was taken place and projecting out like some people were doing scared people. But one thing, I don't know if we were a little too early in this conversation, but what happened that some people may not know about. When we first went to Washington and raised Cain and protested the first year. After we went back on the tractors, most of the people that year I'd say, most the thinkers at USDA and the White House said, Oh hell, that's just a bunch of farmers—

AW:

And this would have been '77?

HJS:

Seventy-seven. Seventy-eight when we went to Washington first time, Spring of '78 with a few tractors and a lot of farmers. The next year we went back with the Tractorcade and '79 with the tractorcade, there was some people in the White House—in the Carter administration, and Bob Bergland was the secretary who got off on a bad foot when we showed up there. He said, “You know they said maybe we better take a look at this thing. What is taking place out here.”

AW:

Which is kind of a surprise in that Carter was a farmer. Or at least that's how he was portrayed.

HJS:

I think he was more of a peanut warehouseman than he was a farmer. I'm not sure.

AW:

Yeah but he was portrayed to the rest of us as a peanut farmer from Georgia.

HJS:

Yes, yes that's how he was portrayed. We were disappointed, but I guess the point I wanted to make—something happened in that administration that caused them to launch a series of hearings called *The Structure of Agriculture*. What is changing is there's something changing in the basic structure. Are too many people leaving the land too quickly? Are we likely to face shortages down the road? What structure do we want? Do we want a family farm system? Should we support a family farm system? Or should we just let market forces take control and if it goes to a corporate system, our insurance companies, our trust funds own all the land and all the farmers become tenants? What is the structure of agriculture to be? And they commissioned a study and held hearings. I went to the one in Sedalia, Missouri. You'd have to hunt in the archives now to find a copy. There's not many of those reports around.

AW:

Really? And what's the name of the report?

HJS:

Structure. *The Structure of Agriculture*. Bob Bergland, USDA commissioned it through the White House to take an overall look and see what's going on. I've got--

AW:

And this would date from about 1980?

HJS:

Yes. After the Tractorcade.

AW:

And why is it hard to find?

HJS:

I think they've all been done away with. I had a friend try to find some a few years ago. I've got one copy somewhere in my files, and I keep it because my picture is in it—sitting in the audience up at Sedalia, Missouri. And our friend and my foreign policy mentor Jim DuPree testified on our behalf on the AAM of Arkansas at this hearing in Sedalia, Missouri about what was happening. It was called the *Structures* Hearing. My point is, as much as we dislike Jimmy Carter and Bob Bergland and their farm bill, what became their farm bill at the time. At least they were willing to take a look and see what might be happening out there. And I commend them for that. When the Reagan administration came in, my friend DuPree went to Washington. The Senate Ag Committee had a hearing when this *Structures* report was compiled. And Dick Lyng was the transitional guy, the ag guy, who later became Secretary for Ronald Reagan. And that administration said, That is not an issue we want to deal with. That's an issue that's best left to the market forces, and whatever the structure of agriculture is to be in the future, it ought to be a force—a market situation that determined that. In other words, they [threw] it in the trash. They didn't take any of the recommendations to see about the loss farm numbers that are concentrated in land ownership. That was something they didn't think they should be concerned with. And I'm not being critical of them. They said it themselves. This is an issue left up to market forces—better left to market forces.

AW:

That was the Reagan Administration.

HJS:

Hands off.

AW:

Anyway. I mean that's the way they looked at everything else.

HJS:

Well basically, yeah. But looking back now, I wish I had been a little more understanding of it. 'Cause at that time, people at that time—farmers, were basically just mad. They didn't think the government was looking at them, we were so dang naïve. So naïve, nobody understood about the political process. We were just angry and upset and they were the people in authority, so that's who you [were] angry and upset about. But in defense of them, in retrospect, at least they said, We need to take a look at this.

AW:

We're talking about--

HJS:

Carter. The Carter Administration.

AW:

Because everyone was mad at Carter because he didn't treat them right, especially during the tractorcade. Just before we get too much into the details on AAM, one little personal question. What drove Harvey Joe to be an activist? Is it something about your personality? Or was it—?

HJS:

No. I had never been involved. I voted, and that was about it. I've never been involved in a political campaign or a political party. I think it was that fear and concern for my farming operation and my family and what was going to happen to us if somebody didn't do something. And I started feeling an obligation to take part and I still feel it today and I feel that's one of the biggest problems [that] production agriculture had. We just didn't take care of our political business; we should have had more political participation. And sadly, the majority of the farmers that I knew back in the early days of AAM—they wanted to blame government. We should have been looking to ourselves more. We should have been up there, saying, Hey look! And we did. When we finally did go, it had already got kind of late in the game. And so in retrospect, I blame most of the problems that we suffered on our lack of political involvement as producers. Production agriculture is an entirely different animal than agri-business and agriculture overall. And the production sector was the one I was concerned about.

But I don't know though. I think it was just the fear and concern. I don't want to think it was my ego that made me want to start writing articles, letters up to the editor. And they elected me chairman of our local group, and I helped organized about thirty farmers, went to Washington when nobody had ever went. We talked about, we started meeting, Well hell, we ought to just go to Washington. Well nobody had ever heard of such a thing. Farmers down there, going to Washington? And we got up there, and I remember somebody—a woman in one of our meetings said, "How many Senators does Arkansas have?" (AW laughs) Hell, we didn't know the difference in a Representative and a Senator. We didn't know. The White House? Is that where they make all the rules and do all the laws? We were just dumber than dumb, as Otis Chapman said. We was so ignorant, we didn't know we were ignorant. And he said, "That's pretty ignorant."

