Interview with Tom Booker

Interviewed by Margaret Robertson
Minnesota Historical Society

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MR: Did you grow up on a farm?

TB: Yes.

MR: Where was it?

TB: This was in Central Illinois, about 15 miles east of Springfield, which is the capital. We were real close to the geographical center of the state.

MR: What kind of operation did your folks have?

TB: Basically a cash-grain operation. That part of the country is not that much different from Renville County. It's basically a cash-grain type of area, with hogs, not a lot of cattle. It's changed about like Renville County has over the years, with livestock numbers going down. The season is maybe ten days earlier in the spring and ten days later in the fall. But other than that, it's not much different from what it is around here.

MR: Were you always interested in agriculture?

TB: Pretty much, yes. I think I had decided when I was a kid that I wanted to be a farmer, but then back in those days, like it still is, really, about the only way you can do it is inherit it. As we used to say, marry it or inherit it. It's pretty hard to start from scratch. I was the oldest of four boys, and my dad was a long ways from ready to retire, so I knew that if I was going to stay close to agriculture, I was probably not going to be able to do it farming directly. So the Extension was about the closest to that, that I could think of. Along with my 4-H experiences back then, I think 4-H was really what led me into Extension. It introduced me to Extension. I understood what Extension was about, and through that and very early in my college career, I made the decision that's the direction I wanted to go. So then I took my courses and went through the curriculum to lead into Extension work.

MR: Where did you go to college?

TB: University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana. I majored in general agriculture, as it was called, with an Extension curriculum.
MR: Once you graduated from college, did you start working in Extension right away?

TB: I had a bit of an Army Reserve stint there. I went through the ROTC program and was commissioned in 1958. At that time, we had to either take the six-month active duty and seven-and-a-half-year reserve obligation, or a two-year active duty and one-year reserve obligation. I elected to take the six months, so I had six months of active duty right after I graduated.

Then my first position was about a month and a half after I got out of the Army and off of active duty.

MR: Was this at Illinois?

TB: Yes, it was in a neighboring county from where I grew up, Macon County, Illinois, which is where Decatur is located, the soybean capital of the world. We like to call ourselves that, the major soybean processing firms there. We grew a lot of soybeans.

MR: How long did you work in Macon County?

TB: Three and a half years. I was what was called an assistant farm advisor. In Illinois, the Extension agents are called advisors, instead of agents. So it's the same thing as an agent, but we had to be different there. My main responsibility was with the 4-H program then. We had an Ag 4-H program and had an Ec 4-H program. I had worked with the Ag program as assistant home advisor, worked with the home economics 4-H program, and then we pulled together some. Home Ec and Ag were pretty much separated. We even had separate offices in that county, separate buildings. So there was a lot needed to be done to pull that together.

MR: A lot of people comment on the importance of 4-H in developing agriculture future. Do you want to talk about that a little bit? Why is 4-H so important?

TB: I guess to me it was really the base for my social development, I think, as I was growing up. I joined when I was 12. Ten was the earliest you could join. I don't know why I waited 'till was 12; I guess my folks hadn't thought about that much until I got to about that point. I'm not really sure.

I went to a rural country school that only had five or six kids in it, 'till I was in the sixth grade, when it closed. So in terms of getting out beyond my own little school there and immediate neighborhood, seeing other kids my own age, it was really through 4-H that I got to do that, with the county activities, first at a local club, and getting involved in county activities.
I can recall that when I was about in seventh or eighth grade, we were going to be moved to the big school in town, when we consolidated in between the sixth and seventh grade, I went to 4-H camp, the first time I ever saw a girl my age, when I had an interest in knowing what one was. So I remember that very well, the 4-H experience there.

