

**Oral History Interview of
Mona Lee Brock, Ron Brock, Glen Wallace, and Joel
Morton**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
June 12, 2013
Lubbock, Texas**

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

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Preferred Citation for this Document:

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Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: N/A

Audio Metadata: 44.1k/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: Elissa Stroman

Transcription: Leah Blackwell

Editor(s): Elyssa Foshee, Elissa Stroman

Final Editor: Andy Wilkinson

Interview Series Background:

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

Transcript Overview:

This interview was done at the American Agriculture Movement Reunion in held in Lubbock Texas, July 12-13, 2013. In it the participants discuss their involvement in the American Agriculture Movement in the late 1970s and 80s, including their involvement in Farm Aid and mental health resources for suicidal farmers.

Length of Interview: 01:11:34

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Keywords

American Agriculture Movement, Farm Aid, AgriLink Hotline, The Farm Crisis

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Let me start this buy saying this is the twelfth of June and it's about 1:30 I'd say.

Man:

1:31.

AW:

1:31, that's pretty good! Andy Wilkinson with the Southwest Collection. We're here at the Ranching Heritage Center, and I have with me Dr. Glen Wallace from Oklahoma City. I have Ron, or do you go by Ronnie?

Ron Brock (RB):

Ron.

AW:

Ron Brock. And Ron, where do you live?

RB:

East of Caddo, Oklahoma.

AW:

Okay. And your mother Mona Lee Brock. And you are from?

Mona Lee Brock (MLB):

Durant.

AW:

Durant, Oklahoma.

MLB:

Yes.

AW:

And we have Joel—

Joel Morton (JM):

Morton.

AW:

Morton, M-O-R-T-O-N?

JM:

That's right.

AW:

And you're from Iowa but now from Cambridge, Maryland right?

JM:

Cambridge, Mass.

AW:

Mass, I mean. "Our fair city," as the Car Talk guys always say right?

JM:

That's right.

AW:

And Dr. Wallace was active in a very interesting aspect of the farm movement, and that was suicide prevention.

GW:

Yes.

AW:

Mona Lee was his right-hand stalwart and is an extremely important person in this. Ron was growing up and has some great stories about his mother traveling all over and Joel is with Farm Aid, and in fact, cleverly put his hat where we can get a good picture of it and I'm glad, thanks.

JM:

Oh I believe that's Ron's hat.

AW:

Oh that's Ron's hat, oh!

RB:

That's mine. Yeah, I've got to take care of all of them. [Laughter]

AW:

That's good, I love it. But we want to talk about Farm Aid, because Mona Lee has also been very much involved in that. So to get us all started, Mona Lee, can we get you to give me a couple of basic things like your date of birth and where you were born?

MLB:

Yes, well, January 1, 1932, and I was born in my home county of Marshall County, Oklahoma—the county seat is Madill—in the same house, the same room, the same bed as my grandparents; they built the house. And my mother and her ten sisters and brothers were born there. Then I was the first grandchild. The home place is still in the family.

AW:

That's great. What's your maiden name?

MBL:

Bruster, B-R-U-S-T-E-R.

AW:

B-R-U-S?

MBL:

Uh-huh.

AW:

I'm glad you spelled that for me because I would have gotten that wrong. Did you grow up there?

MLB:

Yes I did.

AW:

And how did you wind up being involved in farming?

MLB:

Well, my parents farmed and as I grew up and, you know, lived in that cotton field, when school was out I said I would never marry a farmer and I did. And we farmed. So as we farmed we were involved in the Farm Crisis, and we lost our farm.

AW:

Okay, again thinking about who might listen to this fifty or a hundred years from now—what do you mean by the Farm Crisis?

MLB:

The Farm Crisis was a period of time, it started in the late seventies and actually—well there was more or less kind of a slow-down or ending but there's no such thing. It's still going on actually.

And that's why we have Joel, who is active—he's right on the scene of doing everything, and then the rest of us out here just do what we can when we can. And a lot of farmers are still in trouble and until policy changes they'll continue to be. So my husband—we lost the farm as I said—and my husband shortly thereafter had a fatal heart attack and passed away and that was in 1986. Then in September, Willie Nelson had—

AW:

September of—?

MLB:

Nineteen eighty-six.

AW:

Same year?