I guess my role seemed to go from, starting to do it, starting to try to have a voice. And we did see some improvements for a lot of farmers. There was some FHA money freed up that helped some of those in worse shape. Some of them, many of them, went out of business later. But it helped some survive. And there were some loan rates, maybe some target price increase, some things done to make things better. And then along comes 1980 and it really did get bad in the

mid-eighties. But that *Structures* report got almost no consideration from the Reagan Administration. And I've spoken with, Andy, every Secretary of Agriculture that's been in Washington I guess, personally. And had some private talks with several of them. And later on, I didn't see Mr. Bergland until later on after he was no longer Secretary. But John Block, Clayton Yeutter, Dick Lyng, the lady Veneman from California, Ed Madigan for a while. I've talked to every one of them trying to understand. Every opportunity I had when I was in Washington to attend an AAM delegates meeting, I was on the phone trying to find me somebody I could talk to, to help me understand just what's going on here. And I got a pretty rude awakening a time or two from some of the secretaries. Mr. Lyng was one of them who told me. Dick Lyng—basically getting rid of these farm programs was one of the ideas. Getting rid of that safety net. Getting rid of the rice program. I asked him, standing in the hall at the USDA about—we were very critical of Japan and their protecting their rice farmers because they had seen famine after World War II. That's still a political issue today. I was going to Japan. I wound up in Japan later in '87. I remember standing in that hall and asking Mr. Lyng about it. And Yeutter later, about, Well if we get rid of the forced Japan farmer to give up their support programs that are helping them, aren't we going to be forced to give up ours? And Dick Lyng said, "Of course. That's the whole idea. Get rid of all of them." And so I learned—I got very disappointed in all the ag economists. They don't call it a dismal science for nothing, you know. (AW laughs) They had the attitude, and I think mistakenly, and I'm not educated and certainly not an economist. They couldn't seem to grasp why farmers would not do what was in their own best interest.

Do you need to change—?

AW:

No, no, I was just looking at the battery level.

HJS:

They had this attitude that if it's not in your best interest, you won't do it. Well that's not true, and I remember having this conversation with Dick Lyng. That if prices go down, farmers will go out of business and then prices will come back up, and somebody will produce it. It'll get produced. And he told me one day, out of his own mouth too, they didn't care who produced it. If was foreign governments, if it was oil companies or insurance companies. We want it—talking about food and fiber—We want it produced as cheaply as we can get it, and basically we don't care who produces it. And that was it. There wasn't any, You don't do anything to this wonderful mystic market that might interfere with the market forces. That's wrong you know.

AW:

Of course if farmers acted in their own best interest, not very many of those people would have been in office, right? (laughs)

HJS:

Right. And what I told Mr. Lyng. He said, you know if prices fall down, I remember this conversation vividly, standing outside his office in the hall, nobody else around but he and I down in USDA one day. And I said, Mr. Lyng, "If soybean prices fall to three dollars per bushel, which was well below cost of production." I said, "I would still produce them. I have got to have a production loan to feed my family, and make my equipment payments out of this production loan. And I'll plant that crop, even when it's below the cost of production—prices are—in hopes that by fall, prices will recover. And if they are below, I'll do it. You can't just stop and start a farming operation at the flick of a switch. I've already got the combine, I've already got the equipment—"

AW:

You owe money on that—

HJS:

You don't have any choice.

AW:

And plus you don't quit farming one day and go out to be a CPA the next.

HJS:

That's right. But you know what he told me. I said, "I'd plant soybeans if they were three dollars a bushel, if I was planting them and going to lose money." But he said, "But you wouldn't do that two or three years, would you?" I said, "No, I'd be pushed out of business."

AW:

And that was his answer?

HJS:

Yeah. That was his response, "But you won't do it for long." But the point is, I will do it as long as I can or else I have to uproot my family and move to town and hunt for a job that is probably non-existent. So people do, do things that are not in their economic best interest. You don't go buy a hundred thousand dollar rice combine and rice prices go down and go sell that combine. Next year, maybe you might need to be back in the rice business. I said, "You got long term investments like irrigation projects, land improvement, land leveling, all that going on. You just don't jump out and jump back in." It's different than other industries, and most people don't understand it.

AW:

And actually, I don't think it is. I think the difference is in the political point of view about long term versus short term. Because if look back at the eighties and saw deregulation of telephone, deregulation of insurance, we saw deregulation of banks, savings and loans, and all of those regulations that were done away with were regulations that you so well described it, were aimed at stability, to try to dampen the boom-bust cycle. Construction people build because they are builders, and they will build until somebody—

HJS:

They can't build anymore. Yeah.

AW:

Won't let them build anymore. Which is why you have lots of open space for a while, and then you don't have any space and so on. So walk us through, and somebody listening to you a hundred years from now—how did the AAM develop, and what was your role in it?

HJS:

It was kind of like a wildfire. A few guys in Colorado started discussing, I'm told, they were discussing in a service station or a little roadside café, and some truck driver said he was about sick of hearing them wine and gripe. Why don't you get up and do something? And they started having meetings, and I think again fear and unrest of what the future might be fixing to bring, and what some people—economists, were already predicting that was going to bring that you were going to see ever lower prices out there, and it just mushroomed. All of a sudden we started hearing reports of, [there was] going to be a strike, farmers are going to go on strike, it sounded crazy to everybody. Well, hell I've been striking ever since I got through combining, and a lot of people kind of scoffed at the idea. But they were called strike offices, and by December the fourteenth if we don't have something done, we're going to shut down—

AW:

And that's 1977?

