

**Oral History Interview of  
Craig McDonald**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson  
August 1, 2017  
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:  
*Agriculture Interviews***

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## Transcript Overview:

This interview features Craig McDonald as he discusses his career farming. Craig describes the differences between farming in the sixties to farming in the early twenty-first century.

**Length of Interview:** 02:13:18

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### Keywords

Farming, Agriculture, Cotton

**Andy Wilkinson (AW):**

In fact—let's see, this is the first day of August, isn't it?

**Craig McDonald (CM):**

It is the first day of August.

AW:

Of 2017. Andy Wilkinson with Craig McDonald. We're doing volume—

CM:

Two.

AW:

Two or three. No, it's three.

CM:

Three.

AW:

Yeah, it's three. You just told me something that I wish we and known a long time which was how to keep cows from eating your watermelons. Would you repeat that story? It's too good not to—

CM:

An ole gentleman in Ralls, Texas told me one time when I was griping about my watermelons getting eaten by the—just take a few bites, some of them. So, he said, "That's easy to take care of that." He said, "All you have to do is go down to the lumber yard where they have the Coca-Cola machine and get those lids that come off the bottle of cokes. You push the lid, kind of, down just a little bit on the top of—

AW:

Right on the top of it.

CM:

Yeah, right on top of it. "The cow will think that's some kind of trap and they can either smell your hand that was on there or else something. It just doesn't look right and they won't touch it." I saved a lot of watermelons on my farm doing that. I didn't raise it commercially but we always had a little patch of them.

AW:

We always had a patch. We'd never been good at selling because we ate them all. Well, the ones that the cows didn't get.

CM:

Yeah, we didn't sell them. A few kids stole them probably but you have to raise them—out there in the farm you have to raise enough for the fees. They're mostly high school boys.

AW:

Those watermelons, they're only good—

CM:

Yeah, they got to be just right.

AW:

Just right and you can't leave them on there too long.

CM:

It's hard to find a good watermelon. I guess they pick them when they're just not quite ready. I think like bananas or something, thinking they're going to ripe but they don't. I haven't had a really good watermelon in two or three years.

AW:

You know—and this is completely off the topic—well, we're talking about farming—the best watermelon I've had recently is if you go to the United Market Street store, as you walk in you can buy a bowl of cantaloupe, or honey dew or watermelon. Now, I don't know whether they take the watermelon—they've already cut it up, they must take the ones that were too ripe for them to put out in there bins because that has been the closest to a ripe watermelon I've gotten in a long time. You might try one of those.

CM:

I think I will try that. I love watermelon.

AW:

Yeah, I do too. I also found out in my health forays this year that watermelons, strawberries, cantaloupe, melons and some of those fruits are really—even though you may have other kinds of issues with sugar, they're good for you because they have more fiber than other kinds of fruits. But try that. Maybe I just thought they tasted better because I didn't have to do the work [laughs] cutting them.

CM:

While we're on watermelons though, over north of Ralls, there was an area in there that evidently didn't—there wasn't many watermelons or any kind of stuff like that. So, some contractor came in and contracted with a number of farmers, at least seven, or eight, ten, to raise watermelons—hybrid watermelon seed. So, they would plant watermelons, they planted the seed that the guy furnished, and then when they got up, got ripe and mature, they had a machine that came out there that would roll them up off the ground. It was almost like a grinder but it squished them, juice going everywhere, fiber going everywhere and it separated the seeds out; big black seeds.

AW:

So that's all they were doing?

CM:

That's all they were doing. All of the farmers around there was grabbing a few just before they'd get there. Man, they'd get all that seed. They did that for about three years and then, I guess, they started coming up—volunteer and that would run the pollination or something, I don't know enough about that. I know for a little while we had treated—getting some watermelons for nothing.

AW:

What were they—was it a good hybrid? Were they—

CM:

Yeah, they were—they grew seedless ones. They plant that seed then and—it's like everything else where they cross them and get them. It's kind of a naturalized cross, it wasn't a “genetic modification” as they call them now. They're just breeding the kinds and they come out with—they're not hundred percent seedless but they're close. They're not as good either but I don't think quite. And you can't shoot them like your think, through your fingers.

AW:

You can't do it.

CM:

A lot of kids are eating, you teach them how to do that.

AW:

They probably don't spit very well either. [laughs] That's actually a very good lead into one of the things I wanted to talk about today. We were going to talk about changes in farming. There's so many. We probably need to focus a little bit. One of the things that I've been thinking about

is: this very issue—when I was young and we had a farm north of Slaton, my granddad always saved back some cotton seed or if we were growing table corn, he'd save back some corn. I don't remember that being all that successful but the cotton seed, he always—he never bought the cotton seed. Of course now, particularly if you're using a patented—

CM:

You'll go broke buying cotton seed.

AW:

Yeah, and you can't—they won't let you not use theirs and you have to pay for it. That strikes me as being an enormous change in farming. What were the practices that you started out with seed and how did that change through the time that you were farming?

CM:

The first year I farmed was 1959. I got out of the Army in January and came back to Lubbock after going by Denver to ski a little bit. I was twenty-four years old. I'd been out and graduated from college, graduated from the Army. I was in the Signal Corps in Bordeaux, France the last year in the military police unit that was trying to keep the troops from beating each other to death in the bars and stuff, there wasn't any war going on. But, my dad—when I called home from Bordeaux around Christmas time, I asked him if it was possible to farm. He said, "Really," and I said, "Yeah, I think I might." I mentioned doing it before but I didn't want to—I thought that maybe banking, which I was trained to do, would be a lot like the Army and it's chain of command, all this stuff. That didn't appeal to me, plus I really like the outdoors.

AW:

And you didn't—not many bankers spend much time outdoors.

CM:

Desk business and paper shuffling just didn't appeal—didn't seem like that was really what I needed to be doing. I was single so I was could just kind of free to fly. I told him—it's funny, he always brought it up—I said, "And that way I'll be my own boss and I can go water skiing when I want to." [Laughter] He kind of chuckled a little bit. I ended up working seven days a week, probably, for the next six months.

AW:

Twelve, eighteen hours a day probably.

CM:

Yeah, at least. Because I didn't really know how to farm it. What happened was that he said, "Yeah I'll help you do that. I'll help you get started." I had a twenty-five thousand dollar savings

bonds. I think they were like ten-thousand or something—I forgot what you paid—but it was 1875 or something, and when it matured it was twenty-five. But some of those kept paying interest so it's been laying there paying interest so it was a little more than that. It was like, probably pretty close to fifty by 1959. So, I cashed that in. That was going to be my way to get started and buying my groceries. Of course, farmers—you know, farmers are different. They live off their farming income but they borrow some of that to farm and they also go fishing with some of it. That's always been a problem, a little bit. [laughter] It's all the same—the checking account for farming is the same one that mom uses to buy groceries. Anyway, that's kind of where I was there and so he said, “I've got this boxcar out there that's full of cotton seed, almost full, and the stuff we saved last year off the crop.” It had a divider, had a little bit of older crop and some of that must have been ten years old in it. It was all fuzzy, what we called ‘fuzzy seed’ that had fiber on it. So, I had Farmall tractors. I had ended up with, by summer, I had two second-hand—they was three or four-hundred dollars, bought it at a farm sale down in Seminole. All the machinery I had was either homemade, that they had made, or something I was learning to make. I learned to weld and do everything that needed to be done out there. In those days, the blacksmiths were real important in town. So, you'd get the blacksmith to do stuff. Laying on the ground out there by that cotton seed in that boxcar was a sled-type cotton harvester. I had rotted apart. I was dumb in those days. Kids don't think about stuff like that. I should've had it put inside and kept it for the museum. I don't even think they—

AW:

How did the sled harvester work?

CM:

Well, it was just nothing moral [?], but—the blacksmith had built the quarter-inch by two-inch steel strip that screwed in on the bottom of the rail. Everything else was wood, so it was sliding on the metal, that kept it from wearing out so quick. It had steel fingers, just kind of my like my fingers sticking out.

AW:

Right on the front of it?

CM:

For the row. For two rows. And the horse would pull it or a tractor could pull it, either one. But, the guy would stand on the back of it and—I don't know exactly how this worked but I know that the cotton would just ball up. You'd go real slow and it would pull it off the stock just like it does now essentially. He would take a fork and drag it back till he had a big wad of it and then he'd—I guess it'd stop and kick it off on the ground so he had a pile.

AW:

On the ground, then you come off and pick that pile up?

CM:

Then later you'd come by and do that. It wasn't a whole lot of efficiency in that operation and I don't—

AW:

But it's a lot more efficient than going out on your own by yourself.

CM:

Another thing is, in those days we had—it was all dryland and there wasn't much irrigation even when I started. It was slow in West Texas to get started on irrigation, really. Once it took off, boy, those pump companies, they stayed busy after that. It was—that was kind of the beginning of that, and we still had some people came in what we called "pull-bowls." That's what's sitting and pick it—they actually took the bowl with the cotton.

AW:

I remember doing that as a kid and we took the whole bowl.

CM:

Picking like they did in Mississippi and places like that when they'd show those pictures of black folks out there. There'd be a hundred of them and they're picking it out.

AW:

Right out of the bowl and leave the bowl on the plant. We didn't—we pulled bowls too. I always believed—and correct me if this wrong—but I believe that was because we were growing short-staple and it might've been more difficult to pick versus pull-bowl.

CM:

I think that probably had something to do with it. It was tighter in the bowl, which was good for the weather that we have. I'm sure that—it can get damaged no matter how long the staple is if it rains right. But that was an all—they'd start pulling bowls in September and they'd pick till after December sometimes.

AW:

Right because it's slow. Did you kill the cotton or did you let it—dryland—

CM:

I did once. I started—they began to have what they call “tin acid” or something. It had a tinned hash.

AW:

With arsenic acid?

CM:

Yeah, arsenic, had a little arsenic in there. Why that, I don't know, but they did.

AW:

I remember that was one of the problems with feeding moats or things—if you killed it with arsenic acid then you—

CM:

Dangerous to feed the animals with something. I don't know whether it was dangerous to handle because I made it too and I'm still living.

AW:

I never heard about that. You mentioned about how slow it was getting irrigation started and the fact that not many people were killing the cotton either until you started. What do you attribute those changes— '59, it'd been over ten years since the war. There was a lot of technology available now that had been difficult to get during the war years. What—why was it slow to—particularly in this dry country, particularly in the fifties—why was it slow to get people drilling wells?

CM:

I don't—you know, I don't know but farmers, as a general rule in those days, were pretty hard-headed. It was hard to teach them to change. They'd been doing something like that and my daddy's been doing something like that, that's the way it's going to be. They didn't want somebody from A&M or somebody to try and tell them better that never had really done it, they just learned about it. So, it was slow to do it. The real adaptive farmer, like they are now, they didn't really get going until after that. I was the only guy, I think, the county except one that had gone to college. He ended up teaching at A&M finally. It was a great time but it was trying. We were still running go devils.

AW:

Describe—I know what you're talking about—describe a go devil for the people listening to this.

CM:

Okay. Well, it's a—it usually is two rows at a time—they made them finally four rows. When you have a four row deal, it has a tendency to drag crooked. In other words, one side would be a little deeper and it'll put it crooked. That's no good so they'd usually run two rows. It'd have blades on it made out of—done by the blacksmith downtown and he would make these blades that would angle out to the middle of the row, forty-inch rows—that's another story—but the forty-inch rows. These blades were like forty-two inches or something so one would overlap the other just a hair. In certain types of weeds like what we call 'white weeds', which is—it's a poisonous weed but there's a jillion of them in dryland country. It's tough. They would hang up on those blades, so you had a kid—I remember doing this. You'd be sitting in one of these tractor type seats with the holes in them, you'll see them around in the antique shows. You'd sit in that and you had a steel rod that was about a quarter of an inch—maybe three-eighths of an inch—in diameter and with a round—with a heated—so you put your hand and you'd jam that down in front of that blade, in front of where the ball up was, where the weeds had kind of hung up and starting making a big, fat ball. You stick it down in there and the power of the deal would run it off the end and pull that weed out. It might be ten feet before you had to do it again, might be fifty. But if you had a bunch of those white weeds, you did a lot. So, that was one of the things that we had and most of those were homemade. Finally, some guys started making equipment like that here in Lubbock. Next thing was a go devil. They were both kind of the same looking thing but they had two boxes of like two-by-sixes or two-by-eights that would protect the little cotton. This was made to run when you were cotton was tiny. That would try to protect it from covering up with the dirt. So, then you had—you set your little plows just right and some of those plows were like two and a half, three inches wide, little bitty ones. They'd be running right in behind those things, putting the dirt back on the cotton.