MLB:

Yes. And Willie Nelson had a concert in Champaign, Illinois, and that kind of kicked it off. You know, we can do things with the intention of helping the Farm Crisis because so many people had told him—and he's a farm boy himself as you know—and the people helping him were also, I'm sure—the first thing we say is, Well we'll do this or we'll do that. And we do this or we do that. And then, after it's done, well we're standing there and we think, Well what do we do? What are we going to do? How are we going to change it? What do we do about it? And so in my community, we—as in many other communities, although I didn't know it—farm families were holding meetings in their counties, and one family would have many families in, and there were so many farm families in my county that we could only allow one representative from each family to be there, and we'd have as many as seventy-five there at one time. And I was teaching school, and I'd bring chairs home to seat everybody and we'd discuss it. But we didn't actually know what to do. We said if we just had some way of having some means of reaching all the farmers, even though there were meetings going on all over the county—and we'd attend those meetings, this actually did happen. We lost our farm and then some neighbors went to the pastor—he was a Methodist farmer—and they said, Hey we need help. Not only are we in trouble but everybody is in trouble and we've got to bring this before our Oklahoma Conference of Churches. They did—the CEO—that was Dr. John Wesley Hart who was head of the Methodist Church in Oklahoma City, over the state of Oklahoma—they brought it before the Conference of Churches and Dr. Max Glen was the CEO of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, and once they presented that to him, he had to go back to the board and they said, We've got to have someone to come in and help us. And that very year I had retired after twenty-two years of teaching.

AW:

And what year was this again?

MLB:

That was in 1985.

AW:

In '85. So this was after the Tractorcade?

MLB:

Yes. Then we moved, and we had a home there and I think we were still in shock, I know we were. And it was there that my husband passed away. But in the meantime, the Champaign group, Willie Nelson and his colleagues, presented the concert. And anyway, we applied for a twenty-five thousand dollar seed grant from him because we had no money. And the farmers who were already there working with Dr. Glen said, We know just the little lady to come in and do this. And oh, I didn't have any idea what I was getting into. But anyway, I went up for two days, I promised them I'd go up for two days.

AW:

To the concert?

MLB:

No, to the Oklahoma Conference of Churches. And I stayed a total of twenty-two and a half years, and then I'm still with them unofficially. And everybody I think is that helped them out in a minute if they called. But I worked, and I still work unofficially—I'd be happy to do that. And that's how it got started.

AW:

Good. Well again, tell me—well not me, because I know what you mean by “we lost the farm”—but explain what that means to people. I mean we live in a society now where people think they go to the grocery store to get food—that's where it comes from. So what does it mean—how do you lose a farm? How do you go out of the farming business?

MLB:

You know, I'm going to go back in the Bible. You know we're told in the Bible, “In the last days, owe no man.” And we knew better than to take out any type of mortgage, but we had a thirty thousand dollar mortgage. And before you knew it, that mortgage accumulated interest. In less than a year it would go up to thousands of dollars in interest. And not only did they do that to us but they did that to every farmer throughout the nation. I don't know the legality of it, I do know that it was not right. And it just went on and we tried to negotiate, we tried. We said, Hey,

we've been farming all of our lives. We've never failed to pay anybody a penny that we owed them, if we did. We will pay this. But that was not the way things were supposed to happen. And if I had known then what I know now, we would not have lost it. But that was not the case. We did lose it. So therefore, that led us up to that point of losing the farm. The lenders would not talk to the farmers—any farmer—it doesn't matter. My husband and I would get in the pickup. We'd hear about a farmer maybe in Northwest Oklahoma or Southwest Oklahoma, Northeast, and we'd get in that pickup and we'd drive up there. We'd say, Hey, you don't know us, but we're coming to see you. We'll be there in a couple of hours. And we would sit down and eat Sunday dinner and we'd just compare stories of what was happening. And come to find out, even then, and then, later, what the lender was telling us would be told to that family farmer just verbatim. And so we put it together, and it turned out to be true, that that lender was being told by someone above him what to say to the farmers. A lot of what they were told to say to the farmers led to what I later did, there in the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, on the hotline, and it very definitely led to the deaths of many farmers.

AW:

We want to talk about that but before we get into Farm Aid in particular. But when you talk about the lenders, you're pretty much talking about the FMHA, right?

MLB:

Right. The Farmers Home Administration as it was known at that time.

AW:

Yeah, okay. And again, to clarify for people listening to this in some other time and place—a farmer's loan is a business loan, but when you're foreclosed on, and you lose the farm, you also lose where you live, and you may lose generations of connection to a place. So it's quite a different matter. And the effect on people, and that's kind of what we're coming to now—

MLB:

Right, it's totally different.

AW:

Can you talk about that?

MLB:

Yes. I might have mentioned this to you, but I read a book once, written by, I think, a Dr. Gerard. He's from Florida. And in this book he explained—and you studied it in college—Dr. Wallace studied it, Joel studied it—that as long as a person has self-worth and dignity and self-confidence, and is a contributing being in the community, he's productive, and he will continue to live, and live a long time quite likely. But once you've been given the negative side of all four

of those, they accept that as an invitation to die. And they do— one way or the other. And these farmers would go in to their lenders and say, Hey, would you go with me just another year on my lending loan? Up to that point they had made whatever they needed each year to operate. It may not be very much, and they could pay it off—maybe a total of a third or fourth of their total worth, not very much. They could pay it off with ease. They'd go in and the lender would say, Hey, I think we can talk about it if you will go across the street, take out more insurance, make us the beneficiaries, and come back and we'll talk about it. They would go across the street and take out more insurance.

AW:

Life insurance?