HJS:

Seventy-seven. We're not going to plant. We're not going to plant next year. And there was efforts underway, so another thing that makes a strike like that almost impossible. The valleys of Texas and California, they're already planting while it's still winter over here. The different crop mixes, and also what's good for the grain farmer is not always good for the cattleman or poultry man and other people. So you've got all those complexities.

AW:

And plus farmers are not—

HJS:

By nature strike people.

AW:

And not by nature organized people.

HJS:

Right, right. Independence. They like to think they are independent, you know, and not to be dependent on anybody. But our local people, some farmers started talking. We had some guy to come to town to talk about it. He had been to a meeting out west, or had a brother-in-law who had been to a meeting. We didn't have cell phones back then, and said, We ought to get a meeting here in Des Art and talk about what's going on. So we held a couple of meetings, decided we would rent an old service station building. We put us a phone line in it and a coffee pot, started having people drop by, and pitching a few dollars in a pot. And that's when we—we didn't have fax machines, what did we have? Some kind of old Telex communication.

AW:

Joyce Jobjen called it a QUIP machine.

HJS:

Something like that. Yeah. I guess the forerunner to the fax. So we started getting information from some people in Washington and other places, and we decided in the Spring of '78 that we'd just go to Washington when all the rest of the farmers went. And they carried a few tractors up there, and we had thousands. The number I saw was estimated fifty to sixty thousand. And one day I woke up, I had never flown on an airplane before. Most of these folks—thirty people that went to Washington—we flew. None of them had been to Washington; some of them had barely been out of Arkansas, and they ranged in age from seventy down to nineteen or twenty. And we got on an airplane and got up there and got our hotel. The next day, I'm looking around and I'm in the middle of sixty thousand people walking down Pennsylvania Avenue to a big protest at the nation's Capitol and the guy's giving speeches from the nation's Capitol. And it was just like a sea of farmers, almost all of them had caps on. And it was an emotional time; I climbed up on a lamp post, ten foot above the crowd so that I could look back. I remember at some point there. And we had a prayer, and all these people around the Capitol, what would be the west end—the northwest side of the Capitol. And that street was just a mob, thousands and thousands of people. And when they had that prayer, right as the silence fell, a rooster crowed. Somebody surely brought—some of them farmers. They turned goats loose and all that stuff. And that old rooster crowed, and it made the hair of your neck stand up here. Country had come to town. Farmers had come to town basically. And I looked back at the time, and I wish we all could have been a little more understanding and patient, and maybe looked at ourselves a little more, but we were angry and upset, and the resentment of the government was very heavy in AAM at that time.

AW:

Well now, excuse me just a second. Two questions, one is: did you call yourselves AAM at the time?

HJS:

Yes. AAM of Arkansas, AAM of Tennessee and so forth.

AW:

When you said it was emotional, what does that mean? How did it make you feel to be part of sixty thousand people walking?

HJS:

It made me feel insignificant, but it kind of made me feel proud that I was there trying to do something instead of sitting home whining. And it was a mixture of emotions for me, wondering, god, what am I doing here? How are we ever going to get anything done? And I think we wasted a lot of time focusing on issues that really things we shouldn't have been focused on.

AW:

Like?

HJS:

Federal reserve, the tri-lateral commission—blaming everybody else in the world. We couldn't even get our own industry—soybean farmers together couldn't come together and agree on where loan rates are to be, or production. Whether we ought to have production controls or not. And here we were, thinking that John Rockefeller was orchestrating all this stuff and going to driving us out of business because they wanted our land and wanted to control food. All of that was a waste of time. I wish we had known and could have gotten to the meat of the matter, and did what the White House people and Mr. Bergland did later. Start talking about the real issue: what is the structure of agriculture to be in the future, and does the family farmer have a place in it? Is it considered the best option for the chief production unit of food and fiber in this country, and I always think it is, and I've always maintained every dollar that went into farm programs was well invested. That the American people, the consumers, have benefited, been subsidized more than the farmers and also main street rural America. That's where the dollars, so-called subsidies that a lot of people resent going to farmers, that's where they get spent. They don't go to Swiss bank accounts. They get spent at the welding shop, the parts store, John Deere dealer, ag flying services. It's part of the rural economy, and when you start cutting back on that, you're not just punishing a farmer because you don't think he should get that money. The numbers we used to see, anytime you had three farmers go out of business, you would lose a rural business. It would either be a mechanic, or a welding shop, or a parts store. So you start seeing these little old rural towns and businesses close up in them. And that was going on until about the time we

already had mechanized agriculture, but it became much more as far as the one row cotton picker to the six row cotton picker and the combines now with forty foot headers. And it took less people, naturally. You couldn't keep everybody on the land. But where was the number? If you had control of it, where do you say enough is enough? How many farmers do you need? I argued, and my friend argued—Jim DuPree—when there's nothing left to be gained. And I used this example. I bought an eighty acre farm from a fella, who had gone out of business. He had been working a couple hundred acres. He went to town, he and his family, and opened up a café. I took that eighty acres and did some land farming, put irrigation well down, and put it in rice production—made it much more productive piece of land. Now when I leave, no one else is going to do that. Already done that. You take somebody off the land, you're not taking that land out of production. So when you get to where society doesn't benefit—there's no more gain and efficiency—it does little good to reduce the numbers. And that was my explanation of the way I saw it. I can understand that fella that owned the eighty going to town because he wasn't large enough to farm, his operation wasn't efficient enough anymore. Soon mine became that way. It wasn't efficient, but it got up to about fifteen hundred acres operation and I wasn't doing any good financially. But at some point in time, if you aren't gaining from taking these people off the land—and you are hurting the rural communities and small towns, is that good policy? And if not—but for some people, that's still a market force you've got to leave alone and keep your hands off of it and stay as far removed as you can. Later on, I may be jumping ahead a little bit here, but that *Structures* Hearing to me was an important thing. It didn't get recognized, but the fact it did it. And I don't know if you could find an archivist in US today that's got one, but it would be—I wish you had one.