AW:

So the cotton wouldn't burn—wind burn.

CM:

And it would also cover up the weeds. What you wanted to do was put it to bed, that would roll dirt up around the chin of that cotton about an inch high. You had to be careful to get all that set just right.

AW:

And somebody had to be paying attention to make sure it stayed set.

CM:

Right, right. That one didn't require anybody on the machine, it was just a tractor driver, so you was constantly looking back.

AW:

I was going to say, "Now how do you drive the tractor and still keep an eye on that?"

CM:

When you're young, you can do that [Andy laughs] and when you get as old as I am, you look back too many times and your neck won't move. And those—I remember when I got married in May of twenty-eighth of the next year—of '60—I had a crop up—May twenty-eighth was not a good time of year to get married for a farmer and Anne didn't know that. But I was anxious to get married, I didn't care when it was. So anyway, that morning—the night before that, it rained about an inch pretty fast. Maybe it was two days before, I guess it was, had to be. So, the cotton was, in a sense, almost beat down enough—I mean, not the cotton but the dirt, that it would blow so I had to run those on all the little cotton. We'd already run sandfighters the day because you ran those—

AW:

I was just about to ask, "This didn't substitute for sandfighters, it was something you did in addition to it."

CM:

It was in addition to it, yeah. So, we'd run the sandfighters first when you could just barely get through the field. We'd run it at an angle because you couldn't go down the row, it'd make too big a mud hole. So, they'd pull these giant sandfighters. Some of those things were sixteen, eighteen, twenty rows or more but it wouldn't take long to run a whole hundred-sixty acres.

AW:

And you could go across because the cotton wasn't out.

CM:

At an angle, little bit of an angle so it wouldn't be just too much even. Plus, it rained enough it was soft so you could—but, then we ran those things so I got a buddy of mine—my rehearsal dinner was that night. Of course, the rehearsal dinner, it wasn't quite like it is now. It's pretty a pretty big affair now. In those days, we were at the Chinese food restaurants where we had our—we went there on the nineteenth, I think it was.

AW:

The only one we had in town is—I remember it—and he was still there going and doing magic tricks.

CM:

He'd have all his rabbits out of his hat, rubber rabbits. Anyway, I got there a little bit late, about fifteen minutes late. I think her mother was getting anxious. But I got out in Ralls and an ole buddy of mine that went through grade school and junior high with me, high school and went off to Denver with me to school—he just couldn't handle it I guess and he ended up in San Angelo going to school. But anyway, he helped me. He was on one tractor pulling one of those and I was on the other one, pulling one of them. They were called—R&J CrustBusters was the actual selling name for them and they were manufactured here in Lubbock. I forgot what R&J stood for. It was Ross Edwards and—I don't know what the 'J' was. But Ross Edwards happened to be an old friend of mine. He was my dad's really, but he loved me. He had two daughters and that's another story. Anyway, those things were—you get them set right and when it'd get—it was—my daddy used to come out there and he'd say, "That is the most beautiful scene," the cotton wrapped up like that and it had that little dirt. We didn't have chemicals so—

AW:

You were talking about the CrustBuster—we were talking about the—not the sandfighter, but the go devil.

CM:

Yeah, the go devil was one of the big sweeps and it was usually used to clean the beds before you had a crop in there. Then they also used them just like this other but they weren't near as effective, it's pretty primitive.

AW:

Talk a little bit, for the recording, about what a sandfighter is and how it works. You mentioned something that a lot of people will find counterintuitive which is, the worry that you have is after a rain, not—

CM:

It was—you couldn't—first place is, everything was four row and it took a long time to get across a hundred-sixty acres, four row, second year. You couldn't do it in a day. So, people would get their crops blown out. It'd come fast rain, like it does a lot of times, and it'd rain half an inch, but it'd rain hard and in fifteen minutes and then it'd clear up. When it did, it beat that sand down. It was worse in real sandy ground south of Lubbock.

AW:

[speaking at once] Yeah, southwest down there.

CM:

We had what they called "sandy loam," mostly. Mostly.

AW:

We were just talking with Anne this morning about Yoakum County, that sand—

CM:

Yeah, that's pretty sandy over there. You can go back over there now and there's plenty of hills, little hills that run straight down there. They say, "What's that?" "Well, that used to be a wire fence. It's probably still in there." It'd get tumbleweeds and then the dirt would blow in there and build a big wall up for you. Between here and Brownfield, the railroad track had those gigantic deals on either side where they'd blow in there, those tumbleweeds. The sandfighters were designed first—the first one I ever saw was, my brother had helped my grandfather with it a little bit when he was still high school age or something. They took cedar blocks that were about two-foot long and about this big around, pretty good size.

AW:

About eight, nine inches around.

CM:

Yeah eight, nine inches circle. And they drove nails in them, pretty big ones. I mean, they were like sticking out and they were sticking out about this long. They drove all the way around them a dozen times and then they put a chain on the end of that block and put it where there was a bar across there. Then they were all chained—

AW:

So it wouldn't roll.

CM:

Yeah so it wouldn't roll. It'd roll back and forth a little bit like this. They—all of them I saw were horse-drawn. Those would go at angle too because if you put them straight down the row, they'd tear all the cotton up. They'd run it at angle—you're going to lose some cotton just like you do on any sandfighter, it's going to pick it out of there a little bit. That's the first ones I ever saw but I never ran one like that. The ones I had were manufactured, I didn't make them and they were made here in Lubbock. The first ones were just straight, they didn't have folding or anything, so they were about—they were probably four rows to eight rows wide, something about eight rows. You didn't have to—you'd go in at an angle so you weren't—it wasn't a concern about the cotton, you were running over it, really, with the tractor tire. Cotton's tough and it'll come right back up out of that a lot of times.

AW:

And so, when you're running at an angle, there's a real advantage to the wider your implement is because—

CM:

Yeah, you want it as wide as you can build it.

AW:

Because the less damage you're going to do with the tractor as you're going across.

CM:

And you just sweep a big turn, and so you have to kind of plan it. You have to be better at it later on when they started putting in concrete lines because you couldn't hang up on one of those lids or you'd jerk it off, cement and everything.

AW:

So, what did this manufactured sandfighter looks like?

CM:

It was pretty sophisticated. It had blades that were made and they were all made out of standard stuff you'd buy at the steel plant. They were like two-inch wide blades that were probably that long, maybe. That'd be about six inches, maybe, at the most. And they had a little bend to them. When they chopped them—they chopped them off. When they did it made a little sharp, kind of, one side. Then they'd weld them, single at a time, all the way around a two-inch—four-inch tube, whatever it was. There wasn't any bearing in them in those first ones. They were just riding metal on metal. You had grease in there and hopefully that would work because you were running pretty fast with them. You'd run—

AW:

Yeah, so they would—these tubes with the blades welded to them would spin on a rod going down the middle.

CM:

Exactly. There'd be a number of rods and separate—had to be in—most of them were like four-foot maybe between the rods. So, you had a lot of greasers. You'd run them maybe sometimes an hour then you got to get off and grease them because it could get—they'd run fast enough they get hot. That would stop the sand from blowing, most of the time. It would in our area especially.

AW:

Again, explain how that stopped the sand from blowing. Because most people, when I try to explain sandfighter to them, they look at me like I'm crazy because, "Well, it just rained. That'll take care of your problem, right?"

CM:

No, rain makes it worse.

AW:

Yeah. And how is that?

CM:

You love the rain but at the same time you say, “Man, in the morning I got to get ready.” In the sandy high spots—even where you have good sandy loam land, you’re going to have some shallow, chalky stuff. You’re going to have some real sandy spots. That’s where we’d plant the watermelons, on the sandiest spot. Yeah, those things—they would chip the dirt up in such a way, kind of like it would if you’d take a little, tiny scoop and just scooped out about a tiny—it doesn’t take much. Just kind of stirred the soil and it’d go from almost white when the rain had been on it to a light tan, maybe, to a brown once you chipped it.

AW:

Because you’re turning the soil—

CM:

Turning that soil just a little bit, not much.

AW:

So, the sand now was not on top, it was mixed in.

CM:

Right, it was mixed in. And it was stirred—had little clods [0:27:17] rather than just smooth. I mean, sometimes it’d do it. If it rained hard enough, it’d be as smooth as a piece of newspaper.

AW:

And if it’s smooth, the wind can act on it a lot quicker.

CM:

It really gets—yeah, it’ll do it. And it can kill cotton or burn it up in fifteen minutes, if it comes right. Every farmer’s had that happen at some point on some part of his land because he just couldn’t get to it quick enough. The wind would come—a big cloud’d come up and, you know. One time we were—one time we—when it used to rain, get everything covered up and stuff, and get caught up, we’d get everything—what we say, “Get caught up,”—I’d go down to the butane store and we’d play ping-pong sometimes. We have a great ping-pong thing going in Ralls. Man, it’s unbelievable. It’s thirty guys, I guess, who are really good. I even won the doubles championship one time, in a tournament. We’d go down to the gym at school and everybody had

their own table so they'd bring them. We'd have like, I don't know, ten, twelve tables and we'd round robin.

AW:

So, could you make yours curve? I never could—

CM:

Well, we thought we was pretty good. We wouldn't last up against those Orientals. I got a grandson that can play. You can't see the ball, it's gone when you get there. Anyway, that was fun. We would—you had to tend to that kind of stuff. It was one of those deals, I had—right over there by the highway where those pecan trees are now on the Lubbock Highway, the 62-82, there was a real flat field and I thought, That thing's not going to blow. We're not going to have to—it was real wet because—it was too wet, really, to run on but sometimes you had to do it. It'd just make a mess out there. So, I said, "I'm going to wait." Well, we were down playing ping-pong and one of the guys came in and said, "Craig, there's a big cloud back in the east, northeast." I said, "Aww man." I've never seen a cloud in the northeast come in and get us. It's moving east. I've never seen one. So, I was back there playing ping-pong and we was having a good fun and that thing got bigger. He said—he came in there and said, "Craig, that thing's not too far out there now. It's was like the other side of Crosbyton or something, probably East Plains." So, I said, "Maybe I better go back and see what that ground looks like." I got back out there and by the time I got out there and hooked up my rig, started the sandfight, it hit. It burned that cotton. It all died. That's the worse the thing that happened to you because it'll burn it so bad on one side of the—I mean, cotton's like a matchstick when it's coming up like that. It was about two or three inches tall and it burned one side of the stalk, and over it just—like you'd take a knife and skinned it. The other side was green. They said, "Well, wait a few days. It might come back." Well, you wait—it's getting time—I mean, you got to plant over or something. You got to do something and you're sitting there waiting. It's murder to think about it, hard to sleep at night. You're sitting there and you don't know whether to plant over it or what you—that's what you should do. Most people that had good sense were planting over it. If you wanted to save a little money, you'd try to leave it. It'd sit there and it'd be sick—everybody else's cotton started growing. The stuff you planted over would grow and this stuff would just sit there and just be sickly looking like an old flower bed. Finally, you'd give up and you'd have to plant grain sorghum or something.

AW:

Because it was too late to go back with cotton.

CM:

But that's one of the tribulations of farming. It's not all fun and games and they're not all rich. I

know a lot of these young guys nowadays, man, they buy these pickups, I don't know how much they cost.

AW:

They don't make any cheap ones.