**MR:** So a lot of it was socializing.

**TB:** I think so, yes. 4-H has a very good recognition program. When you do decent work, you get recognized for it. I enjoyed that, too, as an incentive. I just thoroughly enjoyed 4-H. To this day, even when I came to Renville County, I had not worked with 4-H or directly with production Ag for a little while, and first started here on August first. The county fair was about the 20th, and so I was right in the middle of 4-H right quick. I thought then just how strange 4-H was then, and now all of a sudden, how important 4-H is again in my life. Even to this day, where I'm in a meeting of some kind, if it's a leaders' meeting that I happen to be present at, and they say the 4-H pledge, I can still remember how it felt the first time I ever said it and what it meant then. It still means that now.

**MR:** How did you come to Renville County?

**TB:** It was kind of a long trip, I guess, for a little boy. When I left Macon County, Illinois, I went to southern Illinois. This time I got involved in what we called rural area development. It had a lot of different names put on it for a time. We eventually became called resource development, which was part of a national thrust that was initiated in the late fifties. There were pilot counties set up around the country, and the southernmost counties in Illinois were two little counties that worked together. Polaski and Alexander counties were pilot county in that program. So I felt that after three and a half years there, I needed to start looking for something of advancement. There was a position open there, so I applied and eventually went down there.

That was about 1962. After five or six years there, I took a study leave to begin working on a master's program, and went to Southern Illinois University, which was within commuting distance of where I lived at Carbondale. I was working towards the possibility of an area kind of position in that research and development area. When I got down there, I found there were some things we could do. I felt like we were doing some good, and I decided maybe that was the direction I'd like to work in.

After I finished the master's program in 1970, I became an area advisor. First I worked with five countries, then seven, and it began to be 15 counties. At that time, the Extension was putting a lot of emphasis in that program, so that's where the future of Extension was. But then priorities change when retrenchments come along, and Illinois went through a retrenchment progress. After I worked in that area position until 1980, they cut out all the area positions. So I found myself looking for a job.
It happened that there was a position in Alexandria, Minnesota, that was open about that time. It was working with a Department of Agriculture program that was funded through the Soil Conservation Service. called resource, conservation, and development--RC&D. I had worked with RC&D area in southern Illinois, too, in my other position, so I was familiar with RC&D and also through my National Guard. I eventually went into the National Guard. I had come to Minnesota for camp a number of times, winter camps, so I had some familiarity with Minnesota. I guess that probably helped me in being selected for the position. So I moved into Alex, then, in 1980.

The federal programs began to kind of cut back in the Soil Conservation Service, so after three years there, that position was eliminated. So I found myself looking again. That's basically how I ended up in Renville County. That was in 1983, and I had about a ten-month break. I came to Renville County in August of 1984.

MR: How comparable are the Extension Services offered by other states? For example, the Illinois system and the Minnesota system.

TB: I think Minnesota and Illinois are probably as close together as any states are. They all have some differences. One of the main differences here is the county base. In Illinois, for a long time, and when I went into Extension, we were very closely tied to the Farm Bureau. We were even in Farm Bureau offices there. Farm Bureau provided the local support with Extension. The funding is three ways: federal, state, and local. The Farm Bureau was the local supporting body. Actually, the Farm Bureau in Illinois was formed for the purpose of sponsoring Extension, because when Extension began there after the federal Smith-Lever Act was passed in 1914, the university said that for any county that can come up with 300 people who are willing to contribute $10 a year for local support, part of the salary and local expenses and office and those kinds of things, they'd put a farm advisor in that county.

The organization with the 300 people, with the $10 apiece, became known as the Farm Bureau there. Farm Bureau changed the emphasis a lot over the years, and so it became necessary—rightfully so—to separate, because other farm organizations came along and we certainly were not in a position to be preferential to any farm organization or anything like that. So there was a change there, but yet Illinois and the counties were not geared up to pick up the slack when the Farm Bureaus quit. So they had to go through an adjustment process where the Farm Bureaus could still contribute money and put in a trust fund at the university. And the university then paid all the expenses.