AW:

Do you have a copy of it?

HJS:

I'm going to go back home and look. I had one copy I kept for a long time. I'm going to try to find it. I'll make it available to you. But it's got testimony from all over the country.

AW:

I'll look for it. But if we can't find it. Let me ask one other question about that *Structure*. It strikes me that one of the things that's changing today is that there is a view towards structure, but it has to do with local food production and consumption. And what you were just mentioning in the 1970's was—you weren't talking about tomatoes or radishes or lettuce. You're talking about rice, something that's a commodity.

HJS:

The five basic commodities—

AW:

A cash-based economy for the farm.

HJS:

The five basic commodities are the base of the world's food supply: soybeans, corn, rice, wheat, cotton for fiber. And those five basic, what we call commodities, primary crops if you will, that was what AAM was focused on. Of course we had cattleman that was concerned about cattle and all that, but those five basic commodities are what the support programs were geared to, and that's what we were concerned about. Vegetable—specialty crops growers didn't have a program—didn't want a program. They are in a different situation, and some people are, Yeah but you're taking this program money and giving it to all these guys over here and all these cattlemen and poultry and especially crop growers, they don't get any kind of subsidy. Why do we do this? Well there's a reason for it. These five basic commodities—that's the base of your food supply. That's what feeds your poultry and livestock.

AW:

It's also what is exchanged internationally, right? You can ship--

HJS:

The export market.

AW:

You can import it and export it. You can't import too well a tomato, I mean you can do it, but it is not an easy job.

HJS:

Right. And now there's a big movement underway, and I took a little issue with the secretary, but it's—maybe more so than I should have. All this truck patches and farmer's markets have a real niche in some places where you're near population centers and all. But most of the places like where we live, everybody's got a garden. You can't hardly make a living growing specialty crops in Arkansas, rural Arkansas. Everybody's got a garden—

AW:

Because everybody around you is not going to buy it. And the cost of you getting it to Little Rock or to Memphis or whatever it is—

HJS:

Now they have some successes in those bigger centers like that. But still, even if you take that all into consideration and talk about wonderful it is that people can go get that fresh produce, and there's a few farmers that can benefit, somebody's still got to produce five basic commodities.

That's what we have got to think about. Some people tend to think if just do more of that, more of that farmer's market and specialty crop promotion, while it's a great and wonderful thing to try to get fresh commodities in people's hands, you still got these basic commodities that's got to be produced.

AW:

And the world would go hungry. Because folks who put the pencil to the numbers on local farms, the local food production that we were just talking about. And what's going to happen to the people in India or China, or for that matter, the poor people in America? They're not going to eat.

HJS:

And what most people back in Arkansas have learned, have tried, and there's been some pretty good size operations doing specialty crops, all kinds of vegetables. It's almost impossible and most of them go broke. They cannot compete with the valleys of Texas and California and the labor force and the climate. They know when it's going to rain and know it's not going to rain. They've got irrigation, and there have been several pretty good size produce operations started in Arkansas, and the biggest part of them go broke. Because that market, everybody they tell me, is more vicious than the grain market is. It's pretty tightly connected; you don't have a lot of buyers in the market for basic commodities. But I think overall, I think, and you'll hear at these meetings, because this has turned into more of an old-timers social club now. But AAM from then on, and I wound up being a local chair and then I wound up being on the state board of AAM of Arkansas and then wound up being the state president. I got to go about 1981, I started being a delegate. Arkansas was sending me to the AAM delegate's meeting. And then I wound up being vice-president and then president.

AW:

When did you become president?

HJS:

Eighty-eight I think. '88, '89, and '90 I think were the three years I was president. And by that time, AAM had developed I think into a real respected voice. We were being called on by USDA and being called on by members of congress, called on by the national media for comments about this or that. And I think we had really gained some respect in Washington. In '88, '89, '90 we were hosting a fish fry in the Longworth Building each year, and turning out as high as two thousand people. Started doing it for the ag committee and staff, wound up inviting every member of congress, and we've had the secretary of agriculture there on more than one occasion. We've had the chairman of the House Ag Committee there, the Senate Ag Committee. We've had just an array of people. Bill Clinton came one year when I invited him, when he was still governor. I don't know if you looked through some of those scrapbooks yesterday.

AW:

I did. Yeah.

HJS:

Some of those people at that fish fry, we really became a player. And Corky Jones participated in the GATT talks. And we were--

AW:

Is it safe to say AAM changed?

HJS:

Yes.

AW:

From that wildfire grassroots that you talked about earlier to something a lot less naïve.

HJS:

Yes.

AW:

How did that occur?

HJS:

I guess, I think out of necessity, there was a—

AW:

I mean, did some of you see we got to do this, did you see to change it on purpose?

HJS:

Well, finally some people realized. Marvin Meek said it best. And I think maybe we hired a firm and started a political action committee. Which went against the grain of some people in AAM who wanted us to stay in the country and be a protest group with no organizational structure whatsoever—

AW:

And that would describe a lot of the early folks, wouldn't it?