CM:

Yeah, you don't need those. You can't tell them that but you don't need those. I've farmed with—I had a heater in it—coming from the factory: no air conditioning, no radio—simple, the most cheap pickup you could buy. No four wheel drive and everything. Everybody used to make fun of me. They even had black tires. Some of them put white tires on their car and I'd go, "Why would you do that?" Anyway, that's life. I'll tell you one of the reasons that I made it and was very successful at it was that I didn't borrow hardly any money to farm. If I didn't have it, I didn't spend it. We just did without it and figured out something. We repaired, we welded everything. I had a—my dad put a concrete platform to set that eight-row planter down once I graduated to that. We did all the work on setting it—that was great because you can set it on there, set it down on it and set the thing—set the bolts, and plows and everything exactly right because you had a perfectly flat surface. It made it a lot easier than doing it in the field. But, farmers got real strong arms, even today, because you're using the nuts that are fifteen, sixteen to put the plows in. To set one of those eight-rows, man, it took like forty-five minutes to an hour to get all of that set just right. You'd be pretty—it was hard. If you didn't tighten those things really up, you'd lose one and then that'd tear up a cotton tire—I mean, a tractor tire.

AW:

Tell me about—you mentioned forty-inch rows, that that was a whole other story.

CM:

Well, Mr. **Gillum** [00:33:03], who's a great old man that live a long time, and he lived out there on the farm about a mile and a half from where I did. He was on the draft board in Lubbock for years. He's part of the Spikes family, the ole Spikes historical family. He was married to one of the Spikes' daughters and she was an old lady when I started farming. They finally rented their farm to me because I was doing a good job keeping mine clean than the guy that was kinfolk's of theirs that weren't, and all the other ones. Anyway, that was—he told me that—I'd question him and he'd have some pictures of his cotton farm out there. No weeds in it, cotton about belly-high and the horse pulling deal down there. I said, "Mr. **Gillum** [0:33:53]"—I said, "How did you get by with—how'd you get these weeds out and everything?" He said, "Son, when we first started, there wasn't any weeds." They came in over the next twenty years. He said, "There wasn't any tumbleweeds, there wasn't any"—what we call "careless weeds," that wasn't the name of them, really. They weren't careless but—he said—showed him—and the cotton was gorgeous because they plowed up that grassland that had been—and it was just mellow with all those roots that's

been down in there. By the time I was, if you didn't plow it a lot, you'd have weeds everywhere. The forty-inch row was what a horse could go down. You'd plant—that was as close as you get them and a horse to stay right down in between them. The horse would do it, he'd stay between the crop. You had to make them go across the row. They just didn't want to do it, they wanted to go down. Their eye—somehow, their eyes—they'd tell me that's why everything was forty inches for years and years and years. Later on, somebody experimented with thirty-two inch rows and it was almost like blasphemy. "You're not going to do that." The harvesters had to be modified to do that because once you did that—cotton, corn, everything was set on forty-inch rows, and you'd have to move them in. John Deere had to redesign everything so you could move them up and down and account for that. They still do, even those biggest ones. I think that they actually have adjusted which way you can put them, narrower or something. That was—as far as I know, that's what the forty-inch rows was all about.

AW:

Makes sense to me.

CM:

It's really an issue, how to narrow tractor wheels or something. You don't really—it doesn't—there not much advantage to narrowing a row. They thought it would increase yield. Tech though it would, but you don't see much of it.

AW:

Right, I know one of the things that I remember in the fifties when we had that farm out by Slaton, my grandad had grown up on farm but he had become a mathematics teacher in the Depression. He wound up going to work for the post office. He always farmed something, but he also went to college. He was—I wouldn't call him experimental but he wasn't adverse to it. I remember him talking about an idea that came around about then called "skip-row." So they actually—by eliminating rows, they increased the space between them. The notion was, you used—it was more efficient with the water, I guess.

CM:

There was eighty inches between two rows but then there's forty inches, usually, between—there'd be two rows forty inches apart and then eighty inches to the next—yeah. That really is still a great way to do dryland. There'll be a day coming, I think, when we'll do a lot more of that.

AW:

Yeah because we're going to be dryland.

CM:

I don't know what the future lies in that, that's another story.

AW:

That's one of the things we want to talk about today. Before we get to it though, can we go back to the seed—you had that seed that you—

CM:

Oh yeah.

AW:

No, I mean—

CM:

You got to direct me because I get all—

AW:

No, no, no, that's why I'm making notes here. But I am really interested in the seed because—and I guess it's just what little time I spent growing up on one the notion that it's illegal for you to save back seed seems just completely wrong to me.

CM:

The seed that I was planting that first year was strictly from the gin. The gin took the cotton seed—fiber off but it left enough that it looked white. Cottonseed's black but it looks white covered up. So, they had special planters—I had, in those first few years—

AW:

Because if you buy seed to plant it slick, right, it's been delinted?

CM:

In the early days, you can actually buy fuzzy seed.

AW:

But, I mean, typically you—

CM:

Yeah, but it was. It's been—the way they did the first time, they burned it off, which is always weird and if you didn't do it just right, it hurt the germination real bad. Then they started using acid.

AW:

Yeah, chemical delinting.

CM:

I never did figure out why but it was—when you poured it in the bin that had that acid on it, you could tell it. It'd make a little dust like—and you could breathe stuff. Probably shouldn't have but we did, and never thought much about it.

AW:

So, how did you plant fuzzy seed? Because you couldn't make that go through a hopper all that easy.

CM:

It did though. It was amazing.

AW:

It did?

CM:

Yeah. At that time, I was farming with Farmall planters, four-row—what do they call them—number ten planters. That was their best kind but they were pretty old. The other ones were already coming out with newer—including International's—coming out with newer type planters then. That seed—they put a—in fact, out on the wall out here in the garage, I've got a plate for it. You had different—you take the plate out and you could change those plates and it would make the difference in how much seed would be planted because of how fast it'd go.

AW:

And it holds in the plate?

CM:

The plate had little fingers sticking out like this. It'd go around and that—they had a wire, so when it went by the wire it kind of pushed it, pushed the seed down in it. It's kind of a little thing about that wide, about a quarter-inch wide, that did that. It made a little noise. [imitates noise] It'd just be making a little funny noise. As long as you could hear that, you knew everything was working good. It'd go around and around then it would plant that cotton seed. It was amazing. It had a—we all had a plastic tube going down so you could look back and you could see that ole number one over there was stopped up because once in a while they would. That fiber just gets—something'd happen or you'd set your planter down too quick, just straight down after a rain and you'd get a little mud, little wet stuff, and it'd stop it at the bottom. It'd take a minute—you'd

start off, everything'd look real good but if you didn't look back pretty quick, you'd have a blank spot there and there'd be a lot of them in a field.

AW:

So, that planter would plant fuzzy seed as well as slick seed?

CM:

Yeah. Then they changed—we'd go right to the acid seed with a different plate. Obviously later on, things really changed when they came out with the air planter, which is—International, actually, was the first, I think, to build that.

AW:

So it's pneumatic? It would blow the seed through the—

CM:

Yeah, it somehow—and it was real precise so you could plant crops four inches apart. The other was just kind of random.

AW:

So, you'd have to depend on the strongest surviving if they were close together.

CM:

We'd plant like—I remember planting thirty-five, forty pounds an acre of that seed. You were constantly stopping, shoveling, fill up the box.

AW:

Then with the air planters, how much less seed would you plant now?

CM:

Nowadays, the planters are really precise. People tell me they plant as low as thirteen, fourteen—

AW:

That's a big difference.

CM:

—pounds but they don't count that anymore, they go by number of seed. I asked my guy that's farming my land yesterday, "How much seed'd you plant?" He said—I forgot what it was. It was like twelve-thousand two-hundred and something seeds per acre. "Aww c'mon."

AW:

Well, wouldn't that assume—if you're doing it that precise, doesn't that assume that every one of those seeds is going to germinate?

CM:

Well, that's one reason it costs so much, they do germinate a lot better.

AW:

Whereas the old thing, if you had a few extra seeds, you knew one of them was going to—

CM:

Well, we used to say that, "We got to plant enough to take care of those that won't come up. Then you got to plant enough—to add to that, you got to plant enough that that sandfighter won't tear up too much of it. Then you got to plant enough that the ones that you cover up with dirt won't die." Once you had a green leaf there, you couldn't cover it up, you'd kill it.

AW:

So, was seed—I mean, seed is a huge cost input today.

CM:

It is, huge.

AW:

Was it that big a cost input when you started?

CM:

No, it was like nothing.

AW:

So, you could afford it?

CM:

Yeah. For a quite a few years, really until this—not too many years ago, what you'd do is you would buy, say twenty-five bags of certified seed, which was a thing that happened through the A&M—through the state.

AW:

Certification means you know what hybrid it is or what?

CM:

You know exactly what the breeding background—and then they plant it and they normally don't want any other cotton around it.

AW:

Because they don't want the pollination to cross.

CM:

So, they'll do that, then that seed is certified and it's also certified—it doesn't have weeds in it. Ninety percent of the time, that's right. Once in a while they get by with one that has cockleburs or something in there, because those seeds look about the same and the machine that separates them doesn't get that job done. That's murder when you do that. Anyway, people would—they would really gripe at the state for certifying a seed that's got cockleburs in it. That ole boy, he'll probably a 'F' in class or whatever. That seed was—for all practical purposes—was not an issue in cost. That was not. There were a lot of things that weren't an issue in cost, fuel was not. When I first started farming, gasoline was seventeen cents a gallon.

AW:

Did you burn gasoline? Butane, diesel?

CM:

Early on, we had gasoline tractors for the first about—well, from '59 up to '64. Then '64 is when I switched over to John Deere and they came out with that—what do they call it—the 'modern tractor', had all the hydraulic systems on it, power brakes and everything. Man, it was—they just ran off and left International harvester at that time. To this day, they still can't compete with them.

AW:

Were those powered by what, butane?

CM:

Diesel.

AW:

Diesel?

CM:

Yeah. What happened was, that the first diesel tractors had a gasoline engine with it somehow. I don't know—I think they used the same cylinders but they had spark plugs.

AW:

To get it started?

CM:

And you'd start it—and especially in the cold, you'd start it—because diesel starts with compression, and it was hard to keep compression up in those old—big, old cylinders in them.

AW:

Yeah they're huge.

CM:

So you'd start your tractor and let it run for, say, ten minutes, and then you'd start running real fast and you'd switch it over to diesel and it'd cough it, and jerk around but it finally—then once it got going you'd have more trouble.

AW:

So, they didn't—when I had—the diesel cars I had all had a glow plug.

CM:

That was the next move after that. The very next—about a year or two later they came out with this glow plug thing. That worked pretty good but there was a lot of times you couldn't get that tractor started and you just had to pull it. We'd put another tractor on a chain in front of, put the thing about third gear and start pulling it, and pulled it maybe a quarter of a mile, I've seen them. A lot of time it'll be a hundred yards or something but it'd get that pressure going in that thing and it'd kick it off. It wasn't long until they—I don't know what they did different but that's not even an issue anymore. I mean, they fire up quick as—like a diesel car.

AW:

I just remember my old diesel car [Craig coughs] particularly when I lived in Colorado and I was driving in it. I was always buying old diesels because the only diesel you could get was a Mercedes, and I couldn't afford a new one so—but boy, you had to take care of those things. You had to keep the block warm.

CM:

[speaking at once] They had problems with them. But diesel has more—I'm not a scientist—but diesel has more power per, I guess, gallon or something, some kind of rules, than gasoline does or butane.

AW:

It generates its torque at a lower RPM [**Revolutions Per Minute**].

CM:

Yeah, it can run slow and still pull.

AW:

And have the energy to pull.

CM:

Nowadays, a hundred percent of the tractors are diesel. I don't know anybody's that got a tractor that's not diesel except somebody that's an antique dealer. They're very reliable. I mean, those tractors that I had the rest of my farming career were all—you know, you'd walk out there on a cold day, turn the key and it'd just take off. They were diesel so it just wasn't an issue anymore.

AW:

Diesel was also a lot cheaper at one time.

CM:

Oh yeah, it was.

AW:

Not so much today.

CM:

Yeah it was. Nowadays it seems like for some reason the EPA [**Environmental Protection Agency**] or something, they got it boosted up where it's higher than—

AW:

Oh yeah.