I think there probably is still some Farm Bureau contributions in Illinois. It's been ten years since I've been there. But in Minnesota, attention grew up with Farm Bureau, and I guess I don't really know that history that well in Minnesota, and the relationship there. But here, we have very much stronger emphasis on funds from the county board of commissioners. Different counties are a different way. We happen to be a county that's
called “alternative funding,” which means that the salaries of all the gents, what we are paid, the county's share of those salaries is 40% of the average of all agents' salaries in the state. So our individual salaries don't affect the county's contribution. There are a number of counties--I don't know how many, probably still more than half now--that are still with the old system, where the agents actually get two checks, a county check and a university check. But here we're strictly university faculty, with an agreement to provide 40% of the average salaries of all the agents. The county also provides the office space and all our local expenses. The secretaries are all county employees. All the agents are university faculty. The phone bill and our mileage and expense accounts are all county. So in Renville County, about 60% of the total budget is county, and the rest of it is state. In Illinois, it's probably more the other way, probably more like 60% to 75% of the expenses are state, and 25% or so are county.

MR: So most of the differences are organizational, rather than services offered?

TB: Yes. As far as our subject matter, program base, there just isn't that much difference.

MR: What do you do? What are your responsibilities here?

TB: Agriculture agent. Basically, my job is to implement an Extension educational program that meets the needs of the people of the county. Part of that, of course, is being sure it meets the needs of the county by using advisory council, local people with input, to determine what those needs are. From that we develop a plan of work. So our role is implementing that plan of work through educational activities. Our educational methods are 101 Consultation--answering questions, phone calls, people calling in with questions, office calls coming in, using the news media, writing newspaper columns, radio programs, those kinds of things; seminars; informational meetings; workshops; using the computer. As far as clientele in the county, we're not on a computer network here, but from the state level, individuals can get in on a computer network through the state. You network that way. We use the computer a lot for things we do in our farm management programs and things like that.

We are operating--and this is kind of a new concept in Minnesota--in a cluster of counties. This went into effect two years ago the first of July, that this has been operational. We are now, as the agriculture agents and the Home Ec and 4-H, too, specializing in some particular subject matter area. We work with Renville, Kandiyohi, and McLeod Counties in this cluster concept. So the agents in the Kandiyohi County specialize in livestock systems. The agents in McLeod and Meeker, both, are crops and soils. We have a cluster Extension Committee made up of two representatives of each of the county committees, and their desire of what we needed, because we have a strong crop base in this area, we needed more than one agent to work in the crops and soils area.

My specialty is in the farm management and marketing area. So my role there is not only
with those kinds of programs here, but also to help out the other counties in the farm management and marketing area. And I call on them to help me with the crops and soils programs, livestock, and those kinds of things. I take all the training, the updates, and so on in this economics area, and I'm supposed to keep them informed. They go with the ones in their fields and keep the rest of us informed.

Right now we're supposed to be up to 25% of our time spent in our specialty area. We still have to do everything else, too. If somebody calls me about a crops problem, I take care of it. I don't just call. If it's something I'm not sure I have the answer to, I'll get hold of one of the other agents and ask him the question, because they've been keeping up in that area better than I have. I keep up in the area of marketing and farm management better than they do, so they do the same with me.

MR: There's been a lot of talk about how one of the important aspects to agriculture now is improving farm marketing. Do you want to talk a little bit about the role of farm marketing in agriculture today

TB: I think it is one that is extremely important. I'm not sure what the national figures are on it now, but in the last couple of years I've heard of Farm Credit Services. People nationally stated that something like two-thirds of the farmers nationally will market in the lower one-third of annual price ranges for whatever commodity it might be, whether it's livestock or crops.

