

**Oral History Interview of  
John Willis**

**Interviewed by: Katelin Dixon  
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Lubbock, Texas**

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

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## Interview Series Background:

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

## Transcript Overview:

This interview features John Willis as he discusses the American Agriculture Movement and some of the issues that farmers currently face.

**Length of Interview:** 00:12:51

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Father's involvement with American Agriculture Movement	05	00:00:00
His father's involvement with other farm groups	07	00:03:24
The future of farming and American Ag	07	00:04:44
Issues farmers are facing	08	00:06:48

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### Keywords

American Agriculture Movement, Tractorcade, Farming

**John Willis (JW):**

My father was very interested, and he died in '92, so from I guess '78 to '92 he was very involved. He was out state president and he became the national president for a couple of years. And he was always holding meetings and going around the country, going to Washington. So I was a stay at home. Somebody had to run the farm, and that fell to me and really kind of allowed him to get out and do as much as he did. So I missed really the Tractorcade and the big events that through the history, the early history, but was well aware of it through him. And then I was the stay at home person.

**Katelin Dixon (KD):**

So what stories would he come back with? And tell you about his time spent in the movement?

JW:

Well, you know—

KD:

How did it impact your life?

JW:

Well, the people, so many people, and friends I got to know. I would go to—went to several of the conventions, so a lot of these guys I've known for thirty-plus years, forty years. And that's like—not dissimilar to a lot of farm organizations that I've been a part of, but it's the friendships and—

KD:

Sure, yeah, the relationships.

JW:

Of course he would come back and tell me things that now I have forgotten, but I'm sure—my wife says my memory isn't too good—

KD:

[Laughter] Oh, that's okay.

JW:

But I would hear a lot over the years, but his real active time would have been in the early to mid-eighties. So we're talking thirty-five to forty years ago now. Yeah.

KD:

And what—do you remember him telling you what his primary purposes were with the organization? What was he striving for? What sorts of motivations did you see as evident?

JW:

Well, better prices, better farm programs, anything to help farmers. He was very close to our representative in our district, you know, U.S. representative?

KD:

And who was that?

JW:

Ed Jones at the time. And he was very well respected and pretty important on the Ag committee. So he had a lot of time with him, and they became good friends, and picked the phone up, called him any time type relationship and all that. So I felt like over the—they really had an impact, I believe, in some farm legislation back in the early to mid-eighties.

KD:

Which legislation in particular?

JW:

Well I'm just going to say in general the farm bills, I can't—

KD:

Okay, yeah.

JW:

It'd be hard for me to say what part at this time, so many years ago.

KD:

And growing up, would you say your memories based on your father's involvement, and this was pretty universally accepted as this was sort of the way going forward as farmers, the future of the profession, or was there a lot of opposition to the American Ag Movement? Do you remember any sort of negativity affiliated with the protests, the tractorcades, the pushing for better wages?

JW:

Well I didn't see that.

KD:  
Okay.

JW:  
But I know that there was some antagonism maybe with some other farm groups.

KD:  
Uh-huh. And was your father—had he been involved with other groups previously, or—

JW:  
To some degree, yeah. And he had some dealings with the Cotton Council in particular. I don't believe with the Farm Bureau or any of those. But one thing that made the AAM so unique, and it was part of its—what we're trying to recapture, is it was such a grassroots movement. It's not like a lot of organizations that have—you might have some grassroots participation, but you have professional staff and the way that it's financed and the way that it's run, it's different than AAM, so strictly grassroots and farmer-run. So it really never had—that's both a plus and a minus.

KD:  
Yeah, right.

JW:  
So it's hard to sustain it.

KD:  
Exactly, yeah.

JW:  
Eventually people have to go back to the farm, they have to work. To sustain that momentum is harder to do. And so many of them now that were so involved and active then, it was really the real rock of the organizations have died. And so hopefully—

KD:  
What do you see as the future? What's the relevance today, and where do you see this headed?

JW:  
Well that's a good question, and I'm not good at predicting the future, but—

KD:  
Of course not, but—



JW:

Well I hope there can be more interest. I think there's room for an organization like this. So I hope that there's—and there's been a push, we've been getting some response, and the next few years will determine how successful we are. And there was a—what really precipitated it was there was such a—so much publicity over the farm crisis in the late seventies and the early eighties. So it stirred a whole lot of interest. Things are so much I guess quieter would be a way to put it. It's not something you see on the news every day.

KD:

Right, exactly.

JW:

There was a point in the late seventies where it seemed like every day the national news would be focusing on farm auctions and farmers going out of business. And there was such an awareness. And there was a lot of sympathy, a lot of support for farmers and farm legislation that came about because of that. And stirred participation. And we don't have that catalyst right now.