MLB:

Life insurance. And come back and say, for example—and this did happen in some cases—I just took out another policy for a hundred thousand dollars. You are the beneficiary. Hand the lender the policy and then, they already had made that lender a beneficiary of a hundred thousand that they already have, just to get through another year. And then the lender would say, Now, if you'll go home, take the gun and blow your brains out, you'll be worth more money to your family dead than alive. And the farmer did die.

AW:

And we don't know of any lenders that went broke, do we?

MLB:

Nope, not at all.

AW:

When you say that you and your husband would go visit with farmers in other places, was it to satisfy something that we now do with Facebook or with Twitter, or with Tweets—was it to be able to communicate with them, though?

MLB:

Yes, to communicate with the farmers and you know, farmers are, as I call us, a different breed of people. If you came in and said, "How many head of cattle do you have?" I would answer, and my husband would answer, and so would all the other farmers or cattlemen, say, "Well maybe— Oh, I don't know, I haven't counted them lately." And they wouldn't tell them. "Well, how many bushels of wheat did you make?" He's not going to tell them. But that farmer, being a farmer, could pretty much figure it out; he knew. But it's something that you just didn't discuss. Your private business was your private business and it stayed that way. And we, like a lot of other farmers, taught their children to keep their mouth shut-up concerning the private business.

It's something they didn't discuss. Contribute, go be a part of the community, be a good neighbor and everything like that but if they asked you how many dollars you had in your pocket, just say, "I've got enough to get by," and go on. And that basically is why we would go and also to gather information, and when they started having trouble that's when the farmers started communicating, getting together and saying, "Hey we've got a problem. Now what are we going to do about it?"

In other words, all of this that we heard this morning, how a tractorcade came about, was they realized they had a problem and I'm going to go across my fence or road and see if Farmer Brown has the same problem. If it is, well I'm not the cause of it. If he isn't, there's somebody else the cause of it. I have said all along that if just one or two people had a problem with that, it's the fault of the farmer. But when everybody in the nation had a problem, it was the fault of something else, and that's what they started digging to find out.

AW:

Tell me, did you meet Dr. Wallace before you started up with Farm Aid?

MLB:

No, it was afterwards.

AW:

Then let's talk about how you got involved in Farm Aid. Were you a Willie Nelson fan and heard that this concert was going on or—how did you know about it?

MLB:

Everybody is a fan of Willie Nelson. (laughter)

AW:

Of course that's true. I know it. But how did you know about it? How did you know about something in Champaign, Illinois?

MLB:

Well, we knew that a concert had been held in Champaign, Illinois. I didn't know him personally, had never seen him personally, but I had seen him on television. So when I was called to go in to the Conference of Churches and help out to help organize something, then what do I do? As the lady said this morning, "We'll figure it out as we go." But, what was your question? I'm sorry.

AW:

Oh I was just curious as to how you knew about Farm Aid. So you'd heard about the concert and the organization?

MLB:

Yes, I heard it on television. And Dr. Glen, who was the CEO of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches—we said, We've got to have some money to operate this thing. There was Dr. Glen and his executive secretary and myself. It was a big building I guarantee you. And I went in, and there was a huge desk and one huge telephone I didn't know how to operate, and there were about four T.V. cameras and I had to start right there like that. So Dr. Glen and the executive secretary applied for a seed grant of twenty-five thousand dollars from Farm Aid and got it. And that's how we started out. And then we were carried through the Oklahoma State Department of Agriculture as a line item veto I guess you'd call it, of a quarter of a million dollars a year. And then we had all the churches in Oklahoma organized and they helped us, then, from that point on. But I got acquainted with Dr. Wallace—oh my goodness we were well into the program—

AW:

What was the program? What did you do with the money?

MLB:

We had a lot of publicity that Dr. Glen was responsible for. And newspapers carried it—everybody was behind it because they too had family on farms, and I answered the telephone. And those lines were lighting up faster than I could answer. And the executive secretary helped and Dr. Glen helped, and he called in his wife to help. And so when I first got calls of seriousness, of farmers threatening to kill themselves, right off the bat, I thought, What do I do, what do I do? And so Dr. Glen contacted Dr. Wallace.

AW:

So the phone calls were not all necessarily suicide prevention phone calls?

MLB:

No.

AW:

But they were phone calls about what do we do, how do we keep from losing our farm?

MLB:

Right.

AW:

Information about how to get through the crisis. But a part of that turned into being the issue of the suicide?

MLB:

Right.

AW:

Okay, well before we get to Dr. Wallace, Joel, would you talk just a minute about Farm Aid? But first tell me where you were born and when.

JM:

I was born in San Jose, California as a matter of fact in, 1958, May seventh.

AW:

Happy birthday.

JM:

Yeah, thank you. My parents were both rural Iowans. When I was a kid, we traveled back and forth between Iowa and California as my dad sought better jobs.

AW:

And that was 1958, right?

JM:

Fifty-eight, right. But my mother was a farm girl from outside of Waverly, Iowa. My grandfather, her dad, farmed an eighty-acre farm in Iowa for most of the twentieth century.