HJS:

Yes. And there was a disagreement in what we ought to do. Marvin used to say, and I don't know if he coined the phrase or if the people with the Martin Haley Company was the name of the company at that time—managing this PAC for us. And helping get us some stature to where we could participate. “Agriculture has a political problem and no other kind of problem. Our problem is political in nature.” Like I said earlier, we have not been at the table when we should have been. And you don't always succeed, and yes, hell, it's frustrating. And most people, farmers, don't like to participate in the political process, but if you hope to accomplish something, and what I used to say to those who disagreed, we ought to be blockading a bridge or burning something or causing—after the protest, you've got to have some kind of plan to move forward. And that plan is going to come out of the political arena. That's where farm bills are written. And if you don't have some kind of political operation in Washington, the best plan in the world, get out on the turn-rows and devise them, they're going nowhere. You've got to have some way to do it. So I think some of us started to realize, hey, as Marvin said—I believe the slogan that was on some of our literature at the time, “Agriculture has a political problem, only a political problem, and no other kind of problem. We deal with our politics, we deal with our problem.” So-called farm program—

AW:

That's a huge change. From McAllen Bridge and the Tractorcade--

HJS:

Huge change. Yes. And I'm not belittling those protests—

AW:

No, no. I'm just saying that's just a huge change.

HJS:

It was, but I think it came out of the realization after the protests, whatever the issue is. Civil rights people protest. After the protest, they had to have legislation to put their program in place. To bring the improvements and the justice they were seeking. Same way with us. That's where it had to come from. There was a government solution to our problem—political solution. And a lot of people, and some still today may not believe that. They still think government is evil and its bad, and we shouldn't have been participating in it. After Tommy Willis was elected president, and Tommy was a guy that had vision and could see that we had to address it politically to get it accomplished—

AW:

Was he the one who preceded you?

HJS:

Yes. Then Corky. It was him, then Corky, then me. Marvin Meek, Tommy Willis, Corky Jones, then me. And Tommy saw that. He'd been active in the cotton council. And he knew what political involvement could do and how it had served the cotton industry in those days. And he understood that. Well, some of the group wanted to continue a grassroots effort and even brought a motion to the delegate body in one of the meetings I was in—I can't remember whether it was in D.C. or Texas—I believe D.C. they wanted to maintain two spokesmen. We had a paper in Texas. A lady named Mickey Alden and Micki Nellis ran it, and they disagreed. They started putting critical stuff in the *AAM Reporter* it was called, about those who wanted to follow—go with the political operation. They wanted—the motion came to the delegate body in those early days, probably in '82 or '83 to have also a spokesman that represented the grassroots area—the states that didn't really want to be part of the organization. And the motion failed. And see I think it was eight to twelve votes, something like that on the delegate body, to “No we can't be up there building a political operation and have somebody out here saying things contrary and discouraging people from participating in it. Because we recognize this is a political solution we're searching for.” And so, as they say, the rest is history. But there are still a lot of people, I know, that if you get to talking to them today, they think the government and the media are their two biggest enemies. And also, a lot of farmers, I think part of them, are caught up the idea that somehow we are so important—this food production is so important that we've got all these people out here, conspiracies going on to control us. Now I don't see it that way at all. Early on I did because I was angry and frustrated, like a kid now. We got a lot of them on drugs now. I got a grandson that's having major problems. Hell, he's in jail today because of meth, and getting drunk and running from the law, and all that kind of crap. You know what? That kid, every time you talk to him, it's always Momma's fault, or Daddy's fault, or the police, or a lawyer, or a teacher. It's somebody else's fault. Farmers were a lot like that. And not being insulting. Somebody's out to get us. When things ain't going right, and somebody's out to get us. Instead of looking and saying, “Damn why haven't I been going to these hearings and sitting down with my member of congress and saying, hey this farm bill is not working. We got to do something different.” Instead of looking inward, we were looking for somebody to blame. And quite frankly, I think most of those people, even the grain companies, even though I know they're monopolistic and all that, and I've seen some things that I don't think was the best behavior from them—hell, they're doing business. They're just going about doing business. The fact that we're getting the heck kicked out of us out there, it wasn't by design. That just happens. They're doing business, they want to buy the product as cheaply as they can get it—

AW:

Everybody's in favor of competition in theory. (laughs)

HJS:

Yeah. In theory it sounds good.

AW:

But when it comes down competing with you—

HJS:

Yeah. As long as it's somebody else. That's how the robber barons are, I guess, developed this nation. Some people call them great visionaries, and a lot of them were robber barons. You buy the railroads and you can't move anybody else's oil if you're Mr. Rockefeller. (laughs)

AW:

All you have to do is look at the dot com revolution. You know, all the bright eyed, starry eyed idealistic kids that invented Google or Apple or whatever. That turned into robber barons pretty quick. (laughs)

HJS:

But those forces, I would say though, intellectual community, the Ag Committee, and the USDA, and the White House, and then government that had this basic idea about the free market would cure everything. After they did that *Young Executive's Committee* report in 1972 recommending drawing the farm numbers down. They're still there in the form of *Freedom to Farm* in the early nineties. That's what it was all about. Let's just get out of this business of supporting agriculture. It ain't working. We're still losing farm numbers and we're pouring a bunch of money into it. And basically the farmers, by in large, have a higher median income than the average guy. So why should we be taking resources, tax money, and giving it to a bunch of farmers? That doesn't consider that rural economy and all the things that bobs around it. When you think about, and Wayne Cryts used to use these numbers, if every farmer in America back in the eighties had bought one tractor—and they would have bought more if they could have—how much steel, how much rubber, how many jobs would have been created? Agriculture was, hell, it's a big part of our economic engine. And it was sick, so the *Freedom to Farm* folks wanted to eliminate permanent farm law. It was some more of what I'd call the free market forces. The same forces that created this and started this farm crisis that lead to AAM's development are still around in *Freedom to Farm*. The interesting thing, and this is a report you can still get, out of that *Freedom to Farm*, the one good thing that happened—when it came down to the final wire, of course Bill Clinton, because my visit and Jim DuPree's visit with President Clinton—he insisted on keeping permanent farm law and saw the wisdom in it, and the danger in doing away with it. There just wouldn't have been a Farm Bill if either House or Senate or White House in the future didn't want to take up one, there wouldn't be one. So it basically forces them to continue passing farm bills. And we went to Bill Clinton and he understood that, and he insisted. And that's another Secretary of Agriculture I've spent a good bit of time with Mike Espy, then Dan Glickman. I visited him, Lord knows, how many times. But that's on a personal note. But the point I wanted to get to is this: when it came down to the wire, and me and you might have talked about this yesterday, and *Freedom to Farm* was going to be—looked like the farm bill. Some people started