KD:

So how do you—if you don't have that sort of catalyst, how do you get information out and make it an issue so that you draw people in?

JW:

That's a good question. But we do have a newsletter, and I have seen our names mentioned in some national publications a few times. It's going to be a fight to get back out there. And without some precipitating—and I've seen some things. You know, farmers are in pretty tough shape in this country, but the national media hasn't latched onto it, and it's not something that you're hearing every day. Whereas in the late seventies the quote "farm crisis" was very much in the news for months and months on end.

KD:

What are some of the issues today that still hold true from those times? But also new issues, that are arising that an organization today would address that's different from before, or the same?

JW:

You ask too many hard questions. [Laughter] Well, the biggest thing is that low prices. Now, if you looked at prices today versus forty years ago, they're not a lot better. Really in some cases they're not as good. And so just imagine how much or expenses have gone up.

KD:

Exactly.



JW:

Now in the late—around 2010, '11, '12, we had some really good prices. We had a run up in corn, soybeans were twelve, fourteen dollars and above. Cotton hit—it even hit a dollar or better, but seventy, eighty, ninety cents, and now we're back in the sixty, fifty, sixty range. And yet we're dealing with those kinds of prices we had forty and fifty years ago.

KD:

Right, exactly, so what do you do.

JW:

And imagine what the equipment is. I was in the cotton business, and the cotton picker today, one of the most prevalent ones—John Deere six row baler picker is about nine hundred thousand dollars. And then back in the day, if you go back forty, fifty years ago you could have bought one for well under a hundred. Now it wouldn't have been quite the same machine, but a cotton picker then maybe thirty, forty thousand dollars. And so tractors that used to be, if you go back, thirty, forty years they were thirty to fifty thousand, and now two to three hundred thousand, combines, upwards of four hundred thousand that used to be seventy-five. So it just requires so much, much less your chemical expense, your fertilizer expense. Labor is so much more. And the availability of labor is somewhat of an issue. It's hard to find capable—you know, and today we're running machinery that is so much more complicated than what it was forty, fifty years ago. On the one hand it's so much more expensive. So you need a little higher caliber of labor, somewhat, and you need the GPS technology on every piece of equipment we have.

KD:

Yeah, that makes a difference.

JW:

So you've got to have someone that understands—it takes a higher level of farm help than it took forty or fifty years ago. So then that type of labor's going to cost you. So you're looking at more than quote "minimum wage" type people. It's going to be a good bit more than that. So that all contributes to the price squeeze. And so I know in my area, the only thing that's kept us kind of afloat—we've been blessed, I'm from the western part of Tennessee. We've had some extremely good crops.

KD:

Okay, yeah that helps.

JW:

But even at that, it's not—people aren't getting rich by any means. And it's more of a break even at best type situation. There's two components to profitability, at least on the income side, is

yield and price. And the price is low, so that puts that much more pressure on yield. So, I actually retired three years ago. I'm entering my third year of retirement. And it wasn't that I had to, I was financially stable enough, but I was scared looking forward at the prices we had. If it took a bad year crop-wise, how much that could impact me—six figures. And so why not get out while I was ahead and could get out with something.

KD:

That makes sense.

JW:

So it affected me. If things had really been—if prices had really been up there I might have held on another year or two. And so I just thought, Why risk it?

KD:

Yeah, that makes sense.

JW:

And what was funny in a way. I thought about, because I've been involved, my family was so involved as farmers growing up, everybody knew my family, and pretty well knows me and my area, I thought I'd get a lot of people that would say, "I can't believe you quit." But on the other hand, it surprised me—I guarantee you nine out of ten if not more said, "Well I wish I could do that." So—

KD:

Yeah, that's telling.

JW:

Yeah, a lot of them are in a situation they really can't. They've got to keep going, they've got to hope that prices improve, and then the profitability improves. And I've had my doubts. I mean since then there've been times I thought, Well should I have gotten out or not? I still miss doing this and that. Then I think, Well I don't miss all the headaches.

KD:

Exactly, yeah I'm sure that's true.

JW:

And I tried to make more of a business decision than an emotional decision. And I also was thinking, If I get out now, I think it's better for my children and grandchildren down the road. And I can carry forward and not risk farming.

KD:

Yeah, that makes sense. Oh, I think I'm being told that your bus is going to—

JW:

Wrapping up.

KD:

I hate to cut it off like that but yeah.

JW:

Well that's good.

KD:

Well thank you so much for your time, and it was nice to meet you.

JW:

You might have come up with some more harder questions.

KD:

I know [laughter] yeah. Maybe good to quit while we're ahead I guess.

*End of Recording*

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