CM:

I can remember when it was way cheaper, yeah Butane was four cents a gallon when I started in 1959. There was no tax on butane. We used that for everything. We started using it in our pickups. Somebody said, "Hey man, you can go down to Co-op and get a carburetor and it's like twenty-two dollars. You throw the other one away, put this one on there and get you a butane tank in the back of your pickup." Everybody had one. That went on. Of course, they wasn't paying any tax on it, wasn't any fuel tax then they made a law that you had to pay it.

AW:

But you probably paid it only once a year.

CM:

You weren't supposed to use your farm butane—

AW:

On your pickup.

CM:

—so all of a sudden, nobody went to the filling station and filled up, they filled up on the farm. Well, the tax people got upset with that, and so next thing you know, they pass a law where you just had to—whether you used it—no matter what you use it for—if it was in a pickup or a car, you had to go have this sticker. It was like a hundred and eighty dollars a year. They figured that was about what the tax would be on an average.

AW:

And so that's what the sticker costs.

CM:

I had a good friend that had a hired hand and this ole boy'd forgotten to fill up his pickup out there on the farm. He was down in town and he noticed, "Man, it was really getting low." When butane gets so low, it doesn't have enough natural pressure. You'll start to kind of [imitates noise]. It makes a funny sound. So, he goes into the Co-op and he fills it up. He never think the sign's off on it, takes off and everything, say anything about it. About a week later, some government agency came in and audited that Co-op, that Ralls—Crosby County Co-op. They saw these tickets in there, they started picking them out and say, "This is what"—this was a hundred and ninety gallons or whatever it was. I think that was about two-hundred gallon tanks back then—maybe not that big but whatever it was, he began to get suspicious so he started tracing it. Of course, it had a license number on it. Even if they knew it, they had to write that license number down. So they went out to this farmer boy and, I mean, they gave him hell. It wasn't long after that, that everybody was paying that tax. But that took a while, it took a couple years—about four, or five years, I guess, for that to happen. I used butane in my pickup for seven or eight years.

AW:

I've had people tell me that it was good for the motor too, that the pickup motor—

CM:

Well, ours weren't—we just bought—I had a Chevrolet that was a—they called it a 'hot water six'.

AW:

I had one of those.

CM:

They didn't do anything but change the carburetor. That was it. I don't know—there may have been later on some stuff on the butane tractors that had been changed to allow for that. Deere came out in '64, I guess it was. Hurst Farm Supply was owned by L.J. Hurst—"Red Hurst" we called him—and I was a customer of his. I'd switched over to these butane—had a big tank on the front end. Boy, that was a modern thing because they had all of that hydraulic stuff, what we called "quick hitch." On a Farmall cultivator, for instance, they had cultivators that was on the front end and the back end. For one guy—I don't care how strong you were, you had to be really careful, because you had to pull up to it and then you had to use those big ole—what I call "farmer's jacks," you see them in the back of the pickup, and jack that one up in there and start bolting it in, and then jack up the other ones just about that far, get it lined up, then get back on the tractor and line it up. Then you'd get back off, get back on, back off and it'd take—man, sometimes it'd take like an hour to go from something else to a cultivator. That was the hardest one to put on. Even the—a lot of the equipment just was hard to hook up. It was better if your farm was big enough to have at least one hired hand to help you. I'd have him get in the tractor and he'd line it up or whatever. Deere came out with a hydraulic system. The first one you had to back into, it had some little blades and it wasn't really efficient because it left a little bit of play. When you're going on cotton you don't want any play in there. It wasn't long until they had that completely go back under it and then snap it in. Man, you can go from a cultivator, to a planter, to a sprayer to whatever in seconds almost. That's another reason you couldn't find any—there wasn't any dealers left hardly. They just—

AW:

All the Farmall.

CM:

Yeah. If it hadn't had been for Farmall coming out with those backhoes—they bought Case—

AW:

Yeah and so they were doing backhoe dealers.

CM:

[speaking at once] Case had a lot of—what do you call it—we called it "commercial construction" stuff. The one that was most popular was the backhoe. To this day, they still make a great backhoe. I don't know why it's any better than somebody else's because they all look each other over, but it is. It's really good. I think that's the only that saved them. They make a good tractor, too. I hate to say that. [Andy laughs] John Deere dealer.

AW:

[speaking at once] Because you're a John Deere—

CM:

Most of their equipment is not near up to the engineering that Deere has. They just got off and got way ahead of them somehow. They were doing electronic welding, electronic stuff, laser cuttings and stuff in those factories. I've been in them. That's one thing that we used to do, is take paneloads of guys up to the factory. They'd see all that stuff and then they weren't quite as upset about the price. They say, "Man, that's really something."

AW:

I did some interviews with the Marvin's down in the south part of the county and I was really impressed with how much interaction they had with John Deere on the engineering side. Because they farm a lot of countryside and they talked about Deere sending out teams of engineers to see what they were doing. "How is this working?"

CM:

You're talking about Vardeman, Buzz Vardeman. He's a friend of mine.

AW:

I was really—of course, they have an impressive operation—but I was impressed about as much as anything by the stories of how much the John Deere people paid attention to what they were doing in the field.

CM:

The story was: we started selling those new strippers when they first came—they weren't any all four-row then—with the baskets, had the augers and all that stuff in there. There was problems in them. We'd bring them in, we'd have to put—they wore bearings out real bad and stuff in them. Ole Vardeman, he started doing all the farmers around there. We'd have one that we just couldn't keep it being serviced all the time. Take it to Vardeman—he built a big barn, you've probably seen all that.

AW:

He took me through—they took my through and showed me. It's full of equipment too. [laughs]

CM:

He didn't have to do too much to change them over to where they never had any problem again. We'd call Deere—because some of them, the warranty was just eating us up. We'd call Deere engineers, and of course they say, "Oh no, we've been working on that for a long time. We got that all straightened out." Well, it wasn't. Finally, somebody took over up there that had good

sense, and they sent two or three engineers down here and he put them up. They stayed in his house. His wife's a really great cook. That's just the kind of guy he was. He didn't mind showing them, but he did patent all of that. He told me—it's been seven or eight years—he had—I think he had like a hundred and something patents that he had developed over those years. Now he gets a piece of all that.

AW:

That's good.

CM:

Thank goodness. He needs to be—I'm not sure he hadn't been already—but he needs to be picked out of the crowd for a big award for that because he had a ton of things to do with—and Deere ought to give him a million shares of stock, is what they ought to do.

AW:

I was very impressed at—you just mentioned something that's very interesting. You said the warranty work was eating you alive as a dealer. The ordinary would think the warranty work would be coming out of the pocket of the manufacturer, not the dealer. [laughs]

CM:

It's not that way. I don't know about cars but I can tell you about tractors. What happens is that when they want to find out how much they'll much pay you on a warranty deal or something—like for instance, overhauled engine, they got these guys in Moline up there—they got a perfectly clean thing, they got nothing else to do, they practice on that. And it's a lot different than one company and it's got bent parts on it, the cab's crooked, you got to take the cab off to work on it, this kind of stuff. So, they tell you what takes—six hours and twenty-two minutes to do it, something. There's no way you was ever going to get that done in six hours and twenty—and that's what they pay you—

AW:

They only pay you on the six hours and twenty-two minutes. If it takes you twelve hours then—

CM:

Yeah exactly. The tractor's got mud all over it, you got to wash it, you got to clean it down, spray it down with diesel, get everything off of it before you open it up. You never make it on warranty. I don't know anybody that's going to get their money back on a warranty. Those things were just—those strippers were just driving everybody crazy. Ole Vardeman one—he built this on a—it was one of the cotton strippers—they were having some trouble underneath, stopping up or something, and they couldn't figure it out. I went out there and he had built a bed underneath

that tractor—underneath that stripper that he could put a man in there with a camera. He'd sit down there and film that thing and he'd—

AW:

I think he's still got it. I think I remember him showing it to me. I said, "You did what?" And he said, "Yeah, we'd run it. [Laughs]

CM:

He's an amazing guy. Then the last thing I know of him doing—but he's getting in bad health, I think, and his wife died. But anyway, I think he still lives in that house. His son's farming that land now.

AW:

Yeah, his son's house is—

CM:

Was there with the—

AW:

With the tractor in the dining room.

CM:

He just couldn't do it. The last one I know of was those folding sprayers that are self-propelled. They got the big wheels on the sides. They were—the hookup in them made them, kind of—if they'd settle down and park it, the wings would be just right. But they were out there—man, it's like twenty-four rows or something. There's twelve on each side.

AW:

Yeah, they're huge.

CM:

So, when you turned around at the end, if the ground was unlevel, like a bar ditch or something, why it'd come down and drag it, hit, or break something, or tear it up or something. You had to really be careful. It'd take forever to get it around. And he got studying that. I don't know what he did. He put a little bit different in the angles of the cables, and next thing you know, it was working perfect. Deere enjoyed selling jillions of them after that, once they fixed them with his—[Andy coughs]. Farmers—a lot of times, a guy down the road would come up with something that you said, "Man, that'd really work good. We got to have that." So you'd go down to the blacksmith shop and he'd make it. No patents, no nothing. He'd just make it, and most of

the time the farmer that figured it out, he never got anything out of it. Never got the satisfaction that he built it for everybody. That's just the way it was.

AW:

Is there a blacksmith shop still in—

CM:

You know, I don't know. There was one in Ralls recently, I know. They got to be because you have—maybe they don't even go through the trouble—we sharpened—you'd plow until those would get dull, and then you'd take them off—some of those plows would have twenty-three. They always have an odd number because the outside had to be wider. We'd take all those plows down there and the blacksmith, he'd put them in the fire, get the red-hot and then he had a big belt and they would bam it like this. [hits hand to imitate sound]

AW:

Trip-hammer kind of thing.

CM:

Yeah and so he'd hold those—he had his gloves on—he'd have his—not only his gloves but he'd have those old tools that he actually made that would clamp that and he could just eyeball—he just beat those things down in front to where they're sharp again. Didn't have to be razor sharp, be just sharp, then they were ready to go. The angles had to be right so this guy had to be—you know, he had to know what he's doing. I don't know—nowadays we sell an awful lot of sweeps. I've got a feeling that when they get worn, they just throw them behind the barn or something and don't fix them.

AW:

Don't get new ones.

CM:

Yeah. And it might be costly to fix them like most stuff nowadays. You're better off if you throw it out and buy a new one cheaper than you can fix it or hire somebody to fix it. That may be the way it is. I've lost contact with that. I just don't know.

AW:

Before I get to a general question, there's an issue that came up. I was—let me just—it's a hot topic now—I'm starting some interviews with people who were growing grapes. Most of those folks are—they grow other things too. This is an issue that seems to have affected them early on, maybe more than other crops: that is the idea of overspray with genetically treated crops, particularly cotton, that resist a particular herbicide. So, you can spray it a little more liberally

but then you're going to have either a mistake in the application, or you're going to have wind or whatever.

CM:

We don't know what—twenty years down the road, we don't know what we're doing to that land, I think.

AW:

Is that a brand new problem? Was that ever part of a problem along and that is, the application of whatever it would be?

CM:

I think it was. I can remember when Treflan came out; we call it the “yellow chemical.” That was what the farmers called it, because it'd get yellow when it was—it's clear. When you touch it with water, why, it goes bright yellow. And I mean, it gets on everything. It'd get on your—you come in and your overalls would be yellow from the waist down. I don't know how much that stuff has gotten—we were really stupid, handling it like a—nowadays they're very careful. Most farmers are very careful how they use that stuff, but we just used that kind of stuff and we never thought anything about it. We thought if you bought it, it was okay. It was, like you say, it worked marvelously. I mean, the first year that I used Treflan, we put it on with a tandem, which is like a plow—“disk plow” we called it. The only difference between a tandem and a one-way is that the tandem threw the dirt both ways so it didn't have a big hole on one side. So, we'd mix—we'd spray with that tandem.

AW:

While you're running the tandem, you would spray it at the same time.

CM:

Right, we'd spray it. You'd get everything calibrated so that you knew how much—you'd factor the water first so you'd know how many gallons you were putting on brake during all this, and get that going. Once you did it the first year, you really get good at it; setting it and everything. You put that on, and then when you'd list, you'd list like you should—I mean, either the contour or whatever they we're doing. Then you're planting that bed and there'd be enough of that mixed in there to keep all the weeds out. Well, the first year I did that there was zero weeds, so I planted and I sandfought once or twice and I never plowed. It was amazing. We had a lot of time on our hands, play a lot of ping-pong.