Over the years, agriculture has changed, where a farm business has to operate as a business. So marketing becomes very important as part of that, just like marketing cars is with General Motors. Farmers have had to kind of change their thinking a little bit, because they have learned over the years that they've come up through generations of production. Most are very good at production, but when it gets to the economic part of it, that's kind of new to the value system, you know. So it's not to say that they're not good at doing that, but it's something new, and they've got to learn to do it. Used to, they didn't have to worry about that much. The profit margins weren't quite so tight, and cost control wasn't quite as important as it used to be. Now, of course, interest rates are high, much higher than they used to be. We have a lot of fluctuations in prices, of course. We're not too bad on commodity prices right now, but probably in a year or two, we're going to be right back down if we operate in the same kind of cycles we usually do. They're going to be down again.

Used to be, you could almost throw the seed out on the ground and you were going to get a crop and make some money. But you just can't do that anymore. It's more like an art and craft. I've heard people talk about farming as a way of life. It's no longer a way of life; it's got to be a business. Well, it's still a way of life, but I think it was kind of an art and craft back in those days, too. That art and craft has got to come out of it. It's got to be a way of life and a business. So the marketing has to be a very important part of it.
Marketing of Ag products can be very complex, too. There's a lot of different choices. A lot of times we talk about marketing alternatives, about ten different alternatives. I was taught one time that when you talk about alternatives, you only talk about two, so it's hard for me to say "alternatives" when everybody else does. There's a lot of marketing choices, from using the futures market using agriculture options, selling cash direct, forward cash contracting, all those kinds of things. So we're trying to teach how to use these different tools that are out there for them to use so they can market in the upper 50% of the price range instead of the lower one-third.

At the presentation this morning, I had a fellow come in and make a point that I hadn't really thought about. He was showing that by getting into the upper 50% on--I forget what size operation--it could make $30,000 difference in gross income. He said that if you spent an hour a day marketing to get that, you're getting paid about 100 bucks an hour. So is it worth the time to spend? How much is your time worth out driving a tractor, as compared to that in that hour? I think that's part of the point that we've got to get across.

MR: What's the best way to communicate that kind of information? Is it in seminars and workshops, or

TB: We're doing it mostly on a workshop series. That's what this was today, the seventh session of an eight-session workshop series that we have going, about a week apart. We meet once a week and go over different tools of marketing, the options, the futures contract. A goal is teaching how to develop a marketing plan, where you set price objectives and then develop a plan to meet those price objectives during the year. Most of that is a workshop basis. We use a series of video tapes with it, and a workbook, with a lot of exercises. They're exercises I devised myself, as well as some that come with the series that we use. It's actually a series of materials that we use developed by Farm Credit Services. It was 1984 when they developed it. It was developed to teach their own people, representatives, and lenders, local PCAs, and so on. They use Extension and university people to develop the materials. We saw that they're about as good as we could do ourselves, so we've leased the program from Farm Credit. That's basically what I'm using in my educational program in that area. We spend about two or two and a half hours each session.

MR: How receptive are farmers towards improving their marketing strategies?

TB: We have a long ways to go, but it seems like there's more and more interest coming. One of the changes that we've seen occur that's going on is with the government farm program. Three years ago, when we started this--this is the fourth year we've been involved in the series--low rates and target prices, the government program was about the only thing really out there. So there really wasn't as much interest in looking at some of these other choices then as there is now. Now things have gotten a little bit exciting. First,
the government program, the low rates and the target prices are going down each year, and we're moving more towards a market-oriented market system. There's been some prices out there that's been kind of exciting. The farmers, if they know how to do it, they can lock onto some of them. So I think there's more interest in that now than what we've seen for some time.

The elevators in the livestock, particularly through the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, are very much interested in teaching, also, in getting this out. We've had the opportunity to participate in seminars in Chicago put on by the Mercantile Exchange, as well as the Chicago Board of Trade. One of the things is marketing clubs. There's been some interest in marketing clubs. Right here, our local elevator here has organized a marketing club, where they are working with a firm out of Des Moines, Iowa, that's associated with the Land O' Lakes cooperative, which is a regional cooperative. They have something like 50 farmers enrolled in that.