AW:

And you and I were talking earlier in the day about your educational background. Talk about that a little bit because I think that's an interesting thing.

JM:

Yes, I have a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas where I did ethnographic work in history and was in fact a professor for five years or so and had taught for a long time prior to that.

AW:

Doing your penance as a graduate student?

JM:

Something like that, yeah. (laughs) And then finally in 2005 I did go to work—2006, I guess it was—I went to work for Farm Aid running the Farm Aid hotline and getting to know Mona Lee at that point.

AW:

How come, getting out of academia into the thick of the regular world, or the irregular world I guess we might call it—(laughter)

JM:

Well partly because it was a kind of return to my roots, you might say. My family had been involved in farming from a long time back. One of my sisters currently farms and a brother is an ag economist, so all of that was sort of in my blood. And of course I knew of Farm Aid. By 2005 Farm Aid had been in existence for twenty years or so and I knew and liked the organization and had a pretty good idea about what they did. But I didn't know a whole lot about hotline work with farmers (laughter) until I actually started doing it and learned a lot from people like Mona Lee.

AW:

What does Farm Aid do to help farmers?

JM:

Well, a number of things, but the primary thing is that we have what we call a farmer resource network of hundreds of organizations around the country. That network has grown since 1985, including the organizations that Mona Lee and Glen have worked with in Oklahoma. So what we do is continue to maintain a national farmer hotline, both on telephone and email, and I'm primarily responsible for that. And I use our network as referrals for farmers to try to get them the kinds of help that they may need. And then we also put on a concert every year, the idea being to celebrate what we call the Good Food Movement—small farming, middle sized farms, sustainable farming practices and so on. Trying to make that more and more popular around the country and retain the significance—cultural, economic, you name it—of the family farmer.

AW:

Of which the family farmer is an endangered species.

JM:

That's right.

AW:

And a lot of it started with exactly what Mona Lee described. Family farmers losing farms and therefore they don't get passed on, but somebody's out there on the land and it's someone that's farming a lot more land and lives somewhere else, right?

JM:

That's right.

AW:

What did you learn from Mona Lee?

JM:

Well, from Mona Lee I learned something about compassion for other human beings, really. And knowing, learning, that listening, actively listening to someone who is in trouble, can really matter. And of course if that someone in trouble is someone like a farmer who often does not want to be seeking help in the first place, is really fundamentally independent and self-sufficient and has a long history of being that, if that person begins to seek help then that person probably does need some help.

And Mona Lee has been—people have described her in many different ways; people have described her as an angel of mercy, actually saving people's lives. And I haven't had that kind of experience—although I have in certain cases—but nothing like the volume that she and the others in Oklahoma did face in the late eighties, early nineties, and through the nineties. But I've learned about, first of all, her reputation about what she actually meant to farmers—credited with saving their lives. And also having spent a little bit of time with her in the last few years, I have a better idea why. I kind of carry that into my own work on the Farm Aid hotline.

AW:

Great. Dr. Wallace, we've got a great interview with you that we did at your home in Oklahoma City a few weeks back so I don't need to know your date of birth again today, but how did you meet Mona Lee?

Glen Wallace (GW):

I worked for the Department of Mental Health and the Deputy Commissioner for the Western Region, from I-35 west basically. And the Commissioner, Dr. Frank James went to a meeting of Mona Lee's governing board—whatever they called the council. And he came back to the office and he said, "You know, this thing is a crisis. We've been through one"—they had a massacre at a post office in Edmond. Killed I think nineteen people or something—and we did the follow-up dealing with "what do we do now?" sort of stuff and working with the families. He says, "You're going to go over to the Council of Churches and you're going to back up that AgLink Hotline." He said, "You work in the Grain Belt where all of this is happening. He said, Listen to me real close. If anyone is suicidal, you'll either go yourself or you'll send somebody. And I don't want any farmer, even if they've got a stigma for mental illness or mental depression or needing help—I don't want an amateur out there. I don't want these patients going on the waiting list with the working worried and put them on the appointment for five weeks. He says, We want to do on-site suicide interventions." So I went over and met Mona Lee and I think Dr. Glen was still there. She had a series of bosses after that—or both of us. But anyway, it was kind of like Mona Lee said—I didn't realize—it wasn't long until the research came out that our suicide rate

by occupation, farmers had jumped to 1,949 per 100,000. The average in Oklahoma for adults was about 19 per 100,000.

AW:

So almost three times?