AW:

That's a big difference.

CM:

Yeah. Now, the problem was, was—no, we weren't even having to walk out in the fields like we used to and check it. It used to—the first thing you did in the morning was go out and check—place—you'd walk out here, walk over here, see how things were going. We got pretty lazy about that kind of stuff, and all that was—everybody—I mean, they sold stuff high. A lot of robberies, they were always stealing it out of your gin or stealing it out of your deal.

AW:

When I was a young police officer, we had—it was a big issue—there were hijacks of semi-truck loads of Treflan. In other words, they'd hijack them and sell them.

CM:

I mean, these are talking about million dollars' worth. I think it was like—a five-gallon can was like forty-seven dollars or something.

AW:

That's exactly the number I remember.

CM:

You could steal quite—maybe more now. I can't even remember but it was high.

AW:

You know where they sell most of that? They sold it at gambling games.

CM:

Oh really?

AW:

The guys running the gambling games, they'd run them here in Lubbock and they were selling—because we'd raid those things and you'd find a room full of Treflan. And they were selling it for twenty dollars.

CM:

But anyway, what happened was, was the really noxious weeds—that was perfect for careless weeds, even tumbleweeds—killed that. I forgot most of the things—but it didn't kill white weeds. White weeds is what—belladonna, something they made out of them back in the ancient days—but it's a plant that has white leaves on one side and kind of silver on the other side and makes the little berry that's about like a small blueberry but it's gray, about this color.

AW:

Yeah, yeah. but it looks like a tomato in the stripes on the—

CM:

A little bit, yeah.

AW:

In fact, they are distant kin to the tomato, which is why the Spanish, when they first came to the new world, didn't trust eating tomatoes.

CM:

They wouldn't eat them because of that.

AW:

They looked too much the white weeds.

CM:

But anyway, those things—and next thing you know, after about two or three years of doing that, you had patches of white weeds. I'm not talking about a few, I'm talking about a lot. So, they'd almost quit growing—you couldn't grow cotton where they were.

AW:

Why did Treflan not kill the white weed?

CM:

Well, it just—I don't know because it's supposed to kill anything that's a broad leaf. It didn't kill grass. Of course, you started having Johnson grass problems, especially if you had grain sorghum and you didn't use—couldn't plant Treflan and plant grain sorghum.

AW:

Yeah because it'd kill your—

CM:

It complicated things because if you got held out on cotton, and you wanted to go back to grain sorghum, you had a real problem. A lot of times you'd—

AW:

You'd still have Treflan in the soil.

CM:

You'd go plow it a couple times hoping to get rid of it then of course it'd be dry and you had to wait on the rain. There was all kind of complications of—once you started planning what you were going to do, where you were going to plant stuff because you generally wouldn't go back with grain sorghum where you had put Treflan for cotton. You just had to leave it out. That's all there was to it. So, those kinds of things came up and then these guys—the first stuff wasn't genetic, it didn't do anything but killed broad-leafed plants. I don't know how they did that but they did it. That was all it was used for—I don't know—quite a few years. Then they began to—it's what they call—cotton seed that had verticillium wilt resistance, it had two or three other things and it had chemical resistance. The smarter they got, the better they could do that. So, it'd begin to have that. The problem has come in the last two years, I think, is that the weeds are smarter than we are. They've learned to say, "I don't care what they do with that chemical, we're going to get them anyway." How they do it, they just modify it like people do about pink eye or TB [tuberculosis] or whatever it is. That's some of God's work. In the long run, you can't whip him on that kind of side of stuff. So, I don't know what they're going to do on some of that because it's gotten to be a big problem lately. This year, if you remember this—you've seen what—last year, Presley—there were a lot of fields that had quite a bit of tumbleweeds that were—not tumbleweeds—

AW:

Careless weeds.

CM:

Careless weeds—that were that tall. But those boogers, when they mature, it takes an axe to cut them down.

AW:

You sure can't do it with a hoe.

CM:

They'll stop up your strippers and just screw up everything. I don't know—what I think—this is what I think: there's going to be a time coming, maybe sooner than we think, that we're going to be back there with those go devils and those little CrustBusters and stuff. We're going to be farming like we're supposed to be.

AW:

What about—the other thing we used to do, which is walk down that row with a hoe—

CM:

Yeah and maybe you'll do that. It was almost impossible to hire anybody to do that anymore.

AW:

I'll tell you, it was—I suggest to people that if you want to understand the mathematical concept of infinity, you get down at the end of a row with a hoe in your hand, look down there and you can see it's going off into the—it never does stop.

CM:

We had—we still did a little hoeing once in a while in those days. There was a kid—I'll never forget this—a barber in Ralls, real good barber—I went to him—and he had a son that was—he wasn't a loner, he was very pleasant with adults but he didn't have a lot of—he didn't play baseball, he didn't football. He was just that kind. He had a motorbike that his dad had bought him, and he wanted to—he said, “Mr. McDonald, I want to hoe. I got to make some money.” I said, “Well, son, have you ever done that,” and he said, “No.” But he said, “I know—I've seen people doing that,” so I took him out—he came out to my farm and I showed him what to do. I said, “Don't skip anything, don't miss them because that's worse. Then I don't have anything—next thing you know, they'll be up above the cotton and I'll know it. When you get them little, you get them all. It's easy.

AW:

They're a lot easier to chop too.

CM:

Keep your hoe sharp, carry your file in your back pocket, get you a big jug of water, set it there by your motor bike and when you come back, get a drink of water every little bit and then move your motor bike down a little bit. So, he did and that guy was—he was the best I ever had. I mean, he walked—he was high school age, he was probably about tenth grade—ninth, tenth grade, something like that. He farmed—where I was living out at the old farm—that whole farm that year. He just kept after it. I don't even remember what I was paying him but—it was wage but it was what you—he couldn't make any better somewhere but he wasn't going to make any less. It was like two-fifty an hour probably. He got after it and he was happy. He made enough money, I guess, to keep him happy all the years in school. His dad—they finally moved off and I often wonder what became of him but I figured he's probably a scientist or something. He's a worker, I can tell you that; wouldn't be doing any worse. Those kind of kids, I think, need to be rewarded.

AW:

You bet. Gosh, we used to chop cotton in the fifties. Not just us—my granddaddy was stubborn in that way too. He thought that was the best way to—in fact, I may have told you this—he carried the mail in the morning—

CM:

Yeah, had a contract-type deal then he probably—

AW:

Well, he was an employee of the post office but he carried the route down by the Forest Ranch and down on the north side, kind of where we live. He'd get done with that by the afternoon and then he'd work his small, little farm. While he was carrying the mail, he carried a hoe. I used to go out on the mail run with him because he was my granddad, it was fun. He'd be driving along and he'd see either a snake—and he'd stop and chop that snake with a hoe or he'd see—if there was a farmer he thought was a good farmer and he saw a weed, he'd stop—

CM:

He'd go get it.

AW:

—[laughs] He'd go down there, walked over there to get it because he said he hated the weeds.

CM:

The early days were a lot cleaner farmers than now. We were allowed chemicals and allowed stuff that—I just think we're going to see a time—there was a widow woman over there in Lorenzo—and I can't remember her name—but she was kind of peculiar, little bit, but she farmed by herself. When her husband died, she kept farming it. She got on a tractor and all this kind of—and she would not use chemicals. When Treflan came out she said, "The Lord put this soil out here and I'm not going to contaminate it." She meant it. She farmed, I don't know, ten or twelve years before she died. She was probably about seventy when she died in '75. She did not ever use chemicals. I thought somebody ought to buy that farm to have it in better shape.

AW:

Especially if you decided at some point you wanted to try to make money raising something that was labeled 'organic'.

CM:

Our area grows—man, you can grow any kind of vegetable. We could cover the world up with broccoli and all that stuff—tomatoes. We make great tomatoes out there. I had a neighbor who had planted, I think, forty acres of tomatoes which is—

AW:

That's a lot.

CM:

That's Dallas-size. They were big ole—they came out, it was about that big around. Well, when it came time to harvest, it was like everything in vegetables, there's a lot of crooks involved in that.

AW:

Plus they all come—they really come ripe really at the same time.

CM:

Just about. Well, you try to grow those kind too. If you don't, then the green ones you just kick them off. They just rot out there on the ground, build the soil up, I guess. This ole boy, Lyman Abel was his name, his—

AW:

Lyman Abel?

CM:

Abel, yeah. His family had the Abel—what was it—Abel something International Harvester House in Ralls. But anyway, he raised these tomatoes and he couldn't sell them so he just left them out there. I started carrying a pepper shaker with me. [Andy laughs] Every time, I'd drive out of my way to go by there and I'd pick up about six or eight of those things and I'd eat them with pepper on them every day until they were out to where they just rotted. After they rotted, he plowed them all up, had a lot of volunteer tomatoes coming up and everything from that all. The same way with pickles—

AW:

Onions.

CM:

I've seen pickles, and onions and stuff like that. They'd send those onions—load them on a boxcar in Ralls in baskets and they'd take them to Chicago. About four days later the guy called back and said, "Well, we can't pay you on those because they're all bad." He didn't know whether he had sold them or what. That happened all the time.

AW:

I remember some farmers in our area tried to circumvent that on a few things by doing contracts. In other words, there were pre-paid. Did that work any better?

CM:

Well, I don't know whether—it just—I never knew anybody that kept doing it. They'd do it a

year or two. I was kind of an experimenter and we started studying the grain elevator guy and I started studying the—Harold Pretty was the guy that had the grain elevator there. We thought—we read about—what's that—I knew I was going to forget something. But anyway, it's a seed—it looks a little bit like a—man, I'm getting all of a sudden—

AW:

Is it an oil seed?

CM:

Yeah it's an oil seed.

AW:

It wasn't war was it?

CM:

War, yeah, that was it. I was the first person to ever plant an acre of war [1:17:09] in Crosby County.

AW:

How did you—isn't it a little, tiny seed?

CM:

It is.

AW:

[speaking at once] So, how do you handle it?

CM:

Well, it's in a pod just like beans or black-eyed peas, but they're pretty flat. They have a seed in there that's the same size as grain sorghum. They're just about—

AW:

Oh, so it's not—

CM:

It's not tiny tiny but it's the same—so a combine would just cut—it'd harvest them good. The problem is that the plant—number one is it's a spindly kind of a plant but it's a—it's tough. It doesn't require much water. We kept saying, "Man, there's going to be someone to do this for dryland, fifteen-hundred pounds an acre, which we did, which is not much but if you got the

price high enough it was okay. Well, we had to sell it number one in Chillicothe. You had to haul to all the way to Chillicothe.

AW:

It's pretty expensive transportation, wasn't it, for that ride?

CM:

The ole boy that had the deal up there was a German. He owned the plant. He was the only one that had a plant so he had you by the *cojones*. You're up there, he'd offer you're a price and you'd look at Wall Street or something and you'd say, "That's not enough." He said, "Well, that's all we can do." It's a very important plant. I don't know, to this day, where they're growing it all, but they're not growing here. I tried it three years and about the second year it began to dawn on me there's a problem. This stuff is as hard as a rock. You can't hardly bite it shut in your mouth.

AW:

So how do they crush it? Do they crush it chemically?

CM:

I don't know. I'm sure it must be because they separate it—it makes about four different kind of products. Sheet rock, for instance it has the smooth side, it's in that smooth side. It's in ice cream. It's some kind of smoother. I just don't know what it does but it's used in a lot of products. So, it's got to be growing somewhere but it must be in Poland or something. I don't know where it is. Of course, this ole boy, he said that they grew a lot of it in Germany so I don't know. But it's—it looks dry when you combine it coming out of there. You pick it up in your hand and it's dry, nothing. It exudes an oil that it's more like a wax. So, everything inside that combine like the augers going up to the bin—

AW:

Got coated with it.

CM:

They started to get coated. After a while, it'll get—I mean, it'll get that thick and you can't get it out. You got to go buy a new auger.

AW:

Really? There's no way to clean that stuff out?