In my marketing series, we are helping the people in the economic system, whether it's types of enterprises . . . [Tape interrupted] controlling production. So what it boils down to, if you can make more money growing beans than you can corn, you better grow more beans and cut back on the corn voluntarily, and vice versa. I guess I believe that. We haven't really seen it operate, because we've been under government programs for many years. It's not something we can just drop everything and automatically move into that. I think that's what we're doing with the farm program now. is a kind of gradual movement in that direction.

Some will say, "The government got us into this. The government's got to get us out of it, as well." I think we're gradually moving in that direction. There are people in both political parties who disagree with that, but I think we're seeing bipartisan support of that. I would not be surprised to see the 1990 Farm Bill not being too much different from the 1985 Bill in that direction, even if we do have the majority. [Tape recorder turned off]

**MR:** We were talking about market forces. You just mentioned computers. People talk about this vision of farmers having a computer in every home office and really being tied into the commodities markets, being able to compare programs. Does that seem to be happening?

**TB:** I think it is happening. I can't tell you what percentage it is, but there are more and more that are doing that. There's a relatively inexpensive system that farmers can put in right now—and I'm not selling it—called Data Line. I think we're going to be eventually getting one in here. They have an initial setup fee of $150, and it's $20 a month, a monitor that works off an FM radio signal. So we have to have this monitor and the unit that sits on this little flat box that the monitor sits on, and an FM antenna outside. You can keep up to date. I think it's ten minutes behind on the commodity markets, and weather data all over the country. You can "flip pages" on the screen and check cash grain
prices all over the country, livestock markets, option prices, futures prices, for what's going on right now at the exchanges. I think it runs about ten minutes behind. You can check back and see what's going on for the last several months, see what the trends are, things like that. That's a fairly inexpensive way that a person can get into it. There's a number of farmers getting that. I guess part of our role, when we get that, is to teach them how to use it, how to use that information most effectively.

MR: How helpful is it to have that up-to-date information? How quickly can farmers react to that kind of information?

TB: They can react fairly rapidly, and there are times when they need to do it. What happens with farmers, of course, sometimes the best marketing opportunities are when they're in the field planting. That's what they're most interested in. To take the time to call in to find out what's happening in the market today, in terms of making a marketing decision, to go in the field, they just don't do it that much. If this unit is at home, whoever is at home, the kids, the wife, sometimes a wife is in the field and the farmer's at home, whatever, they can watch this thing and see something going on, and can react, call and get on their two-way radio on the tractor. "The market's doing this right now. Maybe we'd better sell." They can react immediately and do that. I think it's something that will happen.

MR: If someone were to come to Renville County for the first time, how would you describe the agricultural life is here?

TB: Agriculturally, I think we rank in the top four in Minnesota in terms of agricultural income. As far as diversification, I think that we are one of the best counties in the state. In 1987, we had the top soybean production and the top corn production, both, in the state. We are a large county. It's about 27 townships and about 550,000 acres, 1,600-plus farms. I think the last Ag census was about 1,680 farms, and it's gone down since then. I think we're probably getting fairly close to 1,600. We have corn and soybeans, sugar beets, which is a major economic boom in the county. With the sugar beets, it's a little bit misleading, because we only have 100 growers and something like 30,000 acres. So it's a fairly small percentage. But the processing facility is in the county. What that does to the overall economy is extremely important, the employment that it creates, and other aspects of that.

For our livestock, we probably have 500 farms with hogs on them, which is less than half. Probably less than half of our farms have livestock on them, but yet that's still a significant number. About 115 or so dairy herds. So we've got that kind of diversification. We're not all corn and soybeans; we still have the hogs; we still have a significant dairy. We go to the County Fair with more dairy animals out there than anything else.

So when you consider all that, we have good leadership, good managers among the
people here. It's been basically a conservative county. When the farm crisis problems were occurring, we weren't hurt quite as bad here in Renville County as some of the counties south and southwest of here, and I think that's probably a combination of factors. One is the fact that it's basically a conservative county in the lenders. The lenders just didn't let them get quite as much overboard as maybe some lenders did in some other parts of the state. So we weren't hurt as bad there.

