

**Oral History Interview of
W.D. Vardeman**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
August 15, 2013
Lubbock, Texas**

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

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This interview features W.D. “Buzz” Vardeman, who discusses farming, climate, wind engineering, and agricultural planning.

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Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Crop types, advantages and disadvantages	5	00:00:21
Discussion of larger wild animals	11	00:18:02
Weather, weather forecasting, and farming	15	00:28:09
Wind engineering, building a storm-safe domicile	23	00:49:57
Financial planning and debt	26	01:00:33

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is August 15, 2013. This is David Marshall interviewing W.D. Vardeman at his house out east of Woodrow. And this is part two, some follow-up questions. And I wanted to ask you a little bit about the different crops that are grown out here and have been grown out here in the time that you've been here. When you first came out here, was cotton already the primary crop in this area?

W.D. Vardeman (WDV):

When we first came out here, cotton was the number one preferred crop. But it was limited on the acres that you could plant cotton. At that time, you'd have a certain percent of your land with cotton and the next crop, the preferred at that time was milo or grain sorghum. That hasn't changed a lot. The only thing is, like right now, most of the acres, we don't have allotment on acres anymore, like we used to. So therefore, everybody would nearly plant their whole farm in cotton. But if you get hailed or something and it's too late to plant cotton, then you can plant a second crop, which can be grain sorghum, or sunflowers is a pretty short crop. There is some alternatives that we use.

DM:

What's the difference in the profit margin, the possible profits? Cotton, I assume is more profitable and then grain sorghum, and then sunflowers? Or how does that work?

WDV:

Strictly from the profits you're going to make, cotton is number one, then grain sorghum. Let's go back, say like when I first came out here, grain sorghum was three dollars and fifty cents a hundred pounds and that was pretty good money at that time. But most of your acres was on a small percent of the ground, so there wasn't a lot of grain sorghum produced, and the grain sorghum was pretty expensive—a pretty good price. And then, it wasn't long until we had a larger percent of grain sorghum planted and less acres of cotton and the price of grain sorghum got down to a dollar a and a half a hundred. Well, you can't make any money raising a dollar and a half, a hundred grain sorghum. I mean, if you have a real good year, and a good crop, maybe a little. But year in, year out, that wasn't good. Now then, grain sorghum is like twelve dollars a hundred. In other words, grain sorghum right now can be a real good second crop, come in, take up a lot of slack.

DM:

Now you planted—did you plant cotton this year, or were you not able to? What happened?

WDV:

We planted all of our irrigated cotton, and had it up, going and everything, got it all hailed out, planted it all grain sorghum this year. And the grain sorghum right now is coming along real

good. We just had say, for instance, since last Sunday—and this is Thursday—we've had three and three-tenths inches of rain, and this is right at the optimal season where you've got cotton or grain sorghum, you need some good moisture right now to get things, you know, keep it going.

DM:

I believed you mentioned you were going to—the time to harvest this grain sorghum would be after first freeze, is that what you said?

WDV:

Yeah—just like on cotton back before we first started mechanical harvesting cotton, we'd prefer to wait until after the frost because we didn't have defoliants that'd do it. Well, now we do have defoliants that works good and all, so you'll literally harvest cotton as it gets ready by defoliating it all. Grain sorghum, you can defoliate grain sorghum, but nobody hardly does. It's just not worth the expense and all. But like this year, that'll probably be in our favor that most of the grain sorghum won't be ready until after frost comes and then that makes sorghum—you can harvest grain sorghum in a combine before the leaves get dry. It still works okay. But it works better when the frost has killed the leaves. It separates the trash and everything better.

DM:

Now, have you ever grown sunflowers?

WDV:

Yes, we've grown sunflowers a few times. Sunflowers is a real pretty crop the first year you plant it behind cotton, or something, but sunflowers really takes a lot out of your soil. And if you don't come back with a heavy application of fertilizer and stuff to counteract that, the year following sunflowers can be pretty tough on you. Sunflowers, like the year you plant it, they're pretty easy to make in a pretty short time. You've got to have a special attachment for your combine header and everything to harvest them, but you know, you do nearly everything else, anyhow.

DM:

Which one is the thirstiest crop—of those three, which one requires more water?

WDV:

Well, there's probably not a lot of difference in the amount of water it takes to make either one of them, if you're going to make a good crop, but probably a little bit less on sunflowers because that's a shorter season, and you only have to water as long.

DM:

Now what about—have you ever grown corn out here for ethanol or anything like that?

WDV:

We haven't—most of our farming operations, water is not that good. You got to have a lot of water for corn. Like on the—well, in other words, we just—we don't want to use up that much water trying to grow corn.

DM:

How much? Would it be twice as much water for corn, or can you guesstimate?

WDV:

Well, say like the difference from corn and cotton, it's going to be from say a half again as much to a third more to make a—in other words, if you just used the same amount, you're not going to make a very good corn crop. Say a third more water is going to get you a pretty good corn crop, and a half more, you know, would be better. It takes lots of water.

DM:

Maybe a fifth percent increase in water then.