GW:

Yes. And we had a lot of research by the *Tulsa World* newspaper that's been documented. And anyway, we went to work. And later on, it got so bad that the commissioner said, "I want to change your job title." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "You're now Director of Rural Mental Health." So it became a full-time job for me, really. It was a great experience, very self-fulfilling in the helping process, to deal with people that felt like they'd been disenfranchised, absolutely disenfranchised. And as Joel and I were talking about earlier this evening, the first step in suicide prevention is to get that person talking. And you don't say any judgmental stuff. You keep them flowing. And as they talk—therapy is nothing but talk, okay—but the more the person talks, the more they get insights—insights, insights, insights. And then we can do a lot of follow-up. But Mona Lee and I could share—I think we did—in 1980 or '81, I think we did eighty-two on-site interventions, she and I. And I'd call the mental health center to go out there, and they'd mess it up every time. The psychiatrist would say he'd go and he wouldn't, and then the psychologist wouldn't go. They'd send some therapist out that really hadn't had any experience in suicide intervention. So we ended up doing it mostly ourselves. We lost at least three farmers to suicide that we had worked with. The tragedy of that is—[chokes up] sorry. We have to live with that. We didn't lose many.

The trouble with that whole thing was that—the major thing was—that if you—a community can be diagnosed just like an individual for depression—your farmers being pushed off the land, the farmers that were on boards, the hospital board, the elevator boards, the deacons in the churches—what happened is they didn't go, they resigned from the boards, they withdrew, just like you do in depression. They didn't go to their social things. including the coffee shop where they all drank coffee for years. They stopped showing up. They started staying at home. Mona Lee and I walked into houses where the bills are on the desk this high. They hadn't paid a bill; they weren't going to pay any bills. In other words, they were withdrawing, like in depression. The community starts withdrawing, just like they start going downhill. Your church is not supported like they should be. You see the storefronts being boarded up downtown. Anyway, I think there's a great analogy between personal, individual depression and community depression. And we've seen a lot of that in all this.

AW:

Could the two of you maybe describe—we don't have time to cover all of them by any stretch, though we'd love to. Can you describe what a—if there is such a thing as a typical intervention—a phone call comes in and you're going to go see this person—what does that

mean? Tell us how that happens.

GW:

Well Mona Lee gets a call from Medford, Oklahoma and the guy says he's going to kill himself, and he has a gun. I think he's played Russian roulette. So we hustle up to Medford.

AW:

And that's not like next door. It takes you a little while.

GW:

No, it takes about an hour and a half.

AW:

How do you make sure they don't do something before you get there?

GW:

Well, if the family's with them, Mona Lee talks to the family. She talks to the wife. She worked at a nursing home, and she wasn't going to work that day. The son was out there, and we always tell them to try to easily get the weapon away from them. Well we go out there and that morning he got up and shot the tires off his wife's car so she couldn't go to work. Now we're talking about a Korean Veteran, a pillar in the community, a great Christian man, a fine family, wonderful sons. When we got out there he had gone out in the garage, and they had some paint buckets in the garage and he shot them. So he did great artwork in his garage; he splattered different colors all over the garage. We walk in there, and he had drank a little Bourbon. Isn't that right, Mona Lee?

MLB:

Uh-huh.

GW:

And I think he didn't have the gun by the time we got there, did he? I can't remember.

MLB:

No.

GW:

But anyway, we do our thing, suicide intervention, pretty well. There's a routine we go through as I was talking about before: get him to talk, build rapport—rapport, rapport, rapport. And Mona Lee and I, and his wife was there, and I don't know whether the son was sitting in on this or not.

MLB:

No he didn't.

GW:

I don't think he was. You know, in their lives, they have failure begets failure, begets failure, begets failure in their mind. His grain bin has just been rolled away by a tornado or something, this old storm. Just one little thing had happened after another. And he just didn't want to live anymore. And our job is to convince him that, as Sidney Jourard, the reference book that Mona Lee referred to—he's a suicidologist and one of the best—the title of his book is something, *To Live or to Die*.

MLB:

Invitation.

GW:

Invitation to Live or to Die. Well, a lot of them take the invitation to die. And our job is to get them the invitation to live. So we spent quite a bit of time with him and then we talked about, in this case, we've got to get them in-patient. We can't leave them out there. Sometimes you can leave them out there under certain conditions, take the guns and that sort of thing. Well, he said, "No. I'm not going. I'm just not going." And so Mona Lee suggested—we talked to the wife—we call his pastor, right?

MLB:

Mm-hm.

GW:

And the pastor comes out. We finally say, "Now look, will you go to Meadowlake, the Mental Health Center in Enid, if your pastor takes you?" And he sits there and he begins to sober up a little bit I believe. And, "Yeah." "You'll just ride with the pastor right?" "Yes." So he gets in the car—did the wife go with him or with us?

MLB:

With us.

GW:

He gets in the car with the pastor and drives to Enid. And guess what, we're right behind them. And we get him in to in-take at Enid. And then Mona Lee does most of the follow-up because they trust Mona Lee, and they know she's always available. So if I need to go back—we don't need to mention their names anyway—but if they need more help, they call Mona Lee. We do the follow-up on the treatment—how the treatment went, and she can talk to the wife and how

he's functioning. That's kind of typical. Some of them are not so clear as that.

AW:

What if they don't go in? What if they don't go into the place?