I think an estimate was that something like 30% of the farmers from Minnesota were in very serious trouble. We were probably closer to 15% there. Even if it was 20%, we were looking at maybe 300 farms out of 1,600, but yet we still had 1,300 that are in good shape. So we have to keep that in perspective. As I'd describe agriculture in Renville County, it's the best Ag county in the state.

**MR:** But that's a totally unbiased opinion. (Laughs)

**TB:** Totally unbiased, yes.

**MR:** How has the drought of 1988 affected Renville County? Was there an impact here?

**TB:** Sure there was an impact. Because we do have the high proportion of grain operations compared to livestock, we may not have been hurt as bad as some other counties. We had a lot of grain that was stored from the 1987 year, which was a bumper year, with record yields that year, that the farmers were able to sell. This is one time I'm kind of glad they didn't listen to our advice altogether, because we weren't anticipating the drought, and the prices moving as high as they did. There were 1987 crops that were sold at good prices in 1988, 50 that helped them staying out of the low cash-flow production the other year because of low yields. The government disaster assistance program also came in there and took a lot of the sting out.

Those that were hurt are dairy people, who were probably hurt the most, because they were short forages, short hay. What hay they've had to buy, the quality has not been the best in the world, and they've had to pay a lot of money for it. Normally, hay is about 80 bucks a ton; good alfalfa, 80. And they're having to pay $130, $150 a ton to buy hay, when they weren't able to raise enough themselves. So they're forced to buy hay. Sometimes they go all over the country to get it. Dairy people were hurt the most.

**MR:** What are the prospects for 1989?

**TB:** We're operating with kind of a cautious optimism. (Laughs) Our weather patterns have been dry through the winter. Winter is our dry season, anyhow, so we don't normally expect much precipitation. What's interesting is to watch the pattern.

To go back to November, in November we were right at about normal precipitation, about
1.8 inches. In December and January, we were pretty dry, less than half of our normal precipitation each of those months. But our normal precipitation is less than an inch. But still the dry pattern is what they have to be concerned about. In March, our normal precip is about 1.7. We had about three-quarters of an inch out of the snow that we had last week. So we're maybe about halfway to normal, and we're still early in the month, so maybe that's an indication of a pattern shift. But we're dry. We don't have any subsoil moisture reserve there, so we're going to have to depend on timely spring rains to keep us from being hurt bad in 1989.

My feeling is that I'm going to feel relieved, like everyone else, when it starts raising. I don't think we're going to have a bumper crop. I'm not looking for the kind of bumper crop that we had in 1987. I'm not sure we're going to have an average crop. But if we have any kind of a decent spring rainfall, we'll at least be close to an average crop in prices hanging in pretty well. We shouldn't be hurt too much by the end of the year.

MR: During the rural crisis, there was a lot of talk about saving the family farm and what is a family farm. In your mind, how do you define “family farm”?

TB: Oh, gee. To me, a family farm is basically any farm that's not--I want to say corporate, but that's not quite right either, because there are also family corporations. If it's a farm operation that's not a family corporation, it's a family farm. If it's a farm corporation, it's a family farm. If it's not either one of those, it's not. (Laughs) That's the way I would define it.

MR: So ownership is the key element?

TB: Not necessarily ownership, but the operation of the farm. A lot of land is rented. If a major corporation of some kind owns the farmland and operates it and just hires people to run it, that's not a family operation. In Renville County, I don't know of any that are not what I would call family farms here. We do have some large operations where they hire a lot of labor. Used to say the family farm was where the--I've got to remember my definition, whether it's 50% or 75%, I don't remember—but even of the labor, was furnished by family members. I think we've forgotten that definition. We're not even sure family members ought to furnish all the labor when you consider what is their time worth out driving a tractor, when it compares to making management decisions and marketing. So just because it's not all the family's labor, it's still a family farm.