WDV:

And you know, common sense will tell you, when you've got stalks that's six, seven, eight foot high out there solid, that's going to take a lot of water to keep those things all growing, and the thing is, each one of those stalks of corn just has one ear on it. That's a lot of water for—and if you don't have an ear that produces a lot of grains off that, well—it's something else.

DM:

That's a good point. Now, I noticed that after—that the Canada geese and the Sandhill cranes really come out to these grain sorghum crops. Do they usually hit them after the harvest, or do they impact the harvest at all?

WDV:

You know, it's pretty interesting—I'm glad you said that. In other words, say like Sandhill cranes or the Canadian geese, if that stalk is up high, they won't even try to land in it because they can't land down in it or take off out of it in case something is after them, see. So they're going to wait until that grain sorghum is all cut, and naturally, they're going to be after any kind of grain that's left on the ground, so corn or grain sorghum, man, they go for those fields.

DM:

But the farmers don't mind because it's after the harvest?

WDV:

Right.

DM:

When I see thousands of Canada geese out there, they're not hurting anything, really?

WDV:

Not unless you've got wheat or something that—they can literally destroy a young wheat field, you know, eating the green parts of it. But most of the time, you know—say if you've got a wheat field planted, and you've planted that where—right next to a grain field that they come to, well they can do quite a bit of damage on wheat and that kind of stuff, but most of the time, if they're just going to the fields that's been cut for grain and all that, then, they don't have any damage to that.

DM:

Okay. Wheat is one thing, then, but grain sorghum is safe—and corn.

WDV:

Yeah. Well, see, you don't have anything growing that time of year, all that's already—the plant is already dead and everything—you've harvested the crop off of it, and they're just using the—what, you know, gets wasted, so to speak.

DM:

Now that you're—since you're growing a lot of grain sorghum this year, in the fall, are you going to see—later in the year, after harvest, are you going to see a lot of Canada geese and Sandhill cranes?

WDV:

Oh goodness yeah. Just like right here around the house, when we've had years whenever we planted milo before, you'd have Canada geese that would come up here and—well, right up to your yard. Then they're from you, but they'll come—they know what they can get by with pretty good.

DM:

Have you ever seen any right around here that stay over the year?

WDV:

Yeah, a few times, yeah. You'll have a few Canada geese—and like there in Lubbock, on the lakes and things. And out in a—they don't like to get out in the country that much. They've got better protection up there in town than they do in these lakes and—like it's kind of interesting,

you wouldn't think about the geese—they come out and feed at night and all, and then they go back to the lakes in town in daytime.

DM:

Yeah, from out there at Robertson, I can see this—they migrate by the thousands in and out, in and out. Now, are there other animals that are drawn to your grain sorghum crops?

WDV:

You know, like on the sunflowers, when we first come out here, you had jackrabbits by the thousands. And now, then, we don't hardly ever see one anymore. But the coyotes and the foxes eliminated the rabbits, and now, then—and like, when you—they'll feed on those sunflower seeds—they'll eat those things just as good as the geese will—foxes and coyotes. Well, we've had where we'd be cutting sunflowers at night and everything—sunflowers are kind of light, and you've got to tarp the trucks more and everything, and then you'll still—if you've got it rounded up much, you'll have some loss around your truck and things and everything. And we've had where we bring a truckload in at night—too late to go to the elevator—and see coyotes come up there around that truck, right here in our yard, feeding off of those sunflower seeds that just dropped off of that—because we didn't have any sunflower right here, we was hauling them in from one of the other places. Those coyotes, they survive.

DM:

I know they like mesquite beans, you know, so why not some sunflower?

WDV:

You know, there's not very many animals that won't eat mesquite beans at some time. And like we used to have mules when we was young, and man, those old mules loved those mesquite beans whenever they got—you know, like, if you've ever chewed on those things yourself, when they get ripe, they get sweet, and that's when the mules and everything, they really go for it—well, everything—cows, and all, they like mesquite beans.

DM:

Some people say that's how mesquite's spread so much, is cows eating them, passing them, and all that. Well, what about dove and quail when you have a sunflower crop—you have a bunch of them coming in?

WDV:

Oh, there's dove and quail—we don't have as many quail as we used to. We used to have a lot of quail when we first come out here, but very few any more. Fact of the matter is, right here at our shop, where we kept a kind of a scrap iron—well, we always need kind of a scrap iron pile, so to speak, and every year for probably twenty years, we had quails that would nest and raise right

there at the corner of our shop when I was working there all the time—and raising that. But now, then, we hardly ever see one anymore.

DM:

I wonder why.

WDV:

They just—I don't know, they just disappeared.

DM:

You know, I know that bobwhite quail are pretty common in this area; did you ever see any of those—some people call them “scaled quails” with the ruff on top?

WDV:

Yeah, we had those back earlier—and the blue quails, too. But you just don't ever see them anymore. And like here, see, we don't—if things are right, we won't even have any grain sorghum patches or anything for them to feed on—just plain cotton, you know. And we've had a few pheasants at times, but all of the migratory birds and the quails and all that—everything needs a food supply. And if they don't have it, they're going to have to go where it is.

DM:

They're looking for someone's grain sorghum crop or sunflower crop. What about mule deer, will you have them out in your grain sorghum?