getting concerned, members of the ag committees, what's going to happen if this thing blows up in our face. We're going into uncharted waters here, farmers are going come in, sign up for this farm bill, and when it's over, there's no more. No more programs; you're done, you're through. And if you committee to this, you're done. What's going to happen? Well the ag committee, I think Pat Roberts started out in the House and he was later on the Senate. I think Dick Lugar over in the Senate—they said, Well we'll create a commission. Do you need to take that?

AW:

No, no, no. I was just checking time. I was trying to be careful of getting you on the road.

HJS:

Okay. They said, we'll create a commission, and they called it the "21st Century Commission on Production Agriculture." Meant to do something like the *Structures* Hearing—what is going on out there? And their role was to determine, is it in the national interest to support farmers? And is the family farm entity the best production entity we have to do this, or should we just let market forces take over and let corporate America, insurance companies, trust funds, whoever, own the land and [let] farmers be tenants or whatever. And that was the question that they were supposed to bring. What should we do in the future? Should we continue to support it? Should there be another farm bill after *Freedom to Farm* or not? And the House Ag Committee got to name four people; the Senate Ag Committee got to name four people. And the White House got to name three. It was an eleven person commission, and I lobbied Bill Clinton at every opportunity, and every person in the White House, talked to him personally about it more than once. And got Jim DuPree on there. I also lobbied for Lee Swenson, a friend who was President of the National Farmers Union. And Ralph Paige, a black man from Georgia who works with the Southern Federation of Cooperatives. And I've supported and told the President all three of them, and had President and Glickman with all the people. And right at the last few days, the White House, to show you—and I don't know if you are going to put this down, but I don't care. To show you: the diversity with the Clinton Administration—he said his cabinet, government, wanted to look like America. That means black faces, white faces, all kinds of people would be in his administration. They wanted a black person, they wanted a woman, and then they wanted a white person or some other, they didn't care if it was a minority or not. But they wanted those two minorities, and in the final days, one of the White House people called me and said, "We really need a woman on there, and wondered if Mr. DuPree would step down." I said, "No, I don't have anything against women, it's absolutely crucial. The President knows him, he's got faith in him, he helped him draft a paper when he was Chair of the National Governor's Conference, and went to Washington with him to present a position. So don't do this. Please don't do this." And they went to Lee Swenson and tried to get him back off in favor of some lady from Texas. I believe it was head of WIFE or something at that time that they wanted on there for the diversity. The Republican Chairman of the House and Senate Ag Committee—four Caucasian men, four Caucasian men. They didn't give a damn, it just wasn't an issue with them. It just gives you a

picture of what—so on the three that the White House got, there were two white guys, one a farm leader, and Jim DuPree was a farm leader and a friend of the President. But Ralph Paige filled the minority role on there. And they held hearings all over the country. I lobbied the President to meet with them, and he did meet with them. Jim DuPree told the bunch before they went up to the White House that morning after I had helped arrange the meeting—he said he told them, Barry Flinchbaugh was the Chair of that commission. The ag economist out of Kansas State. Jim said, “Well I’m going to tell you something, if we can’t agree as a commission, these eleven people, if we can’t agree to this one precept before we go down there, I’m not going and wasting the President’s time. Is the family farms system worth saving? And should we support policies that nurture or support it in some way, or should we just let it go the other way, let the market take care of itself?” And they all agreed. Yes, the family farm system was important—

AW:

The whole committee. The committee agreed?

HJS:

The commission agreed—

AW:

Commission—

HJS:

They call themselves the Commission. And you can find that report.

AW:

Do you remember what the name of that one is?

HJS:

It’s called *The Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture*. Or *The 21st Century Commission on Production Agriculture*. So they went down to the President and they talked about this, and all those guys out of the Midwest were just flabbergasted that Bill Clinton had such a crass for it. And most of them were farm bureau type, American National Corn—a guy named Northey. I did know all of them all by name; there’s a big popcorn farm out of Indiana, State Farm Bureau president. Most of them I think were probably Republican in their leaning, other than DuPree, Ralph, and Lee Swenson. There might have been—

AW:

Now am I correct in assuming, or thinking, that Jim DuPree is now passed away?

HJS:

No. he is not. Very much—

AW:

Where does he live?

HJS:

He lives in Little Rock. He farmed at one time—

AW:

Would he be willing to sit down for an interview, do you think?

HJS:

Sure he would. And they just did some oral stuff with him to go in some archives up at University of Arkansas recently. I'd love for you to meet Jim. He is the one—he taught me more than I'll ever be able to recall about this whole issue. And I guarantee you, he could hold his own with all of them—Secretary of Agriculture didn't like to be in front of him. I guarantee him. He knew what's good. He's 82 or 83, we just had lunch together the other day. We talk real frequently.