GW:

Well, that's what I choked up on a while ago. Mona Lee wasn't with me; she should have been. But I was called—maybe she was—you were there, Mona Lee. We were called to Piedmont, Oklahoma that the husband had sat and cried for two or three days. And here's a guy that jumped out of an airplane in World War II, I guess, or Korea, I can't remember. And he caught T.B. while he was overseas and had some health problems. Deacon in the church, leader in the community, married a woman who was quite wealthy by inheritance, beautiful big home. He had a heavy debt load, but in this case she just wouldn't jump in and pay off the debt and that kind of made him angry. She was a psychiatric nurse. We spent quite a bit of time with him. I believe it was on a Friday or Saturday, I can't remember. And he wouldn't go. I said, "You've got to go to in-patient." And he said, "No. If you send me to in-patient I will kill myself sure enough. If you want to get rid of me you just send me to in-patient." I called the sheriff. You know, most sheriff's departments have a mental health unit that comes out. If they have to cuff them they use these sponge cuffs—that sort of thing—and treat them as nice as they can.

Man [videographer]:

I'm sorry, we're going to have to stop in just a second and switch cards.

GW:

Do you want me to stop now?

AW:

Yeah, they just have to get more storage.

[pause]

GW:

So we got through the Farmer's Union didn't we? Didn't the referral come through the Farmer's Union?

MLB:

Uh-huh.

AW:

Are we ready?

Man[videographer]:

We're back.

GW:

So, I called Dr. Shackford, a psychiatrist that worked for the mental health center and I said, "This guy really is in crisis and needs some help real bad." He said, "I'll see him at ten o'clock Monday morning." And I turned to this patient, and I talked to the wife about it, who was a nurse. And we went through the house for guns; we got all the guns. We made sure the son came and got them—I don't remember how we—and I asked the wife, "If anything changes, call me." Big mistake. I was working out at the "Y" Saturday morning with the group I always worked out with. Got a phone call that said, "You've got to go to Piedmont. They have something going on out there." Went out there and there was yellow tape everywhere, and there was a mustache in the back of the pickup. He sat on the back of the pickup wheel and put a .410 shotgun in the roof of his mouth and pulled the trigger. Somebody left a .410—one of the kin folks shooting possums, and he knew about it but we didn't know about it. And the point of that is that poor judgment—he should have gone in-patient. We should have called the sheriff anyway.

AW:

Well, as my father used to always say, "Our hindsight is twenty-twenty, and our foresight's not ever quite that good."

GW:

I called the psychiatrist and told him, "Dr. Shackford, he won't be there." "What happened?" "Well he's dead, Dr. Shackford." He said, "Well I don't need to see him. I need to see you." So we did a little detox on it. But it's very fulfilling to help somebody, but it's very destructive when you don't.

AW:

When you don't, yeah. Are you still getting calls?

MLB:

Yes. When I was there I would get about forty, forty-five a day. Now, those days started at five or six o'clock in the morning and go all night long until they stopped calling in. Because I took those calls, regardless.

AW:

Farmers get up early, too.

MLB:

Yes they do. And anyway, since I have retired, I've kind of gone into just privacy altogether,

unlisted telephone number. And I moved from my home county over to the adjoining county, and I don't take the calls. But anytime I get a call from Farm Aid I will take it. And then calls will come in occasionally and farmers will put in an ad in a paper that goes out to everybody in the state looking for my number. And the people who know me and know the telephone number give it out and once it's out one time, it's gone. So I've never refused those calls. And they do come in, they are. So the problems are still there.

AW:

Ron, in some ways I guess it's a little bit of a burden to be the son of "an angel of mercy." (laughter) How do you live up to that? Tell me what it was like growing up with your mom doing this really important but very demanding work.

RB:

She told me to never discuss anything I heard or saw with anyone.

AW:

Well you were telling me this great story earlier about how if you needed to know where your mom was you got the newspaper out, or watched the television.

RB:

Well one way. Then they came out with the mobile telephones. We called them bag 'phones.

AW:

That would have been in the late eighties?

RB:

Yeah, early eighties I guess. I think I've still got that phone. I'll just give it to y'all because it was her phone.

AW:

They weigh about forty pounds don't they? Well tell me the story about the way you told your mom about the number.

RB:

Well I never could get ahold of her. And one time it was three months I think. And, you know, for somebody that grew up with—she had to know every breath I took, me and my brother both. And you couldn't get ahold of her. So I got her a bag 'phone. I told her, "Mom this is my connection to you. Do not give this number out." And the first week I got ahold of her pretty good. It just worked fine. And after that I couldn't get ahold of her, and it was another two months—a month and a half—I got the first bill and it was close to a thousand dollars. She gave

the number out.

AW:

I was going to say, someone else had gotten the number. And I forgot, Ron, I forgot to get your date of birth.

RB:

Seven, three, fifty-eight. [July 3, 1958]

AW:

So you are about to have a birthday.

RB:

Yeah.

AW:

And were you born in—

RB:

Durant, Oklahoma.

AW:

In Durant.

JM:

It was a good year, '58.

RB:

It was.