WDV:

Well, you know the only type of deer is some that just comes up out of the canyon, so to speak, and comes up across, but we've had deer to come right around the house here, and seen them just be walking across the field and lay down out there, not fifty yards from the house. But those type are always moving, you know, they're not a—just staying around.

DM:

Are you more likely to see them around in a grain sorghum or sunflower year and not a cotton year?

WDV:

Well, most of the time that you'll see those kind of animals—they're moving, and it's not necessarily when they got grain or something that they'll just be—and you know, just like here at Lubbock, the canyon comes all the way up into Lubbock, so those deer will travel that area, and they'll get off out here—and especially like we've got one farm up there that—Jones Canyon

there, in the city limits of Lubbock, and you'll see deer signs up there regular, where they travel along that canyon.

DM:

By the way, you mentioned jackrabbits—you remember when you used to land at the Lubbock airport and jackrabbits would scatter in every direction?

WDV:

Oh yeah—that was the same way at the airport, where we flew all the time. You don't see that much anymore.

DM:

Well, when you have small animals like that, sometimes you'll draw up a big predator, like a mountain lion. Have you ever heard of any in this area?

WDV:

The only mountain lion that I know of—and we see one—and that was down, south of Post there about six, seven miles. We was down there one day, and that—but the rancher down there at that time, he didn't think we seen a mountain lion, and he said "We hear these tales all the time," but anyhow, we seen one down there for sure. And the thing is, there was five of us together, and all of us seen it, so it wasn't—

DM:

Right. He doesn't know where all the mountain lions are. They'll show up in funny places, too. Now what about pronghorn or antelope? You ever seen them up this far?

WDV:

No, we used to go up around Dalhart, plow up there, and there was a lot of antelope up there, that was pretty interesting. First time when they started having permits for antelope hunting, we was—a friend of mine, they had a sporting goods store, and they wanted us to apply for a permit, so we did—so we got one each, and we flew up to Dalhart, and it was kind of interesting, what you did there. They had the game warden and also the highway patrol in on that deal. So we flew up there and spent the night in a motel because we wanted to go early the next morning. So anyhow, the highway patrol carried us out, and then the game warden put you in his vehicle and drove around and showed you the antelope, and then he was with you whenever you made the shot at all. It was all a license deal, so it was—that's a little bit different hunt than most times you go, when you've got somebody like that right beside you the whole time.

DM:

Those antelope, they used to be real standoffish. Is it a long shot you have to take to get them, or did you get up pretty close?

WDV:

No, the shots that we was—it was like—the one I killed was three hundred and fifty yards, running. There wasn't any just stand-alone shots. From the time they'd see you, they'd be trying to get away from you or go farther.

DM:

The closest I've seen of these antelope to this area is around Flat Top Mesa, down there, the other side of Justiceburg, there's a little herd that hangs around down there—you can see them, driving by. I guess they probably get up towards Post and beyond—they used to, but you never seen any up in this area, huh?

WDV:

And used to, like between here and Ruidoso, you'd always see antelopes out there, but—

DM:

See them in New Mexico, uh-huh.

WDV:

And even up—I've seen a lot of antelope up west of Matador, up in that area.

DM:

Oh have you?

WDV:

Yeah—or used to, that's been several years ago.

DM:

I bet you still do. That kind of country would be okay if it's open enough. But now there is a lot more brush off the Caprock, too.

WDV:

Well, you know, the area that I'm talking about up there, you're right on the edge of where the ranch country and the farmland, and you've got a lot of that open-grass area there that's never been plowed or anything, and that's the kind of territory the antelope likes.

DM:

They sure would, they'd love that. Well I'll keep my eyes open next time I'm out that way—see if I can see those white rumps, you know, that's the best way to spot them. Well, so there's cotton out here, grain sorghum, sunflowers, those have been grown out here for a long time—you ever grown any wheat in this country?

WDV:

Yeah, we still plant wheat on some terraces and turn-rows and things like that, but as far as plant wheat to harvest, we've had very little of that. Dryland wheat out here is not too good of a crop. And that's another thing on irrigation—we'd rather spend the water on—you know, like make more money out of cotton than we can irrigating wheat.

DM:

What about other crops that I'm not thinking of?

WDV:

Well, there's been a lot of different types of crops grown here. There's sesame and—man, I don't know—black-eyed peas—there's lots of different types of crops planted, but you know, as far as being much of that at any one time, it hadn't—sesame and guar, that kind of thing—there's still some of that planted, but it's not very many acres.

DM:

At one time, people were experimenting with pecan trees out in this country—I don't know if right around here, but in different parts of the South Plains, they were trying pecan groves. Did that ever—?

WDV:

Yeah, there's been—well, right over here, there's a pecan orchard planted way back, when we first come out here, but if you don't irrigate pecans—a lot of people that planted pecan don't realize how much water a pecan needs, and putting pecans out here, dryland, that's not going to work at all. A pecan needs like fifty inches of rainfall a year, and you don't have that out here when you've got twenty inches—so dryland—and if you're not watering trees by drip irrigation or some means, you won't even ever get them started, much less make a crop.