CM:

No. I've never heard of it. There's got to be something. They don't harvest all that by hand so. It

got to where you just couldn't—wasn't worth it. I spent I don't know how many hours trying to get it out. You take the thing apart and you had this steel tube down through there. I really would screwdriver it as far it would reach. It was like cholesterol in the veins. I said, "That's it, I've had all I can do. I've had a noble effort to do." The only crop I know of that's been consistent for a small group of people is pumpkins. They've done well with those.

AW:

What about sunflower?

CM:

Well, sunflowers—

AW:

Does it grow—

CM:

—are generally so cheap. They grow them by the jillions up in North and South Dakota.

AW:

So you can't compete with that price?

CM:

Yeah, the price is just what gets you. The other thing is those seeds, when you harvest them you have to wait until that seed is completely mature. So, when you combine them, you're going to have a little bit of slap and stuff and they get in the ground.

AW:

Now you got a lot more.

CM:

They come up for two or three years and they come up in the row a lot of times. You can't—you'll notice them for a little while and next thing you know, here they are. Boy, they drive you crazy.

AW:

I read before in some of our archives and other material I've come across about—and tell me if you know anything about this because I'm dying to find someone who has heard about it—that early on, around the turn of the century around 1900, there were people who actually harvested devil's claw seed and they—I don't remember now the account that I read, whether they waited until they were dry or whether they harvested the green pod. But those seeds were crushed and

used for oil but not edible oil. They were used for a lot of three-in-One oil or something—you know—

CM:

I never heard that. I don't know. That's a plant that's not too much of an issue anymore. I don't why but—

AW:

[speaking at once] It used to be.

CM:

—if you plow it good, keep plowing it, it takes a while for that claw to make. It's an interesting plant though. It's very unusual. I guess it's grown in other places.

AW:

I mentioned it to people farming elsewhere and they don't know what you're talking about. I remember as a kid we would see it mostly in sandy soil. You didn't see if there was much—

CM:

I don't know about that. Cockleburs' another one that was—cockleburs was a lot harder to handle than, say, those claws. It's easier to plow them out and get them done. Cockleburs, they got the seed that looks just like cottonseed and about the same size. I planted some certified Arkansas seed one time that had—this was—well I'm having another bad spell there—

AW:

But it had—

CM:

Soy beans. It was late, got hailed out on that very north farm. So, I asked a guy that was the seed guy there in Ralls and he said, "Well, once you go up to Plainview they've got some." Of course, there had been a lot of hail that year and so there as a big demand for these soy beans. So, we go up there and they were like ten cents a pound so they was like—I forgot what—sixty dollars for a bag or something. It was real high I thought. I went up there in my truck and loaded all that up. It was the highest priced premium stuff they had. It was a short-season type and it was about the first of July when I planted them. They looked beautiful, everything going good. We still had enough water to do it and we watered them twice. They was looking so good then all of a sudden you could began to see—here's one, here's one, here's a patch—had those cockleburs in there. It'd get on your shoes, on the horses legs and everything. Murder. The only way to do it was you had to walk out there to where they were and grub them out, carry a grubbing hoe with you. If you could get a small one, you could put in a sack but you would never get it out of that sack.

Usually you just picked up the whole deal—and sometimes they were that tall and this big around—and walk back to your pickup until you fill the pickup full then drive real slow down to the dump ground.

AW:

Yeah because you didn't want the seeds bouncing out.

CM:

Yeah and those boogers are—man, if you let them get matured, they just kind of explode then they come up for quite a few years. I fought—I had that sixty acre track and I guarantee you, for two or three years I fought those things but I had to walk out there to do it. You can't get them any other way. I don't know how anybody had ever farmed down there and Spur because there was a lot of them down in that.

AW:

[laughs] That's right. They're pretty obnoxious.

CM:

But farming's so much different now than—

AW:

What is the—well, before I ask what's the big difference because that's kind of the capstone question—I remember when I first moved back here in '79 or '80 from Colorado that there were some changes going on and I hadn't—you know, I'd been a policeman up there and I hadn't really kept in touch. My dad was still working for Anderson Clayton but he was selling their products on the international market out of—I think they were in Phoenix by that time, so he didn't keep up with the day-to-day what was going on on farms. We didn't have anybody that had a farm anymore. When I got back, I met some folks who were doing low-till or no-till farming. What ever happened to that? Did you ever try that? You ever hear anything about it?

CM:

Yeah. That started in, I think, about '65 or something, they began to do a little of that. One year I planted two rows of cotton and two rows of grain sorghum—no, four rows of cotton and two rows of grain sorghum. I'd take the two outside off the grain sorghum planter box. I already had a four-row planter but I was only planting the two inside ones. So, you had four rows of cotton, blank, two rows of maize, blank, and two rows of—all the way across the whole field. It was supposed to keep it from blowing and having to worry because that grain sorghum would come up—

AW:

A little taller.

CM:

Yeah, a little taller and quickly. So, it would begin to stop all that sandfighting and stuff. Well, that just looks so pretty. It looks so good. The guys from the county agent would come out looking at my field. I was the only one that did it. I mean, it was their recommendation but I—it wasn't—I didn't think it up. One of the A&M guys probably figured it out. And they didn't have to harvest it. Now when it came—you had to cut the maize first because it'd get ready much quicker. So, you combine the maize with a four-row combine.

AW:

And how'd you do that without destroying your cotton?

CM:

You had that blank row in there so you were—

AW:

So that was enough.

CM:

—if you was careful. And you go down through there and you'd get that grain sorghum. What you didn't realize was, you had this stalk about this high.

AW:

Yeah which was—now, you were growing stripper cotton by then probably.

CM:

Yeah. Oh yeah.

AW:

So this was about the same height as your cotton.

CM:

So, now you're sitting there and you're thinking, It's getting drier and it's getting drier. Some people—we shredded about five acres of it just with a two-row shredder right down there. That was really bad news. I shouldn't have ever done that. What was happening was, when all that started getting dry, whether it was shredded or not—it's worse when it was shredded but—even when it wasn't. All of that began to blow in and drift in under the cotton. Now, when you start running a cotton stripper down through there, you're running that stripper right on the top of the

ground. You're sliding dirt, really, is what you're doing. Man, I'm telling you, that cotton was about—that cotton's that's up in that trailer or in that overhead—

AW:

You got a lot of stalk in it.

CM:

It's full of stalks. I mean—and the gin hates it.

AW:

Yeah. So, then the price of your cotton went down.

CM:

And it was why you got discounted, because of fiber problems and you got discounted—it was just a disaster that year. That was one year, that's all that took for me. I said, "That's not working. That's not going to work." Even if you did twenty rows of grain and cotton, if you get anywhere around that grain sorghum it's going to blow those leaves and stuff in there because they start dying, peeling off and just going everywhere. There's no way.

AW:

I've talked with one fellow, young fellow, back in the early eighties who was farming south—kind of over near Buffalo Lake—Springs Lake. He was—on his cotton—he wasn't plowing it under after he stripped it. He let it come back, let it put on bulbs the next year and there were fewer and fewer bulbs. He would do that two or three years before he would plow it up.

CM:

In Arizona, they've always—I never have seen this but they told me that some of that cotton out there'll be six or seven years old and they have to chop it down. It gets huge. I mean, you don't strip it, that's hand pulling. It's real long staple and something that they were doing. I don't think they do it anymore but I'd heard stories. Some of the guys that came to work for me from Mexico—I got fairly fluent in Spanish working guys like that all the time. They would tell me that the *algodón*, that's Spanish for 'cotton'—they said, "The *algodón*, there's *mucho grande*. *Mucho grande*." I said, "Like isn't it"—"No, no, *mucho grande*." It'd be like six or seven feet tall. They'd have to finally cut down and use it for wood, for firewood. Of course, labor's cheap and people'll cut it down for nothing just to get the wood. It got to where you couldn't reach it. It got that high then it's time to cut it down, hand pulling it all. It'd come back—if it didn't freeze, hard freeze, it'll—it's a perennial, it'll never die.

AW:

We've—always in town by our house, we'd have one, two, three or four plants that we would plant, leave them up and they were really—they made a nice shrub.

CM:

Yeah they do.

AW:

Pretty flower.

CM:

I got giant sunflowers out here now that—I planted some last year and they came back this year. I got to do something with them. I mean, they're as tall as the ceiling.

AW:

I've been putting this question off—and this is an easy question to ask but probably a tough one the answer: What is the biggest change in farming from the time that you got into it?

CM:

I think the government, they—the government's always trying to give somebody something so they can get a vote. That's my opinion. I'm a radical, I guess, about that. When they started subsidizing or monkeying with the free markets, then after that it gets necessary. It's like, you drink—it's like this drugs that people say that—opiates or whatever they are—that everybody's having this huge trouble we're having with. You start giving them for everything, giving them antibiotics for everything and stuff, finally you depend on it. People'll cry if they don't get antibiotics for a tooth ache.

AW:

And all the time we're building a lot smarter germ.

CM:

Yeah. So, I think that happens because at first—you know, at first they—evidently during the war, cotton got to a dollar a pound they said. I never did know that but they said that. A few years later it was twenty cents. So, everybody kept dreaming about that. What would happen—the government goes, “Well, we don't want cotton to get too cheap because that's going to break the farmers.” They can't pay off the *[inaudible]* *[1:32:27]* or whatever it is. So, they put a floor plan in and they say, “We'll buy the cotton from a farmer”—we call it “putting the loan.” They didn't buy it, they loaned you—

AW:

[speaking at once] And the idea of parity, readjusting—

CM:

What they—count that around, figure out—they had all kinds of farmers for that. They still have that but it's so low, it never goes in there anymore. It used to. It was pretty high, and I'll tell you—I don't whether this is good science here but—Mr. Underwood was an expert going to Congress. He's the one that Mr. Ralls, that guy—

AW:

Harris Underwood.

CM:

Yeah. He got—well, it was his daddy. But Mr. Ralls over there—and he went to San Angelo and told George Mahan that he would—he wants to get him elected. He's a tall, good-looking, smart lawyer. They needed him to represent all this area, and George had been a hero all these years but I can tell you, part of the debt we got is because he was for everything. He was—and that's how come they had five-hundred warehouses all over, because they were storing that stuff. That's like a motel. So, the farmers lot for years. We'd put—end up having to put your cotton in loan because you couldn't sell it for anything different than the loan price. You never planned to reclaim it. You could reclaim it but you had to pay the storage and the interest on the storage.

AW:

And so, at some point it wasn't economic—

CM:

It controlled the price, the price never got over the loan. It was rare. It did occasionally but it was really rare. Had to be some drought in India or somewhere that did it. So, all the cotton came off the stock, went in the warehouses, it stayed until the government did something with it and they would sell—they'd sell it. They had to do something with it sooner or later. Before they sold it, there was a whole lot of hotel room money. I'm saying that cotton was in that hotel room sitting there and they got paid for it. So, it was just every—it automatic money coming all the time every month.

AW:

One of the things I recall when I was still working for my father in the oil seed products business, brokers business—I remember a thing that really shocked me was in number—and this was in the mid-eighties, early to mid-eighties—that every year we had as much cotton on the floor in storage, as what we were going to produce that year in the field. How do you ever get the price up if your warehouses were empty?

CM:

You were selling with the government. The government was selling, you were selling and he had a lot more than you did that's for sure. So there wasn't any way they do it. You just made what they wanted you to make and that was it. You were farming for the government and so every time there was some kind of something that you could do to do different they used to say, "I'm going to farm for the government this year." That's what they'd do and they'd—it's like their insurance. These guys, I've seen—it's true stories—guys planting crappy seed and very little of it, insuring it. They lose their crop and then they get—they make more money with it. There was guys over in Ralls that they were hoping they'd get hailed out. They get hailed out, they get all that cotton insurance, and then they plant soy beans. They got to be hailed out in time to plant soy beans—there was plenty of water in those days—and now make twice as much. There was a lot of—and still is a lot of—it's not just there, I think it's in hospitals and a whole lot of other things. It's one of those things that controls—they guy that farms my land now—what happened was, it was supposed to protect little farmers so we'd have little farmers forever. That's the blood of the good neighbors.