MR: How important is family farming? A lot of people talk about the dangers of vertical integration and about corporations buying up farmland. Do you think that's a real danger?

TB: I think it is, because it's kind of a danger to the future, both from the standpoint of conservation, preservation of the land, stewardship of the soil. Corporations have profit motives and work to milk the most they can out of it. That's the danger, I think, that you
can run into without real concern about what's going to be there for generations that follow us.

The other one is the area of environmental issues. Groundwater, of course, is a major concern. Groundwater contamination by pesticides is a major concern. We start getting into this high-profit motive, and I can see how, without a lot of incentive from the corporate managers to control groundwater quality, that could be a problem. So that's where I see the dangers there.

I can't quote a figure, but agriculture as an industry is one of the largest industries in the country. I use General Motors, a major auto industry. The thing that's different from agriculture is that it's made up of so many different production units. You go into General Motors, you've got a dozen factories. I don't know how many factories General Motors has, but relatively small number of production units, while in agriculture, we've got 1,600 in Renville County alone, though each in that industry is made up of each individual farm, a separate production unit. There's a lot more independence. Each farm makes their own decisions about what they're going to do. So it's more difficult to move together in some particular direction because of that, but yet I still think it is good, and the way of life is still there. You can't forget that.

I don't farm myself, but we live on a farm. We rent a farmhouse with a barn and all out there, and don't have anything but our dogs in it right now, but when my grandson gets old enough for 4-H, I hope to get a few sheep. My grandson and my daughter live with us. He's five years old. I can't envision him growing up anywhere but in that kind of rural farm setting, because he can roam, he can do anything he wants to outside, and not bother anybody else, learn about nature and not be subjected to a lot of the pressures of having to spend his days in a three-room apartment or something like that. I just can't say it's not a way of life. I think it's a very important way of life, too.

**MR:** I realize you haven't been in the county that long, but how has Renville County changed in terms of community? We've talked about how farming has changed as the years have gone past, but have the communities in Renville County changed? Are people going shopping in Willmar rather than spending money in Olivia?

**TB:** That's very typical of an area that is predominantly agriculture. This is population decline, and it's going to continue to decline here regardless of what anybody does. The population is probably going to continue to decline in Renville County, just because of the economic base that's here. We don't have any large urban centers like Willmar or Hutchinson. Those aren't really large, but compared to what we have in Renville County, they are. The largest town here is Olivia, which is about 2,800 population. So people do a lot of shopping in the trade centers—Willmar, Hutchinson, and New Ulm—those towns in the south part of the county, closer to New Ulm than they are to Willmar and Hutchinson. It does put a real stress on the rural communities. What they need to do,
they've got to adjust to that, recognize that that's the economics. They have to look at what their economic reason for existence is, and not try to buck the trend, but go with it.

Going back to my community development work from back over the years, any time a community starts trying to beg people to shop at home for patriotism purposes, in order to support the local businesses, they're in trouble, because people just aren't going to do that. They're still going to go where they can get the better prices, get the best selection, and not very many people are going to stay and shop where they can't get what they want and have to pay more for it. So the communities have got to adjust to that trend, realize that that's what's going on, and meet the local needs that exist here for them. I think we see that. It's kind of a natural progression of the businesses. You lose businesses, is what happens. They go out of business.

In Olivia right here, and I think in most Renville County towns, Olivia has hung in fairly well, much better than some others. When I lived in Illinois, some towns there I saw had problems. I think they have done a pretty good job of realizing that and staying with that trend. We do have good leadership among the people in this county, and it shows up in the community.

The thing that has to happen a little bit more--again. it's a gradual adjustment. You can't just say, "This is the way it's got to be," and expect that it's going to be, that the various communities need to work together with each other a little bit more, not compete with each other so much. I think they're realizing that more and more and not competing.