DM:

You know, it seems like mostly what you see out here, if you see a pecan grove, is a dead pecan grove. So was there a time when it was kind of fashionable to—when people started experimenting with it, and then they gave up, or was there—like, maybe in the seventies or so, did people start trying this?

WDV:

Yeah, there's more things tried back then than there are now. People are beginning to learn now, you don't have the water to experiment with—in other words, you don't have enough water to do that sort of thing, anymore. And you can't—you talk about a long-term project, you're going to have to have about ten years to get a pecan crop started. Well, like a fruit tree—say, like peaches and that sort, about three years you can start production. Well, pecans, that's a lot longer time.

DM:

Now something that came in, I guess, maybe thirty, forty years ago was vineyards—little bit of grape growing. I guess it's fairly small-scale, I don't know.

WDV:

Well, vineyards—there's a lot more vineyards out here now, for sure, than what there used to be, but the reason I didn't get into the vineyard deal [is] we had grapes when I was growing up, and you talk about hand labor; that requires a lot of hand labor, and that's why—just like we had to come up with a way to mechanical[ly] harvest cotton, because you couldn't get the hand labor to do it. Well, grapes is, to me, you fall right back in that same category.

DM:

It's still all hand labor, isn't it?

WDV:

It's still all hand labor, and this day and time—for instance, last week on television, the guy that grows a lot of vegetables up here at Lubbock, he was shredding a big field of squash because he couldn't get the labor to harvest it—and the squash was just beautiful. It had been irrigated and grown up to that point, and he was having to shred them because he couldn't find labor to harvest them. So if you're not careful, grapes and that sort of thing, you're going to fall in the same category.

DM:

You know, when you drive by Caprock Winery over here, for example, they've got a little vineyard out front—doesn't look like much acreage. Does that sustain them, or are they bringing in their grapes from somewhere else?

WDV:

No, this little bitty vineyard you're talking about, they've just put that in the last couple of years.

DM:

Oh, that's for show, then?

WDV:

Yeah. All of their grapes is brought in; they don't have any right here. The one over here on [FM Road] 1585, they've got a little vineyard there, but that's not enough to even start to be a percentage of their—

DM:

Well are their grapes being grown on the South Plains—?

WDV:

Well, a lot of them down in Brownfield area—I guess that's about the biggest—closest—distance from—

DM:

Well let's talk about the water situation a little bit. Now, we're lucky to be getting some rain the last couple of days—you think the drought's breaking, or do you want to speculate on that, or is that just too difficult to guess?

WDV:

Well, that's strictly a guess deal, because if we could predict all the time—

DM:

Well, you've done so well out here, I figured you was—just had this sixth sense or something.

WDV:

Well, you do kind of have a sense of when the—and just like most drought periods is usually about three years or more, and the first drought—of course, whenever we first come out here, we was in a drought period. And then, in '53, it didn't rain at all. But at that time this was all new irrigation out here, and all the wells was eight-inch, full pipe wells, you know. So if you was irrigating, we made good crops and everything, even during the droughts. But the dryland was just nothing, you know. And then '57 was the next year that was pretty good crop year—and then like we've had that same thing here lately, where we still going through a drought period. You know, one of the things I learned from the time you're little, we talk about weather literally every day. And if you're farming, the reason you talk about it—weather has something to do with everything you're doing every day, and you have to learn to live with the weather and work with the weather. What the old saying was—we talk about weather every day, but we can't do a thing about that weather. We have to learn to work with it and live with it, so—and we can't change it—we'd like to, but—but on the other hand, if everybody had a button they could push and make the weather like they wanted it, could you imagine what kind of mess we'd have it in? So it's a pretty good thing the good Lord is still in control of the weather.

DM:

Well, I've noticed, when talking with you and other farmers, that mostly what I see is just kind of an easy-going feeling about the weather because you can't control it.

WDV:

Well, you just—in other words, you plan, and you listen to forecasts and all that—and these forecasters are not all a hundred percent, even though they got—they are better than they used to be, with all the satellite stuff that they've got now, it's a lot better, but it's still not a hundred percent accuracy.

DM:

What about long-range, are there any particular sources of—any particular long-range forecasters you listen to, to try to get an idea—someone who's talking about what it's going to do next month, for example—do you have any kind of source like that you follow?

WDV:

Yeah, I watch all the forecasts and that thing, and there's some pretty good long-range forecasters out there, but still, they're not a hundred percent. If they were, they'd have all the—they'd have a lot of listeners, pretty sure.

DM:

Are there any favorites that you would mention, or just you listen to different ones?

WDV:

Well, I listen to different ones, because they change from certain times of the year. You know the—actually long-range forecasting, most of it comes from more up in the Midwest and all that corn country and everything. Corn is a lot more—in other words, that's the biggest crop there is growing right now. In other words, like there's a hundred million acres of corn in the United States. And say like cotton, we're right in the middle of the biggest cotton patch in the world, and that's three and a half million acres, but—in other words, there's about five and a half million acres of cotton around—you know, not too far from here. That's still a small percent compared to corn.

DM:

So that's where they're based.

WDV:

Yeah, that's most of the long-range weather forecasters, they have more to do with corn. They have a lot bigger clientele of people trading on corn futures than there is cotton, so they go where they can—they're the most popular.