AW:

Well there are a couple more meeting we need to have, you and I. that would be a good one to do. But the other one would be, and we're not going to have time to do it this morning, is talk about Farm Aid, cause that's a very interesting story. But while we have a few minutes left before you need to get on the road. Two things that I think are related, we might could cover, one is: how did all this change Harvey Joe Sanner? And the second is: I've been incredibly fascinated by the growth of people just like you in this movement. You don't go further than high school, which in America seems to be a big blot against you. And then you're lobbying and sitting down with the President of the United States and the dictator of Cuba. How does this change a man?

HJS:

Well it did change me. And part of it—not all for the better. My farming operation and my marriage suffered because of my political involvement, no doubt about that. And I should have done a better job as a husband, and a father, and a farmer, I know that. But it did change me, and I'd like to think—my grammar is still horrible, but it's much better than it was when I began.

AW:

No, no. my whole point is that if a person sit down with you, they wouldn't say, well this guy never got out of high school. They would say, like I did, Where did you go to college? Because

your point of view and your connection to the world is different than what we think of as a small town, uneducated person.

HJS:

A lot of what I have learned, and I'd like to think I've grown, came from associating with people like Jim DuPree. And being able to rely on him. And he cut to the chase early on, and when he went to Washington, when they finished up that *Structures* hearing, when the Reagan Administration come in the pyre, he was in the room. And he knew, they knew, how many farmers were going to go broke in the eighties. And they refused to do anything about it. They could have raised some loan rates, they could have really softened that blow, and they refused to do it. They said that's something we don't want to take issue with, and they didn't do it. And Jim came home and basically dropped out of his AAM involvement. All he said, until they get ready to address this basic issue, which is—

AW:

Not the AAM, but Washington—

HJS:

The government, yeah, the system. Until the political system—

AW:

That elected group.

HJS:

Yes. Till they get ready to address it, and the issue is this: concentration in land ownership and farm numbers. Until it becomes an issue worth addressing, we are not going to get much done. And that's like Frank Mahler--

AW:

And are we still there today?

HJS:

Still there. It hasn't become a national issue.

AW:

We've gotten two Republican administrations since Bill Clinton, and we've got a Democratic administration and a half. And it still hasn't changed.

HJS:

Still hasn't changed. It's still not a real issue. And I think one of the reasons it hasn't—nobody's gone hungry yet in America. We're still producing as far as disposable income, people are spending less than almost anywhere else in the world for their food. So, when I ask—J.B. Penn was an economist, and he used to be a friend of DuPree, but they kind of got crossways over philosophy. Penn was a pretty powerful guy—

AW:

P-E-double-N?

HJS:

Dr. J.B. P-E-N-N. Came from a little town of Lynn, Arkansas. And he was the undersecretary for economics in the Bergland years. Howard York was the guy—that did some of the hearings. We had a meeting with J.B. in Memphis—AAM did—had several states represented. And Congressman Ed Jones and a bunch of them, this was about in 1980. And J.B. Penn could be an arrogant prick, and I found out later he was an alcoholic. He told a close friend of his, told me later, he was about drunk that day. Didn't know it, but somebody said, "The farm problem." And he said, "What farm problem?" Can you tell a room full of farmers that are pissed off, what farm problem? He said, "We've got plenty of production, food costs are lower than they've been. We've got plenty for the export market. Where's the farm problem?" Well I'm going broke. That's your problem, that's not a farm problem. He was that blunt about it, and it sobers the hell out of you. Well wait a minute. You know everybody—farm problem, farm problem. J.B. says there's not one. Now the production sector, certain areas of the production sector was getting the hell hammered out of them. But overall, things were alright. Production was going on, the commodity prices were cheap to the buyers, and plentiful supplies. So in his mind, there is no farm problem. This is just a bunch of racket by a few producers, and when they drop out, the more efficient ones will continue—production will continue. So, what farm problem? And it's pretty sobering stuff when you think about it. And you get to thinking, Shit, like a bug, I'm so just insignificant. And I felt like I could just shrink that day that Dick Lyng told me, "Yeah you'll keep producing those soybeans but you won't two or three years in a row." I said, "No sir, I won't be able to, the bank won't loan me any money anymore. And I'll be out of business." But what he's saying to me is, "That's not my problem. You need to do something different, you need to subsidize your income, get you a job off the farm, grow some other crop. That's your problem, that's not a farm problem for the nation—not something we need to deal with," and that's kind of the attitude that they've had. This hearing DuPree and them did, and they presented to the Ag committees, what it basically did, said, was say, We agree that the family farm unit is the best entity to have to be the chief primary producer of the basic commodities—food and fiber for the United States. Better than going to a corporate structure. But as far as having that much impact on anything, I don't know. And now the real issue is now not so much partisan. I'm a yellow-dog Democrat. In fact, I chair the Democratic Committee in Perry County. I've got quite

a bit of disdain for some of the Republican ideas that I've seen over the years. But when the farm bill starts coming together, it's normally not a Republican-Democrat, it's a regional and commodities. There's been one thing that happened in 1985—

AW:

Yeah in fact, the Democrats really haven't been on the farmer's side since Bill Clinton.

HJS:

That's right.

AW:

And probably wouldn't have been without Bill Clinton.