AW:

Thomas Jefferson, the yeomen farmer.

CM:

Yeah. It didn't, it just the opposite. It slowly—they either—the guys that were younger and tougher would get bigger and smarter. They'd figure out ways to take in more land, they were good farmers and the old men like my would finally retire. When he did, he had to have somebody to farm it or sell. Some sold them but others would hire these young guys coming on or something to do their farming for them. So, the contracts got better—I paid twenty-five percent of almost all expenses to get 25 percent of the crop. He still makes better than if he owned the land. I mean, I had six landlords, and I made money better on the parts that wasn't mine, even at 25 percent it was. They just got—these guys farmed, I think, seven or eight thousand acres and there's guys farming thirty-thousand acres. They say—in order to do that, you've got these deals where you can't make—if your income is over a certain amount, you're not going to be allowed to get this subsidy or in any programs. They'll have grandpa partnerships and they'll—every kid in there and all this kind of stuff. They fool around, and they could get away with it. I don't know how they do it. I don't get any subsidy because my income is too high. But the farmers that do it, they get their subsidy out, and I get it down it anymore. I put all mine—now, I gave it all to the kids and it's in a company called CALEY which is the first letter of all of our five members. It's a big partnership and now that partnership's eligible. If anybody's in that partnership that has more income than nine-hundred thousand, then you're ineligible. They watch that like a hawk but they drive you nuts because you're filling out these forms—supposed to be once a year but I get calls saying, "We don't have your daughter's form."

I say, “She’s in Singapore. On top of that is, she’s already filling it out. We got them all done at Christmas.”, “Well, we can’t find it. You’re going to have to send us one.” Just drives you insane. Those guys—all those farmers spent a lot of time in that office over there in Crosbyton, I’ll tell you, and in the Lubbock office, trying to get their record right, and straight and everything else. In a sense, they have you—you feel like you got to have that subsidy. If nobody got it, if they stopped it completely and nobody got it, it might be a year or two of real crying and moaning, but there’d be a time coming where that market would get back level.

AW:

There is the argument that—not farmers necessarily, although I hear of farmers that will agree—that the subsidy really is not aimed to help the farmers, it’s aimed to help the consumer.

CM:

I think that’s true. They don’t want to stop the industry. It’s big, it’s huge.

AW:

But you want to keep milk prices low and you want to keep whatever else low enough that the consumer—they’re a lot more votes from the consumers than there are from farmers. So, how in—and I think I know the answer from the way you talked about your farming—how does the—as a society, how do you keep a free market from having too many peaks and valleys? In other words—

CM:

Well, that’s a problem. That’s where the argument is on the other side. We’re trying to keep that from happening. What they do, they keep it on the low side.

AW:

What I was thinking the answer might be listening to you talk is that—what has struck me in the interviews is—one thing that’s—first of all, you paid attention to your farming. I mean, you were a good farmer or at least tried to be a good farmer. The thing that really struck me was that you didn’t borrow money. As you’ve said many times, if you had to borrow it you just didn’t do it, you made some other way around it. I just don’t know too many farmers today that could operate without a banker.

CM:

I tell you, I went down to—an old friend of mine runs a gin called Star Co-op. It’s down there by the winery, pretty close to the winery. Buzz Cooper’s his name and I’ve known him—he used to run the gin in Ralls. That was a private gin then but he went down to this one. So, we have all our cotton hauled down there. Of course, now there’s been modules, they go anywhere. So, the same thing’s happening to the gin. Most of the small gins have all closed. Ginner used to run

private gins by himself with a couple helpers, ginned, say, six to eight thousand bales, and make a good living for his family. Now, these gins—they gin a hundred and twenty-five thousand bales and a lot of them eighty-five thousand bales, seventy-five thousand. It's caused by farmers getting bigger and bigger. They might not have but twelve customers but, man, those farmers—just farming—they're making eighteen thousand bales with one farmer, so there's tons of money rolling. I went down there to that Star Co-op during the rainy season and there was about nine or ten farmers and they was all about thirty-five to fifty-five, sitting around that table in the gin like they do. He told me—he introduced me to all of them and I knew the names: Heinrich's and some of them, a bunch of these German kids is what they were. They're not German because they're fourth generation U.S.

AW:

Kitten's, Klatanoff's, Heinrich's, yeah. I grew up with them.

CM:

Then we went back in his office, he shut the door and he said, "There's only one guy in there that borrows a nickel." He said, "These guys, they keep their money in CD's [**Certificate of Deposit**] and stuff like that. Even when they're getting half a percent, they still do. Then they draw down on them during the year as their production costs come in.

AW:

That's interesting.

CM:

When they come and buy a tractor, they write you a check. They don't fool around. They trade in a good tractor—of course, if you're making good money, as long as they've got this law about write-offs on depreciation and all—boy, that's wonderful for implement dealer too, because they'll come in with a tractor that's three years old, brand-new, and they'll trade that thing in because they've already deducted all of the value of it. So, they can take that off their gross so the income tax is not so high and at the same time—obviously you got to be making money to do it. If you don't make money, you can't do it because you don't have anything to charge off with it.

AW:

A write-off doesn't help if you don't have it—

CM:

I think that's why they'd ride those big pickups, because they love their big pickups anyway; four-wheel drive, they can see where they go when it's muddy. We have so much government interference in the stuff we do it just controls our lives. It's getting worse and worse. I kind of

think that's why Trump got elected because people said, "We've had it with all of that." Most farmers, I guess, if you had them vote they'd vote for—not—for people that are really conservative that don't want a lot of that stuff. They still get it, you know. It's a strange world we live in, I'll tell you.

AW:

It is. So what I'm taking away from this is that—at least for you—the changes that are going to make a difference in farming aren't going to be dependent on technology or biology nearly so much as they're going to be in terms of the structure of how a person can operate in a market and still be a farmer. Is that an accurate—

CM:

I think that's probably right. One thing is that technology—we live in a world—we're not the only world that does it—but we live, in the United States, with a lot of people concentrating on making things better some way or doing something. To take a cottonseed—we used to make—we made a bale to acre all the way across and we had tons of water. We were happy. We thought we had really done something. We'd sell cotton for thirty-two, thirty-five, maybe forty cents. Nowadays, they're selling it for thirty-two, thirty-four, maybe fifty, fifty-five cents.

AW:

But they're spending more on that tractor.

CM:

The only way they're surviving is because they're so big. That tractor, these guys and their farm equipment, they charge them off. Once they charge them off then they got to do something. So, we get a lot of cotton strippers that are like three years-old.

AW:

Where's the market for a three year-old cotton stripper?

CM:

It's good. About as good as a new one, not quite.

AW:

So, the person who buys that used cotton stripper, they can also depreciate it for three years.

CM:

They can do the same thing. That's right, same thing. Maybe a cousin or something. We sell a new one, two or three years down the road that guy trades that one in, we sell this to a guy, he trades this one in. Trades in. It's a chain. We may have eight years of stuff until it finally does

wear it out or wear out. Finally get to where repairing it is too big an issue. It's not only the cost of repair, it's the downtime that eats you when you got cotton out there needing to be—because cotton, when it gets ripe—a lot of people don't realize this that are not farmers, farmers know it—it starts losing weight. I've done this before. I've stripped half of a field that look the same all the way across then ginned that, then moved to another landlord because landlords, they're hollering about, "When you going to get my cotton?" So, you have to get a little here, a little here which is not real efficient but you got to do it. Then you go back and strip this thing. I mean, it'll be like fifty to a hundred pounds less breaker. That's a lot. The greener you can strip cotton, the more weight it is.

AW:

Because it's more moist.

CM:

My dad told me that back in the thirties, they would strip cotton, bale it, compress it, ship it to Galveston and set it out on the warehouse with no roof on it, nothing.

AW:

So it absorbed the moisture.

CM:

And it absorbed moisture and you could make quite a bit of money doing that.

AW:

So, why doesn't a gin or whoever's buying the fiber, why don't they wise up and say, "We'd rather have drier fiber?" It can't be any better to handle, the damp—

CM:

If it's too dry, they'll add moisture to it. They got little fine-mist sprays in these mills. I don't know what they do. I don't know that they do that in the cotton gin but I've heard of that. It was just—you sell it for what it takes to get it is the way it is. But they're also in that supply and demand figure. That's still God's law, really. Short term it's not supply and demand, it's supply—what's the word for it—it's like—it's an anticipated supply when the crop's not harvested, against the anticipated needs.

AW:

We used to have three saying in commodities. One is, "The best cure for high prices is high prices. The best cure for low prices is low prices." The third rule was, "You never know what anything's worth till it ships." [laughs]

CM:

Economics, I studied economics a long time in school. I had a lot of law and a lot of economics. It's mostly guess, it's about like weather guys. They finally gotten to where, "Well, this is the U.S. model and this is what it shows. This is the European model that shows for West Texas. We think it's going to be—we're going to put 50 percent." But they don't know. I swear they don't. If it's raining then they can call the shots pretty good. They're really good on temperatures now, but they're going back twenty years, averaging out and doing stuff. There's a lot of predictions that are put together in Washington D.C. that are highly inaccurate and just joke. One of them is these storms that they talk about. "It's going to be a year of violent storms. We're going to have nine super hurricanes and we're going to have four medium-sized hurricanes." Last year they had all that kind of stuff. "It's going to be a bad year," and they had practically nothing.

AW:

They're too many variables. It's hard to—

CM:

They don't know what they're talking about.

AW:

And plus, there's no such thing as "general weather" except looking backwards. Most of us are interested in what's the weather happening today right here in this spot, not down the street.

CM:

They're pretty inaccurate. You never know. There's a lot of crap shooting in that kind stuff and you can't help it. You got to get ready for it but at the same time, if you go seven or eight years and don't have anything you think, This is not going to—I'll tell you, in my farming—I don't know why this happened but I never got hailed out that I didn't have a way to come back with something. I never did.

AW:

With another crop.

CM:

And I never bought a dollar's worth of insurance as long as I was farming. Now, I do now because the government makes you do it. That's why they do it. If you don't have an insurance policy with a legitimate outfit, the government—and they take copies of that—the government will not pay you any subsidies whatsoever, not a nickel. So, everybody's got to have it. I didn't have it all so I saved a lot of money in premiums. I had enough equipment that I could run a truck off the Caprock once a year and be even. It wouldn't be any more than—my premium was the same. I never had it. My dad taught me years ago and said, "Don't buy any insurance unless

you got to have it. If you're going to suffer or can't replace anything then buy it, but if you don't need or you got cash saved to pay it—buy a new one, don't buy it. All you're going to do is keep a lot of families going that's not yours." That's what he told me and he was right. There's a fortune of people buying stuff that they never need; a young couple buying life insurance for a baby. Once in a while I guess that works in nine and a half years.

AW:

There was a time where life insurance for a baby made sense. By the time the baby was thirty they had some cash value in their policy but you can't buy that kind of stuff anymore. It doesn't make any sense.

CM:

Another problem with that is, you don't know what inflation's going to do. You don't know if the company's going to be solvent. There's a lot of things you don't know.

AW:

That's right. If a twenty-four year-old Craig McDonald, would you do this again today, not like back then?

CM:

Yeah I would. I would be upset about how the interference with the government and stuff and how much paperwork it takes. These guys tell me that they—it just drives them nuts. They're using computers and all this kind of stuff, which I didn't have. I made maps and they always bragged on my maps I'd take over there. I'd get those government maps that they fly over, take a picture then you move it until you get it to fit this grid and everything. At the same time, it was a nightmare when I was doing it. It's much worse now. It's just crazy. They did release cotton—you can plant—there's no allotments on cotton anymore. They stopped that so now you can have—used to, you had a hundred and ten acres of cotton, forty acres of grain sorghum, twenty-seven acres of wheat and you couldn't plant more than that. Now, if you owned the farms—two of them, like put them together, in a sense, financially, then you could move them to where you could have more on this farm and less on that but you still had the allotments. Now they've done away with that. You can raise cotton on a hundred percent of the acres if you want to. You can't make it—it won't have a lot of dryland in there, but you can do it. Unfortunately, there's a lot of people doing that now in West Texas because grain sorghum, and corn and soy beans are selling at all-time historical lows against inflation and cost, so hardly anybody's planting it. The elevators are empty. For five or six years they were empty, period, and now they've got a little bit of grain from last year. There was some grain growing last year, but this year they tell me that—I've had guys tell me, they say, "I don't plant anything but cotton, and then if we make it on dryland," because they can't water but about a third of the farm now.