DM:

I know you came out here to this place, and you were already—it was already irrigated, wasn't it, when you got here?

WDV:

Well, the irrigation well was here, but they wasn't taking advantage of it.

DM:

It wasn't being worked, that's right. Now this was open-ditch, eight-inch irrigation, is what you came onto?

WDV:

Oh yeah, that—in other words, every bit of it at that time—they'd just come out with irrigation tubes, really, and most of it was just ditch water. You know, you cut the ditch out with a shovel and let the water run down, so it was all just shoveled irrigation.

DM:

When you do that from one irrigation well, how many acres can you cover that way, with ditch irrigation?

WDV:

Well, in other words, a good irrigation—one good irrigation well could water about a hundred and sixty acres good—you know, that much water at that time.

DM:

Well that was a pretty standard-sized farm, too, wasn't it—back in the fifties or so?

WDV:

Yeah. And then like this place had two hundred and sixty-eight acres that's on the place, and we watered—in other words, we liked about fifty acres of watering all of it. And then we drilled the second well, which—in other words, it was hard to get water from one well on all that land, so we drilled a second well in order to get water. We just had the two wells for a long time, like on this particular place.

DM:

That sounds like a lot of work, maintaining ditches—maintaining ditches with a shovel, I guess.

WDV:

That was a lot of work. Man, you worked all the time. And like on my irrigation, we changed the water every four hours, twenty-four hours a day.

DM:

What do you mean, you “changed the water”—the direction, or—?

WDV:

In other words, you’d have it on this set of rows, four hours from then you moved to the next set of rows. So you was getting up and changing water, you know—you worked all around the clock, and you literally took hour-and-a-half to two-hour naps at a time to do it. It was a tough deal, I mean, working.

DM:

Now somewhere—I guess the most common now is pivot irrigation, drip irrigation?

WEV:

Well, there’s more pivots right now, and then drip irrigation is the best as far as water saving. There’s getting to be quite a bit of acres in drip now—especially all this smaller wells, you can do more with a small amount of water.

DM:

Have you ever flown over—I don’t know if you have flown much at night—but have you ever flown over the South Plains during irrigation—the peak of irrigation season—and seen the pivots flashing? I can look out there from our hill and see them and I just wonder what that’d look like from the air.

WDV:

Well, the little individual—you can see it, but that’s not as spectacular as like a vapor light, so to speak. Used to, whenever we first started flying—I got my license in ’53 —and say, like flying from here to Dallas, there’s a big spot of country from —especially like the Caprock—down across all the ranch country that there wasn’t enough lights to even hardly count. Back before you had vapor lights, you didn’t see—lights in a house don’t show up. It’s got to be something out—and boy, there was spots of country down through there that was plenty dark at night. And then when vapor lights first started, man, that showed up—and then, you know, like it is now, my goodness, there’s no comparison—the way it looks now compared to what it used to.

DM:

Because everybody has them. Everybody out in the country has them. I always wondered, though, what it would look like to be flying over the South Plains with all the irrigation lights going on.

WDV:

You can see them. And say, like for instance, when you’re flying at night, the airport has your

beacon light, and say like the military—in other words, their rotating beacon has a double light to it—that's the way you can tell a military beacon from a—say like up here at Lubbock, you had your regular airport, international, and you had Reese airport out there—well, you could see by that beacon, you know, which was which.

DM:

Well why are there flashing lights on a pivot? That's too low for an airplane, isn't it, to worry about?

WDV:

That's where you can tell where the pivot is—in other words, that light—in other words—

DM:

Well who needs to tell—the farmer?

WDV:

Well, yeah, the farmer—he needs to know if his pivot is moving, or where it is in the circle.

DM:

I see. If the light's not flashing, there may be something wrong with it—I see.

WDV:

Right—you know that something's not working.

DM:

It's saying "All is well, all is well." Well what about between the period of the open-ditch irrigation and the pivot irrigation, were there other basic, important stages in irrigation?

WDV:

The first thing that came along after just open-ditch irrigation, you had the tubes, which—that kept you from shoveling out the ditch, you know—you'd syphon the tube—we called them "siphon tubes," so anyhow, that was a big step. And then the next, past that, you had the gated-irrigation, they called it, which was aluminum pipe with gate valves on each row. And then past that—well, when we was using that, we had valves that would switch the—in other words, say, like you'd have two sets of irrigation pipe out here; you'd be running out of one, one time, and then this valve would switch to put it over here in another one, and then that'd give you time to move this set of valves, so in other words, these were timed, but they'd also alternate the time the water would be on, say like an hour, and then be off an hour. And that a way, then, if you're just running that water down the row and don't ever stop it, it'll get to where it'll go in the ground and—but if you cut it off for an hour and you start it back up, it'll go past where it was better. So

therefore, you could run longer—make water go farther and not put so much in the ground as deep, so that was another good step. But of course the, like, sprinkler irrigation came along with the pivots—you can control that any way you want to with it.