(laughter)

AW:

You youngsters. This is a '48 here. (laughter) Well what was it like being in the family of someone that had a calling? And again, an important calling—that's an interesting thing.

RB:

It was. Our evening meals were interrupted every day. And just to sit and watch her work on the phone—and everybody involved was amazing. And I really got to do the fun stuff.

AW:

Like what?

RB:

Run errands, take eighty dollars to this farmer over in Arkansas because if he doesn't have it by eight o'clock in the morning they're going to foreclose on him. That was all he liked having his place paid.

AW:

Eighty bucks?

RB:

Eighty bucks.

AW:

And you got to do that kind of work?

RB:

I got to do that kind of work, yeah.

AW:

Now, how does American Agriculture Movement figure into all of our discussion this afternoon? Were y'all all members of AAM?

All:

Yes.

AW:

Right from the start? Right from the late seventies?

MLB:

In the beginning some people looked at us as radical. We were known as the Radical Right and everything. And then somebody—as one of the farmers said this morning, “It was great persons seeking change.” And I think the Webster's dictionary definition of it is, “To seek change.” And it doesn't mean somebody that's really on the extreme, but this is what some people associated us as being connected to and it wasn't at all—because it was to treat each person with respect even the lenders and this is what we all did, even if the farmers had to take their tractors and surround the lender's offices to get them to go with that farmer for another year. That's pretty persuasive. That's not at all extreme.

AW:

Yeah. Well earlier we were talking about losing the farm, and let me just kind of distill it for the recorder and you chime in, any of you, and correct this but I'm just going to describe it for anybody listening, one of those people who thinks you go to the grocery store to get the food and that's where it comes from. So when we talk about losing the farm, what happens typically is that production loans are taken out, or loans to buy capital, like tractors or whatever. And at some point you can't pay them back and usually that point comes from changes in inputs and outputs. And inputs would be the cost of things like fertilizer and fuel and we know what was happening to those costs in the eighties, because of the issues with the oil embargo from earlier, and the increasing prices on petroleum, and a lot of city folks forget that fertilizer, most of that, comes from crude oil, from petroleum. So if your prices go up, the rest of the world says, Well, you're just going to raise the price of your product. But how do you go about raising the price of wheat for instance? You don't. You have to survive in a world where you have no control over the prices—the money you spend or the money that you get in. You can't change the price of your product.

MLB:

When you turn the key on that tractor, sometimes you'll lose as much as seventy thousand dollars. You automatically lose money because the price of the product is below the cost of production. When you look at it from this angle, one of the farmers describes it as being—and who is to blame, I don't know, I can think on it and figure it out, and think I know, but I may not—that it has been the greatest swindle in the history of America, is to take the wealth from the farmers. Because when you take production out—this is raw materials, new materials—then everything goes down. And this is what we have seen happen since the late seventies. And as Dr. Wallace said, we have seen sidewalks, the grass growing in the sidewalks, and you remember what William Jennings Bryan said. And you see businesses boarded up and the local taxes go down. None come in. And people move off, but move off to what and to where? The problem is the same there. It's really something. And you know, nobody—even as many people as we contacted in Washington, D.C. and who knew it about it and they knew the problems that were taking place—but nobody could do it or would do anything about it. And certainly nobody has done anything about it.

GW:

The American farmer furnishes the food and fiber for this nation and probably the only business man that produces raw materials that doesn't tell somebody the price he wants for his product. And decisions are made by people, as one farmer said, "that have never smelled the exhaust of a John Deere tractor." It's made by people that oftentimes have no idea what agriculture is all about. The local dollar—that one research showed—that a dollar spent in a local community goes around seven times before it leaves that community. Now talk about how it affects a community.

The best analyst of the agriculture thing that I know is Dr. [William] Heffernan from the University of Missouri, and he published a lot of his data and really helped. Lyman Knapp in Oklahoma taught finance at OSU. He's one of those farmers that belonged—he was president of American Ag for a while. Dr. Heffernan's wife, Judy Heffernan, probably did the best research on what happens when people are pushed off their land. They were soybean farmers themselves. And she studied, I believe it was forty soybean farmers in Missouri that had been pushed off their land—that's the term I like to use. It's probably an ugly way to say it, but it's true—and she looked at. Once they were pushed off the land, she followed them for several years. [She studied] the number of domestic violence cases compared to those that weren't pushed off their land, the number of people that got divorces compared to—you know. She looked at domestic violence, divorces. She looked at substance abuse, which was big. She looked at the quality of life stuff like what happened to their children, did they go to college, stuff like that. And, I was thinking today, we need to get a copy of her study. It was powerful.

The commissioners of mental health meet once or twice a year in Washington—all the state mental health directors. And Judy and I presented the other side of all this. She gave her presentation, which was wonderful, to the mental health state commissioners, and I did the psychological part. And we talked about stigma, and we talked about a waiting list, and we talked about people in crisis, and hopefully that helped. But Judy Heffernan—she did a great study. The Farm Crisis—so what? Well she kind of answered the “so what?” There's lots of pain and suffering that goes on that no one sees, it shows up in the jails and the courts and other places rather than being referred to us.