HJS:

And even in Bill Clinton's administration. DuPree and I drafted up a plan and met with him more than once. Hoping to replace *Freedom to Farm* with something we put together. And I didn't give you a copy, but I'm going to send it to you. Summation of what we recommended to the President. And we went to the white House and met with John Podesta, and Carl Willett who was undersecretary, and I forget who all else in that meeting, maybe Glickman was there to talk about a basic change to *Freedom to Farm* and they were not willing to do it. The Democrats at that time, on the hill, they wanted to come in and tinker a little here and tinker a little there, and not make any major policy decisions. The farm vote, I guess, was so small and so fractured. In fact, most of the farmers probably voted Republican. The majority of them did. They vote on other issues other than their own best interest. They vote on abortion, they vote on health care reform, they vote on gun control. More so than they do what's in their best interest of their livelihood. And that's what I saw come together this time. And I was very disappointed. I'm a big Obama fan; I think he's a brilliant guy, and I just really think a lot of him. I guess one of the reasons I did—I grew up in a racist neighborhood, with some ideas that I'm ashamed now that I had toward people of color. I guess I want to apologize, but to say that I'm a strong supporter of President Obama, I damn near get killed in the local area for standing for him because I hear the "N" word constantly still yet. And then people tell, "I don't give a damn what color he is, it's his policy that I don't like." Bullshit. A lot of them are lying to themselves. But in his administration, on all of the appointments he's made, USDA and elsewhere, I don't think he's talked to one damn person south of the Mason-Dixon Line. And there's a heavy resentment that grew out of 1985, especially for cotton and rice. The Midwestern farmers were smaller, relying more on crop insurance.

[phone rings, pause in recording]

HJS:

I forget—oh I was talking about the administration, how disappointed I've been that they didn't have more people from the South, looking at all regions of the country. But in '85 when we went—I say we—we the Southern states, cotton and rice primarily opted for that marketing loan plan that had been out. Wheat and corn boys elected not to do it. And there was a lot of money that went to cotton and rice. And there's been an almost hatred by a lot of people from the Midwest over. They've been open about it—members of Congress have—open about, them damn big rich cotton and rice guys down there. Y'all got shafted you know. They had an opportunity too, but nobody understood at that time. Bob Dole wanted five cents on the target price on wheat, and Lugar wanted a nickel on corn or something, and that's what they wanted. And they elected. Well it wound up being a good program for cotton and rice. I wasn't real supportive of it early on, but it does let commodities move. And we think, DuPree and I, we told the President this, and I think he agrees with us. But his staff and members on the hill wasn't willing to take it on and push a new direction in farm policy if you will, like we presented him a plan. Take the marketing loan, raise that loan rate to a level that's not profit guarantee, but make a safety net. Use it for all commodities across the board, and it'd be so much simpler and easier than this complex animal that we've got now, and more effective. And with a marketing loan concept, you might know how it works. I never did sell—prices went lower when the marketing loan was imitated. But the buyers for rice, or cotton, or soybean could come to you and offer you a premium. And you could pay back that loan at the world market level. That let the commodities move in the world market and you don't build up stockpile. Then you don't have to start asking for set-asides it. And nobody wants to do anymore. Particularly the supply people—the suppliers to agriculture. So we thought it could really create and be a good guide from here on for farm policy. We didn't get it done, and I was disappointed. And then we had Blanche Lincoln as chairman of the Senate Ag Committee, which I used to dream about at night about having a chairman of the Senate or House Ag Committee from my state—my region of the committee. Damn farmers voted her out last year over healthcare. And now we've got Deb Stabenow and when that damn farm bill started coming together, I mean it discriminated against the delta. And I've been a very active and engaged in a group called the Delta Caucus. We went to Washington and lobbied the Clinton administration and created the Delta Regional Authority, patterned after the Appalachian Regional Authority to focus on poverty and all other issues in the delta. Eight states. We've got two hundred something counties and parishes. And I've been going to their meetings and conferences and been their kind of ag guy on that thing ever since. When they started putting that farm bill together, it was discriminating against the delta, pure and damn simple. And I wrote articles and everything else and letters and it did little good. But Ms. Stabenow and the rest of the people up there think they'd heard all that resentment. They think that cotton and rice boys have gotten far bigger share than they deserved of farm programs. So it gets to be a regional, not necessarily—some of the Democrats, the more liberal members, they look at it as sending money to farmers who are living in nice homes, with nice cars and a whole bunch of damn equipment, instead of giving it to poor people, to food stamps, and so forth and

so on—housing and whatever. I think they always overlook the fact that no matter how well that farmer appears to be doing, he is a businessman, and he's hiring several people in most cases now—quite a few employees, and he's contributing to that rural economy. So I always defend farm program. And it ain't popular to do in a lot of circles anymore, especially with the payment limit idea. And the people in the Midwest have just raised hell that those payments ought to be limited. Well on the one hand, you got USDA and all economists saying you got to be more efficient, you got to get bigger. Get bigger or get out. You got to be more efficient. You get more efficient, you produce more commodities, it qualifies you for more support. So you got a contradiction there.

AW:

Well and plus, if you don't believe in government, you can't believe in farm programs.

HJS:

Yeah, and I believe in government. And I think it's got a role, whether we believe it or not, it's got a role. And right now the debate kind of is, what's that role to be? Is it supposed to provide healthcare for people that don't have it? That's really the basic issue about Obama and the hatred for him, and I mean, it is vile.

AW:

That and the fact that he's black.

HJS:

And that because he's black. And because he's socialism. I argue with them on Facebook all the time. I said, "That's the same damn argument that Republicans made against Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, rural water, rural electrification. Everything that helped rural America and helped the middle class people." They call it socialism, and they fought the hell out of it. I read enough of history to know that's true. And now I see it, over and over and over, I get sick of it on Facebook. This is socialism.

AW:

Well socialism is a payment that goes to somebody else, right?

HJS:

Yeah.

AW:

Alright, well we've got a lot more to talk about Harvey Joe. Thank you so much for this, and God speed on your way home today.

HJS:

It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

End of Interview



© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library