DM:

Now what about these that shoot water way out there, has that ever been—I don't know the name of it—but has that ever been popular around here? I don't remember where I've seen it, but it just shoots it out kind of like a yard waterer and it moves—

WDV:

Well, most of the places where you'll see that is on alfalfa patches and things like that where you have that much water hitting on cotton plant—that's not too good. And then it's not as even, so—

DM:

So it never was big out here?

WDV:

No, except in spots where they was growing hay and that kind of stuff, there was a good bit of that.

DM:

And how much of this—how much hay growing has there been in this country?

WDV:

There's been alfalfa grown from the time irrigation started, but not in big lots—it's usually fairly small blocks people have where they'll have some cattle, and then they'll have enough hay to—for their-self, and sell some.

DM:

It was mostly for their own livestock, though?

WDV:

Yeah. Just like right here, we don't have enough water and all for people to just really make a lot of money out of just growing hay.

DM:

About two years ago, hay prices really went up, though. In fact, thieves were going into barns—I know out west of Fort Worth—and stealing hay out of the barns, it was so expensive. And they were bringing it in from California, and up on the Northern Plains—were there any people that

got into it around here—trying to grow it because of the high prices, or is the water price too high?

WDV:

Well, in other words, there's been hay production here—that's another crop that, if you get, say, cotton hailed out or something like that, you can plant a hay grazer-type deal and make hay out of that, too, so that's—and there's some of that—

DM:

But no one would say, "Hey, I'm not going to grow cotton this year; I'm going to grow hay."

WDV:

No, there was very little of that.

DM:

Now what about as—I know that there's a water issue now, and I guess the Ogallala is—I guess the level is dropping a little bit—is that the case out in this country, too?

WDV:

Yeah. That's going to be true all over the—well, say like Texas—all over the state is going to be the same way, because like we got the Ogallala Formation out here, but say like San Antonio, Austin, all that Hill Country area down there, they have a different water formation, but they've got the same kind of problems. so they're going to try to limit—say, irrigation, you're going to be limited to so many inches a year.

DM:

Are farmers talking about what they're going to do?

WDV:

Well, I imagine everybody will just have to comply with the—you know, whatever kind of rules everybody agrees on, but one of the bad things about that—whenever you get a crop started here and use—say if you're limited to twenty inches of irrigation a year—or whatever—and you come up here and your crop depends on that last water finishing it up, and if you just had to stop watering right there, you could literally lose what you'd worked for all year. So anyhow, then, they talk about they ought to make that where you can carry so many inches a year over—there's not any way that that's going to be good or easy to follow. It's going to be tough.

DM:

You can't know because you don't know what the rainfalls are going to be that year.

WDV:

It's like people's always saying, "Well, if you knew exactly how much it costs you to make a crop"—we've been right here sixty-five years, and there's no way that you can accurately predict just exactly what it costs you to make that crop because that changes every year—nothing will be the same, and you can't—you've got a general idea, but you can't just go and say it's going to take seventy-nine cents a pound to make cotton—it don't work.

DM:

If someone claims they can predict it, you know they're telling a story, huh?

WDV:

Well, predicting is right—being accurate is something else.

DM:

Well, are they—is anyone talking about alternatives, like would people continue dryland farming if they were really shut down on water, or would they go to grazing, or does anyone talk about letting their land go to wind turbines and things like that—do you ever hear any talk like that—radical changes?

WDV:

All of the above. Well, there's not anybody that wouldn't lease their land for oil or lease them for turbines or whatever, if they think that's the economical thing to do. And just like the amount of water we've got, I don't think there's anybody that knows—it's a matter of time that we won't have water being spent on raising crops like we've been doing. All that will change.

DM:

You want to venture a guess as to what will happen to this land?

WDV:

You'd go back to what it was before we had irrigation. You'd be dryland farming.

DM:

Do you think that would remain the dominant over grazing—cattle grazing, for example?

WDV:

Well, you'll have both, but you know just grazing cattle on dryland, that's not as profitable as you think it is, either, it's—

DM:

You were talking about—I guess before we started the recording, in fact—a cow drinking thirty gallons of water a day, so it could be a problem.

WDV:

And say for instance, whenever we used to farm with horses and mules, you figured a fourth of your land to raise the feed for your horses and all, so you had a fourth of that farm that just went into raising the fuel and everything for your—even today, your fuel cost is still going to be the same way in one way. But like during the horse and mule days, very few people every thought about that of every acre out here, about a fourth of it was planted in hay and a crop to feed the teams and horses and cattle.

DM:

Well, that was your horsepower, so you had to have it.

WDV:

And then like the cattle part, that was for your living and a little meat on the side.

DM:

Well, these were fairly self-sufficient farms you were talking about. Well, another thing I wanted to ask you about—and then I won't take up any more of your time today—but I wanted to get you to tell the story on tape, if you don't mind, about building this place and building it in a storm-safe way, and how you—the Tech wind engineering people who came out—because this was early in the program, when they started coming out here. Now wind engineering at Texas Tech is an internationally-known project, so I think it's interesting that early on, they came out here and were impressed by what you were doing. Do you mind?