AW:

The grass in the sidewalks.

JM:

Another way to put it, and it's not a new idea, is “rural ghettoization.” And arguably it's been going on for a good long time, since the late seventies if not a little sooner. And of course it's not only a white phenomenon either, it's also an African American and a Hispanic phenomenon as well—basically anyone who lives in rural areas. Despite the fairly rosy picture for the ag economy generally, presently—in part that means that the farms that have survived have gotten larger and larger. Those smaller farmers have gotten pushed off the land and those kinds of calls, those very difficult kinds of calls, continue to come in to places like ours and so it can be a real struggle. These issues have not gone away.

AW:

What happened to Thomas Jefferson's ideal citizen of the democracy—the yeoman farmer, the informed agrarian. What happened to that? There not many of those left are there?

JM:

Well there's some left but—

AW:

Well I know but not a whole nation full.

JM:

The idea has kind of been shoved aside a little bit. That's probably fair to say.

GW:

I went to OSU, an extension of my alma mater, which I do love. And I thought, "Boy they'll be helpful."

AW:

Even here at Texas Tech we'll admit that OSU is a good school.

GW:

Well they are, but they make mistakes too. I went up to talk to the Director of Extension and told him what we was into. And he said—and I could tell he wasn't listening. At the end of it I said, "You know what our needs are, is there any help?" His comment basically was this, could be summarized: There's too many farmers out there on the land. And they're going to go, anyway. And the other thing was that some people basically aren't good managers. Well, nothing could have hurt me worse than that stuff, so I didn't go back there anymore. That was my last trip. But the quotation, William Jennings Bryan said, "You can destroy our cities and they will rebuild them almost overnight. You destroy the rural area and it will take years for it to grow back." We had a tornado in Moore. It will be rebuilt in a couple or three years. You go out here and destroy the cotton farms in Southwest Oklahoma and the archaeologist will tell you—not archeologist, I'm trying to think of the other word for the people who study—

JM:

Anthropologists?

RB:

Economists?

GW:

But anyway. Well, let's take the colored people. How are they doing today? It's taken a century, and they're still not there. The same thing is kind of happening to a lot of our rural communities, and we're 2% of the population—rural, farmers, agriculture. And not only is it people who have never smelled the smoke of a John Deere tractor, we also have people up there that don't

necessarily represent the people, they have a lot of lobbyists with deep pockets, and sometimes the decision maker would rather have the money than do what's right, and that's a big problem. Like someone was telling me that the Farm Aid tractor was put in the Smithsonian, and it's not there anymore, they sent it back to Texas. They found out the reason—they got a 1963 Oldsmobile there now, but they got ten or twenty thousand dollars to do that. So unless American Agriculture Movement and Farm Aid and all the rest of us—we've got a real battle ahead of us to make sure that this 2% of us are represented, and that the family farm is a way of life, as Mona Lee said, they're a little bit different, but that family farm is like a family member in a lot of cases. And you lose that family farm and that's like a death in the family. All we learn from history sometimes is more history. I had to take Texas History when I went to school in Texas, and I couldn't graduate from Oklahoma until I had Oklahoma History. Well I took it because I had to. I learned a little bit, not a lot. But the point is we want our grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren to learn something from what we're doing today—from what American Agriculture Movement is doing—to not let this thing happen again. And yes, get a price for their product. Yes, get parity. Yes, get people in Washington that represent the people, not the lobbyists. It's an uphill battle. Farm Aid and all of us—we've got to stay in existence, because this thing is not going to go away. And we're going to create a lot of Cumberland Gaps if we're not careful. The Dust Bowl—they came back, but how many years did it take? Some of those communities it didn't take—

RB:

I can show you communities that never have come back.

GW:

Well, we worked with a farmer that farmed sixteen quarters in Oklahoma, right on the border with Kansas. He pastured his cows up in Morton County, I believe it is, Kansas. All the farmers left to go to California or somewhere, left during the Dust Bowl. The government took that over, and now you're allowed to run so many cattle so often up there on a lease thing. They never came back, but at least the cows benefitted from it.

AW:

Drive through Boise City, Oklahoma or Texoma, Texas and you'll see two cities that prior to the Dust Bowl were big important centers and have never been the same.

GW:

William Jennings Bryan really had a message for us, but I'm not sure we really hear that.

AW:

All right, well I can't keep hogging y'all in here all to myself, so we're going to stop it here. Not that the discussion's over with. I'm going to make my way out to Durant here before too long. I

got a great interview with Dr. Wallace, as I said earlier, a few weeks ago, and I'll add for this little snippet of the tape that Dr. Wallace is also a farmer and grew up on a farm—farms in Texas and Oklahoma— so we have a room full of people here that understand the farm, despite their PhDs and other kinds of degrees these are all farm folks. So thank each and every one of you. It's been a very good interview.

GW:

Thank you.

JM:

Thank you.

End of Interview



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