AW:

And cotton historically is a good dryland crop.

CM:

It is but it won't—it's not for-bale stuff.

AW:

No, no, no but I mean—especially if you look at energy costs to put on the water, even if you had the water. Of course, it doesn't make any difference if you don't have the water. It also strikes—I did a lot of interviews with people involved in the American Ag movement.

CM:

Those guys, I thought they were nuts.

AW:

It's real interesting, though, to see the process. The thing that struck me was the—almost all of them would say—that drove them to the point of thinking they needed to do something was the product prices staying flat and costs not staying flat. That your input cost was—it's higher. You were just saying, now you're still selling cotton at thirty-two, thirty-five cents.

CM:

The loans for the kind of cotton were growing now is about fifty-seven cents, something right in there, so you could get that, and you can still do that, and a lot of people did. There was plenty of cotton in those warehouses. You'd drive around out there and, man, there's a lot of cotton in there and it needs to be sold between now and August.

AW:

Who's going to buy it?

CM:

They say that exports are actually ahead of the productions for this year. Cotton's eased back up. On the futures market it's about sixty-eight, sixty-nine cents. So, if you could sell your crop for sixty-eight cents, it ought to be alright. The funny thing is that futures—the futures market used to be not very relevant to what we had because we had fifteenths, sixteenths and maybe a little bit more one-inch cotton and that was about it. That was about all we could grow here with the kind of cotton that we had. Now, nearly all the cotton will average an inch and three-sixteenths or something, so it's longer now than what used to be considered 'long-staple cotton'.

AW:

Really?

CM:

Yeah. And so, that helped some, the fact that it just breed that kind of seed we're buying—is doing that. Guys are definitely making more pounds than they ever have. Not everybody's making full bales but there's a lot of—it's not a bit unusual to have cotton making two bales to an acre now with this seed stuff that they're doing.

AW:

Did you—you just mentioned futures—did you hedge your crops on the market?

CM:

Well, I never did 'hedge' as you call it. I did buy the futures some. What happened was—I think I said this but—in one year, the futures were so low that you couldn't grow cotton for the—it was like twenty-eight cents or something, to about thirty cents.

AW:

Below the cost of production.

CM:

The cost of production. So, on my farm that I owned the land, I didn't plant. I didn't plant an acre, I just bought futures. I thought, Hell, that doesn't make sense. I'll let the ground rest and I'll plant some hay grazer, shred it and plow it in to the ground. I planted a bunch of black-eyed peas, which are good soil builders. When they got good and green, about almost ready to eat, plowed them all up.

AW:

That would've hurt me. [laughs]

CM:

I became a genius in Crosby County. I mean, they still talk about me. They say, "What happened to Craig? He knew what he was doing." I went around with my landlords, which some were my kinfolks—sisters and brothers—and I said, "That's what I'm going to do. Do you want to do that?" They said, "Well"—they said, "We need that twenty-five cent crop that we get even if you don't make any money. We won't have as much but we got kids in school and stuff like that." I said, "Okay," so I farmed there just like the rest of it. Actually, the crop went up in price a little bit, and I made real good on what I had in the futures market. I had rolled them once like you'd have to do. They made about the same as they normally would but they're twenty-five cents. In that day, my dad had a lot to do with what was going on around there. He still had his finger in the pie. We put in that underground pipe and he'd say—it'd be on my sister's place or something—he'd say, "Craig, you pay for that. You're the only one that's got the advantage of everybody. You're out here taking care of things and making money off this land." I said, "Dad,

anybody else would be expected for them to pay their share of the pipe.” In fact, most of the farmers had—the landlords had to put in the pipe. I put in the pipe on all of them. Fortunately, it wasn’t that expensive but it was still twelve-hundred dollars here and fifteen-hundred dollars there. It was always me, I’d pay it. It’s worked out good. The Lord’s been good to me for doing that. I manage now—actually have nine trusts of my grandkids and my niece’s nephews. That’s what I do. I’m behind. Since I went on that trip and took off three months and I didn’t do anything, man, I’m way behind. I know a lot about the oil business. I learned over the years so I have to manage a lot of that. They all count on me to do that. I’m trying to raise somebody in there. I’ve got one niece down in Houston that is in a law firm and she’s in an oil company. She’s doing oil company work for it. Hopefully she’ll get good enough and maybe we can turn this—[laughter] It’s like everything else. My dad, back in the thirties, would buy ten acres of minerals under some place that was about ready to have a well drilled. Then sometimes he’d buy twenty. It’d pay like ten dollars an acre or twenty dollars and acre. If the well was real close, it might be a hundred dollars an acre. That was a lot of money in 1939, ’38. So, he was taking some big chances. Now, the kids—there’s five families coming out of that then they got—all of them are dead but me so now they’ve got grandchildren in there, those nieces and nephews of mine, and I do all the stuff and everything for them but they have two acres. They all have oil checks running about thirty-five hundred dollars a month. It works pretty good. But I do it all and I do it free, even the paperwork. [Andy laughs]

AW:

That’s why you’re not finding anybody to replace you, you’re working too cheap. [laughs]

CM:

I’ve tried to tell them. I said, “Look, if something happens to me somebody’s going to have to be paying legal fees on something, so get ready. And you need to work together.” I’ve got two of them that actually—I don’t have to do anything with except handle the paperwork for them. My brother Fred, when he died, he had four daughters and lo and behold, they agreed on starting a trust after he died, and so it worked out really good. The four of them let one girl in Houston whose husband was a lawyer, who recently died about a month ago—she handled her part but she calls me. She doesn’t do anything unless I okay it. That way I get to bargain with these land men with more acres. If I was bargaining with two acres, I couldn’t get anywhere, but if I can bargain with twenty, that’s a lot more. So, I get them some pretty good deals that they couldn’t get otherwise. I leased some stuff the other day for twelve-hundred and fifty dollars an acre, three-year lease.

AW:

We talked about that last time we got together. It’s surprising to me that with barrel prices as low as they are that the leasing market is as active as it is.

CM:

It's amazing in that western part of Yoakum County and then into Lee and Roswell County, especially Lee County, New Mexico. Man, I mean, there's guys over there that they offer to buy acres for as much as sixteen, eighteen-thousand dollars an acre.

AW:

An acre? Sixteen thousand dollars?

CM:

To buy the minerals.

AW:

That's still a lot of money.

CM:

That's crazy. I mean, we paid—twenty years ago, I paid a hundred dollars an acre or something. Makes you think if you—I guess if you were smart, you might sell it but there's an ample amount of oil underneath that ground and we're not ever going to quit using it. We talk about it, they're going to be—

AW:

You're just going to change what you use it for. If every car in America was electric, we'd still be using oil for other things.

CM:

Plastics and everything in this room, nearly, including this stuff right there. We're using a lot of it like that, they don't talk about that—Dow Chemical, they're the forefront of figuring out what to do with the next generation. Those little—whole little things and that's the deal that's what that is. They'll be using for fuel and I won't quit doing that. We're not going to quit. I don't care what they say, how many of those windmills they make, they're not going to produce enough. I think it's only 7percent of the nations now.

AW:

I've done a fair number of interviews on wind power. Wind can make a difference, so can solar, but there's a limit to it. Our biggest limit in America is that we have a really third-world grid system for electricity. I had a wind power scientist from Europe who said the United States—well, the two countries in the world that can best profit from wind are China and the U.S. I said, "Why is that," and he said, "Because you cover so many—

CM:

After you get big enough, you average out.

AW:

The main thing was so laterally, you cover so many time zones. What that means is, you're generating power in one time zone that's not being used. If you have a grid where you can transmit to that to the time zone where it is being used, then what you do is, you can raise the amount of wind power that's used overall if you have a system where you can move the current back and forth. The problem is we don't because we're still built regulatory.

CM:

I thought they had enough—because they have down places that's like—the only time now that we ought to have a downtime for electricity is when the system itself is torn up from a tornado, like that deal off the coast of Carolina where they dug up a drill into the electric power system that covered the whole deal.

AW:

I mean, the thing is—like Texas, we're in what's called 'ERCOT' [**Electric Reliability Council of Texas**] which is its own grid. So, if we have surplus power in Texas, it's very difficult—

CM:

You can't send it out. I didn't realize that.

AW:

It's very difficult to send it out. I mean, physically you can do it but from a regulatory point of view, it's hard to do it, and then they're also physical requirements because the whole grid is like a big animal. If it has too little electricity, it goes down. If it has too much electricity, it goes down. So, it has to be kept up, which is a lot of—

CM:

That can be improved, no doubt about that, over a period of time.

AW:

At some point we'll have more of that but if you stop and think about solar power, how do you do that? If you put solar panels up, you're not going to grow cotton out here.

CM:

I've had an offer—there's guys from—sending out offers to a lot of farmers about—

AW:  
Solar?

CM:  
Yeah. "We'll pay you this enormous amount of money," supposed to be, but you can't—you might as well sell them the farm.

AW:  
And also right now in Texas, those solar developers are all in legal trouble. The two big solar developments, one out by Alpine and one by McCamey, they're both about halfway built. There's nothing happening on them now because—so, it's a little bit—it's an early industry. But where we could make a big difference in America according to the people who develop these things is if your roof was generating electricity than you were using, you would be reducing the amount of electricity you'd buy off the grid.

CM:  
You might not have all of it but you'd have some of it.

AW:  
Right and so that distributed generation which, from a policy point of view—well, you remember the Crosbyton Solar Power Project, do you not?

CM:  
Yeah.

AW:  
That ran afoul of the whole policy apparatus in Washington, which was opposed to distributed power, i.e. a city like Crosbyton generating their own power versus power being generated on a big scale, it would go to more than one place. That's a policy issue. There's technology that was capable of doing that.

CM:  
They're getting to where the regulations ruin the free—idea of what they're doing and everything, I think. Well, my grandfather out there at the farm, he started farming out there in '40. He went broke in Nebraska and moved to West Texas to be with their daughter, my mother, and my dad got to move in that farm. They like to farm, that's what they did. He lived out there and he didn't—it's like he owned the farm, didn't have to pay anything for it all those years. He had a single generator on the side of the house going up. I remember that little thing. It was whirling. All it did was one light bulb. If the wind died down for a minute, the light bulb would get dimmer. We'd stay up late, nine o'clock maybe, go to bed every night at nine. I'd go out

there with a little boy, I'd sit out there with him and we'd play checkers and stuff under this light bulb. They had a battery down on the floor that was always stinking. It was a big ole battery, it was sitting in a box kind of a deal, and it stunk all the time. There wasn't any adjustments so if the wind was really blowing, it overcharged it. They were supposed to carry it when it did it but it never did seem to be too much help to me. Then the front room just had a big ole battery sitting over there. It wasn't too good. They've come a long way with solar power too, I think, the way that they make it.

AW:

Yeah, yeah. The two layers so that—used to only a few degrees of the sun would generate enough but now they have—it's almost like—remember those little things you get out of a cereal box that have a picture, you tilt it in the light?

CM:

Yeah.

AW:

So, they're using that technology you have in those slits to make a solar panel that will capture more of the degrees of arc that the sun traverses the sky so that you double or triple the amount of electricity you can generate out of it.

CM:

Those big projects—when they put money into it—the government puts money into it if you do a certain thing like that. Man, they're so open to graft and fraud, it's just amazing. Some of those solar powered operations that were put in earlier were just fraudulent. But then you know, that's human nature, I guess.

AW:

When there's money involved, there's going to be some fraud somewhere.

CM:

There's a whole lot of fraud going on up there no matter who's in power. It's heartbreaking to think about it.

AW:

It is and it's sad to think that—my first idea is you vote them out. Well, you vote them out but you vote someone else in and it's just a—

CM:

You never know where you are yet.

AW:

That's right.

AW:

Trump's done a lot of good things but—about like regulations that were damaging stuff—

*[End of Recording]*



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