WDV:

You know, I think about this a lot. In other words, just like myself, you learn from experience all the time. That's one of the best teachers that you have. Well, from the time we came out here, you began to realize the way the wind blows at certain times of year, different from where we grew up and all, you know, it's different out here. Well, the old house that we moved into was one of the first houses that was built in this community, and man, it was just a shell of a house at that time, and really wasn't hardly fit for anybody to live, but we had the chance to fix it up and make do and rent the farm and have a place to start and grow from, but—

DM:

Worked out all right.

WDV:

Anyhow, it worked out fine. But say like that old house, you just had an old shell to start with. Well, we wound up—well, I'd never stuccoed anything. I've seen people do it, but I just decided that I could stucco that old house and make it where the wind didn't blow through it, and it'd be a lot better—and it was. So learning from that, little steps at a time, and then you begin to learn about the structures, you know, what it's going to take to make something stand and all and like, for instance, we drew house plans for twenty years before we built this house. Well, during that twenty years, you can't imagine, there was almost a constant thinking about what you'd like to do and all, and it just all turned out—well, the way it turned out, when we first started, we set back enough cash money to do what we wanted to do without having to go to the bank. Well, during that particular time, the interest jumped up to—we got nineteen-point-eight percent on four hundred thousand dollars of CDs.¹

DM:

Oh, I wish we could do that today.

WDV:

Well, that was the best money we'd ever made. So that delayed for about another seven years on that deal. Well, during that time, gives you time to think about, so when we started to build this home we wasn't short on capital—we wasn't having to go borrow it, and we didn't have to ask nobody, we just—we was going to do it like we thought it ought to be done, and so that's what we done. So anyhow, just like on all the structure, it was in my mind, how to brace it and make it all—so that's what we did from the foundation up. Say, for instance, you know, on our office in there, where this all is, that's all concrete and steel and say like the top is eight-inch thick, with four-inch, there-quarter-inch rebar across, and the sidewall is cinderblocks, but they're filled with concrete, and a rebar run down every hole. But with that heavy top and everything on it, there's no way that thing's going to twist and turn. (laughs)

DM:

Yeah, and those cinderblocks are eight inches wide, themselves, aren't they?

WDV:

They're eight inches thick. And then, we decided to make that our office, and put a four-hour fire door on the—so that we could shut that off in case of a fire—then our office and everything would be safe—and that'd be a good—we called it "safe room" from the start, but we didn't realize that Tech was kind of working towards that same thing. So anyhow, I don't know how Tech guys got ahold of our—what we was doing, except the guy that we hired to help us do all that, he had been talking to one of them and said "Y'all need to come out and see what Buzz is

¹ A certificate of deposit (CD) is a time deposit, a financial product commonly sold in the US and elsewhere by banks and credit unions.

doing.” So anyhow, they came out here and the first minute they walked in, they said “Man, you’ve got a safe room here.” See, we didn’t even—that was the first thing that was built, before we even built the rest of the—we had that concrete structure all there. So he walked up here and the concrete slab was here, and that room was built, and then, naturally, the basement was already built. So that’s what was there. Well, naturally, you know, to them, that just looked like what it was—a safe room. Well, and then the rest of the house, say to the garage—we started out with a three-car garage—well it was wide enough that it could really have been a four-car. I wanted lots of room on each side where you—you know, there’s probably more than six feet between the cars out there.

DM:

Oh yeah, it’s a big area.

WDV:

But anyhow, the way that jetted out at that time, I was thinking about say, you had one of these seventy, eighty, hundred-mile-an-hour winds, what it could do to something sticking out, you know, like a garage.

DM:

Without the solid wall across, but three big openings.

WDV:

And so anyhow, I built a triangular brace out of four-by-four by three-eighths steel—that’s what we used out toolbars out of, and they go up the side of the wall—in other words, my foundation was laid with this in mind, where this could bolt down to the foundation. So that’s a triangle that’s eight feet up, eight feet out, and then down—and that’s all covered in brick, of course, now, but that’s a wind brace, I called it. But just like this is—we finished this house in ’86, and we’ve never had a single crack in any sheetrock or rick or anything on this house.

DM:

Do you remember the names of any of those people who came out from Tech?

WDV:

No, I don’t. At that time, when we was walking around here—their belt on with a hammer and saws and everything and working—at that time, we introduced each other, but I don’t remember the—

DM:

About what year was that?

WDV:

Well, that would have been in '85.

DM:

Well it's an interesting time—that was a very important time for Tech. They were really getting into this wind engineering. Like I say, now, it's a well-known program.

WDV:

But, you know, I mean they called that a safe room right off, and that's what we'd called it, you know, our-self, and I didn't think about they—but the first thing he said when he walked up, he said "Oh, you've built a safe room. We're going to be recommending that this is what people do in their home. They don't necessarily have to build a whole room like you built, but at least build something that your family can get into—a closet or anything." But see, like this right here, that four-hour fire door is really a bought door. So like on that, every time we'd leave, we'd close that door. We don't ever leave the house and leave that open, just because if you had a fire, that literally separates the—and like we've got all of our bookkeeping and stuff goes back to the time Joyce and I married.

DM:

So it's all safe.