We're seeing it in the school systems. We've got all these systems that are pairing. We didn't have that in Illinois; that's a new concept for me. It's almost like not being able to figure out the athletic teams unless you had some kind of chart to figure out who's playing together, who's together wrestling, who's together in baseball, and who's together in football, basketball. Different ones are, and they might compete against each other in basketball, but play together in football, you know. (Laughs) Now most of the school systems in Renville County now have three-way pair. I don't know how a pair can be three ways, but there are three or more. I guess that's the "legal terminology"--pairing, all together now. I know Olivia and Bird Island are coming together and will be together next fall. When my grandson gets into kindergarten, I'll be watching that situation.

**TB:** Yes. I think it's moving that way. Maybe people went into it kicking and screaming, but I don't think they really had much of a choice.

**MR:** You mentioned pesticides and groundwater contamination. Has there been a problem with contamination in Renville County?

**TB:** We have not been able to detect a problem. We just completed a cluster wide, four-county well-testing program. We tested for seven herbicides, the ones that are most
common and the ones we would expect to have the most problems from. There were 139 wells tested in four counties, including 39 in Renville County. Two of those showed traces of one pesticide--Atrazine. The allowable limit is determined by the Minnesota Department of Public Health is three parts per billion. One of those wells had one part per billion, and the other one was .25 parts per billion. That's not all the wells, either--people pay to have their wells tested. They paid $86 each for that. That's one of the things we don't have funds where we can do this, because it is costly for the lab analysis to take place. Those were the only two in the four counties that showed anything.

What it says is that Atrazine is very persistent in the soil; we know that. If we're going to expect any problem, we would expect it from Atrazine. The two wells that showed that were very far removed. One of them was at one end of the county; one was at the other. We've promised confidentiality on all that, so I can't even say what part of the counties they were in, but they were no direct correlation. They were far removed from each other. Both said they had not used Atrazine on their farm for five years. So it shows that it's there. Both are under allowable limits as far as health considerations, and I'm told that those health considerations are very tight. You really don't expect any problems until you get to something like 60 parts per billion, and yet three is where the limit is set.

So I don't think we have any health problems, but yet the potential is there. We have to be very careful that we use our pesticides properly, use them according to label, the farmers know how to use them right. We have a pesticide applicator training program. where farmers have to be certified every five years to be able to even purchase it. They have to show this certificate to purchase restricted-use pesticides. Not all are restricted use. Some of the more common ones now are--Bladex and Lasso. I would not be surprised the time--and I'm not sure it shouldn't happen--that farmers will come down on me hard to hear me say this, but I think everyone who uses any kind of pesticide should be certified and go through the training program before they can use it. I don't even have any good rumors, but I would not be surprised to see that happen not too far down the road, that that's going to be a requirement.

**MR:** Is there more concern about environmental issues among farmers, more concern about pesticides?

**TB:** Yes, I think so. When we go through our needs assessment while developing our programs, and "What do you see as the most important needs facing agriculture or farmers in Renville County?" groundwater becomes one of the high ones. They are also very much concerned. They're concerned both from the standpoint, of course, for their own businesses, because despite what a lot of people say, it's very hard to operate where we are with agriculture in the food needs, even in the country, yet without chemicals, we wouldn't be able to meet them. That's just where it is. Because if chemicals were completely outlawed and yields went down 50%, what's going to happen to food prices? The consumers are going to have to pay. Farmers are something like 2% of the population
of the country. What about that 98% of the population? What are they going to say when they see their food prices jumping up because of the scarcity and not being able to get what they want? So I don't see chemicals ever being outlawed completely; it's just that we do have to be more careful with them all the time.

I don't think I answered your question, but I've forgotten what the question was. (Laughs)

**MR:** You were saying there is more concern.

**TB:** Yes. Farmers are concerned not only from their own personal business standpoint, what regulations might be coming down the road that put more restrictions on them, as well, of course, as the environmental concerns and health. I don't know of any farmer that wants to contribute to pollution.