WDV:

I've got ledgers in there—go in there and show you right now—that, when we moved over here, we'd already been out here one year, but we just only made twenty-one bales of cotton off four hundred [and] eighty acres of dryland that first year, and then Joyce worked in the grocery store at Slide, fifty cents an hour, and I worked part-time in the shop down there at sixty cents an hour. But when we moved over here, we had twelve dollars and forty cents—I mean twelve hundred and forty dollars and a few cents, and that ledger has got every penny that we spent—if it was a nickel or a dime or what, she had it down.

DM:

Well I think you touched on something important there, you know, the time that you waited to start to build your house—it gave you time to plan, it also gave you time to build up your capital—very different from the way most people are doing things now. They start with nothing, and then they go into a thirty-year debt, you know, to pay for a house.

WDV:

The way things worked out for us was—it was just great, and a lot of it wasn't just planned, it was—you know, say for instance, the banker there the first few years, we wasn't really borrowing from the bank. We tried to start on our own, you know, and at that time, you just tried

to make do with what you had, and that's what we was kind of able to do. And then the landlord that gave us the opportunity to start—we didn't realize that he was in a bind and couldn't make his land payments, and the First National Bank was the ones that he'd borrowed money from. And so anyhow, this farm right here—he bought this farm at the courthouse steps at an auction sale for thirty seven dollars and fifty cents an acre. And then we moved over here, and everybody ahead of Mr. Neel had lost this place at a farm sale—I mean everybody had to have an auction sale—in other words, that was a repossession sale, really, is what it was. Well, anyhow, old Mr. Neel, he went by the bank and told them he wasn't going to be able to make the payments, and he said “If y'all will stay with me, I think we're going to make this work. I got a young man that I think that's going to make it work for us.” Well, I didn't know about all this at the time—this is what they told me later. But Mr. Neel had told the bankers up there about me and all, even though at that time I wasn't going to that bank—First National. But anyhow, a short period after that, I started going there, and when I went up there, I walked in there—and of course, I didn't know anybody—and all the bankers back in those days, they just sat around one desk, about three foot apart, and everybody is down here in one little room—well, it was the main lobby. So I walked in, and I was just like any—an ordinary farmer walk[ing] in, you know, and you was trying to figure out who you needed to go to, and Mr. Neel had told me to go see Mr. York—head of the bank—I'll think of his name here in a minute—but anyhow, those two was the ones he—Walter Posey—so he said to see either one of them. So anyhow, I was standing there, trying to read if I seen their names or something, and then one of the guys that I was looking straight at, he got up out of his seat and walked out to where I was at in the lobby there, and said “Can I help you?” and I said “Well, I'm Buzz Vardeman. I was looking for Lee York,” and he said “Well, I'm Lee York. I know who you are, Bill Neel told me about you for a long time. Come on in.” So anyhow, from that day on, if I needed anything, Lee York and Walter Posey—the head guy—they just asked me what it was, and so that was a big help to know. So I was lucky to have somebody to—if I needed anything, well—so that was like when I spread out and bought—well, after I was in on the design of the 4010 John Deere, and that put John Deere ahead—well, I wasn't looking at it in putting John Deere company ahead—I was looking at putting us ahead of what we needed. But anyhow, soon as that tractor came out, I bought two of them to finish that year out, and then that fall, then, I ordered three more and five sets of six-row equipment, and that was the first six-row equipment that had been sold in Lubbock, or around here. So anyhow, I was able to borrow just a little money to finish up that crop that year, after buying all that equipment and everything.

DM:

Well you turned this place around.

WDV:

Yeah, we did.

DM:

Made it work. Well yeah, I was just curious about that, though when you started building on this and you starting with that safe room, because it was something pretty innovative out here on the South Plains—and something very much needed. Now you've never had to test it, really, I don't guess on a tornado or anything.

WDV:

Tornado and fire, both, was our concern.

DM:

Well, and then also, there's security. If anyone was trying to get into your house, you could go in there and close the door, you know. How long would it take them to get in?

WDV:

I'd hope a long time.

DM:

They'd give up and go somewhere else.

WDV:

I'd hate to be the one that tried to break into that deal, because I know how that's built and it wouldn't be an easy—

DM:

Well, that's what I wanted to ask you about this morning—we just didn't quite get to it last time, so I wanted to follow up a little bit, and I appreciate you giving me some time to do that. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I hadn't thought about—along what we've been talking about?

WDV:

You know, this kind of reminds me of the old song that used to—come out after Joyce and I was married a long time, but it says "If I had it to do over, I'd do it again with you." I guess, when I look back at what we been through, that's kind of the way I feel. There'd be some things you'd probably change, you know, and not do the same way, but I hadn't got any regrets of what we've done.

DM:

I just think that's wonderful, because I don't know that there're a lot of people who can say that, you know, that things have worked out and gone the way you would want them to go. So it's been a good life.

WDV:

There's not any doubt that you've got to do a lot of planning all the time, and one of my favorite sayings—"Things don't just happen, somebody has got to make it happen." And that's true in life, because you got to help things along if you're going to do it.

DM:

Well, I mean you can just kind of come out here and see right off that it's taken a lot of hard work and a lot of planning—you know, you're right; it doesn't just happen. Well I'll go ahead and stop this. Are you ready? Okay.

End of interview



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