Interview with William Nelson

Interviewed by Margaret Robertson
Minnesota Historical Society

Interviewed June 2, 1989
at Waseca Technical College, Waseca, Minnesota

MR: I know that you grew up on a family farm. Tell us a little bit about that.

WN: I grew up on a farm in central Minnesota in the late '50s and early '60s. In some ways, I think our farm was a little bit out of sequence with what was developing in that--and I'm really glad for it, by the way--we were using some technologies that most of our neighbors had gone past.

I'm not that old. I mean, this isn't that far back, but I remember as a small child, we were putting up hay on the farm, yet, with a hay loader and some of that. It only happened for a year or two before we switched to baling and stuff, but I still remember that as a small child, even on our own farm.

Then we did a lot of farming with relatives and neighbors who were even just a few years behind that. I certainly, at the time, didn't appreciate it as I do now, especially a few years later when it got to be more work, and I was old enough to do work. Neighbors were a little bit ahead of us in technology, and I suppose I could have felt like, "Gee, why don't we get the newer machinery."

But looking back, I'm really glad that I had that, because I have not really run into anyone my own age who has the glimpse of that, not just in haying, but in other examples. We did putting up silage, for example, and threshing, even until I was into high school. So I had a chance of working with all of those older technologies; things like artificial insemination, which was around in our own farm operation and in the close neighbors, moved back and forth between those levels of technology; same with hybrid corn and all of that.

So I feel really fortunate, looking back, that I had a chance to participate in those older things. I get a strange feeling now seeing in southern Minnesota, especially in the fall of the year, doing the threshing bees and stuff, and people going back and not understanding it. I grew up with it even though I really shouldn't have because I should have been a little bit passed that. But that's very important to me.

I guess some other things that probably had an influence on me and to today in terms of what I'm doing in my career and education, the whole idea of trying to find better ways of
doing things from a mechanical point of view. You drive up and down a field on a tractor and for hour after hour you spend a lot of time thinking about better ways of doing things, whether it was some kind of a mechanical contraption or whatever.

My dad did a lot of that sort of work, just tinkered with stuff and came up with a lot of homemade implements and stuff which I think really were innovative and creative. Probably if he had carried them a little bit farther and gotten patents on some of it, he probably could have gotten wealthy off of some of them.

On the other hand, I think that was probably typical of a lot of farmers. You did a lot of that sort of tinkering and stuff. It really helps you appreciate the kind of industry that agriculture is and where you've got a lot of individual entrepreneurs, and maybe it's the reason why family farms have been valuable. You've got a lot of individual inventors out there developing new technologies and testing them out.

I think it's changed a lot today because there are fewer farmers that have the time to do that, plus the costs get higher. A lot of the things my dad was able to do then, you couldn't do now simply because of governmental regulations, whether it's building a certain kind of building which you might decide one morning to go out and put up and new shed on your land, and a lot of things you simply can't do now.

On the social side, I think that some of the things that had a big impact on me were—I guess, I remember as a child—thinking of better ways of organizing to do things. For example, I'd be aware of older retired farmers or retired rural people. They hadn't necessarily been farmers or even very successful. I think of some individuals, for example, who were, maybe, 60 years old and kind of retired, but they were in fairly good health and had, as it turned out, maybe, 20 years of pretty healthy living ahead of them. There are ways that we could build those people into what we're doing. And sometimes you would hire them as a hired hand or they would just come over and help out, but I guess I could always see better ways of doing that.

In our family we had eight children, and one of the things that happened is we grew up with that. We became less and less involved with neighbors. When I was a small child we did a lot of our work with not only some relatives who were neighbors but other neighbors as well. Later it became just the relatives, my mom's brothers.

Then eventually even that faded away. I think, in most ways, not entirely, but in a lot of ways, simply as the children in our family took over some of those things, as well as you buy a combine instead of a thrashing machine, and all of a sudden you've eliminated a lot of dependence on each other, and you gain independence. You can make your own decisions. You don't have to worry about their schedules or anything else. I think certainly, that was always a good feeling, not just in our family, but in others. everybody wants to be more independent. In the long haul, looking back, I think it was a very costly
independence in that people really never became as independent as they thought. As a concrete example in our own family, this worked real well until kids grew up and went away to college and stuff. Then each year my father has less help at home eventually to the point where he's got a farm that's bigger than what he can handle by himself.

Historically the traditional way is you substitute some of those family members for new members coming in by in-laws. A son or daughter marries someone and they take over the farm. To some extent that's happened in our own family farm. But it's not a smooth transition. It wasn't particularly difficult in our family, but between what I saw happening in that part of the state and what I have experienced at the college in working with our students and a lot of farmers, it's just a tremendous amount of agony that goes on in those transitions.

It's a very peculiar thing, too, agriculture. You don't see it in families with a parent as a teacher or a doctor or a lawyer. Maybe the closest is in families where father is a minister, for example, and you see the kind of tensions that goes on as the kids are growing up and going to their father's church and wrestling with being the minister's son or daughter, that sort of thing. But even that doesn't even compare to, I think, what farm families go through.

I think historically we have not been very good at working those things through. I think it was a major reason why--I can explain how I ended up choosing the college direction that I did, but looking back, obviously I and my brothers and sisters and parents were looking for easier ways of doing things.

We spent a lot of back-breaking hours picking rocks and shoveling manure and cutting brush and stuff like that that I don't think was all that healthy, looking back.

I'm seeing it in my own work pattern now. I think I have developed a work addiction that's not entirely healthy. Some of it I really value, but some of it isn't healthy for a person or for a society where you can take on a project whether it's taking on something and carrying it out, clearing land that probably shouldn't be cleared.

It's happening up there yet to this day, although people aren't doing it by hand as much anymore. You get a bulldozer and you can clear out 40 acres in a hurry, and you end up with some sandy, rocky soil. I'm not so sure that that's really what's best.

When I look at land here that could grow crops a lot more efficiently and effectively in this part of the state. Sometimes I think that if a person really wants to farm, maybe what we should do as a society is figure out a way to help him farm in southern Minnesota and leave some of that land in northern Minnesota and be used for something else, develop it more for recreation or something else. It just doesn't make sense for us to do things that way.
We are destroying land here. We can pave it with a parking lot, and there's plenty of so nobody worries about it. Up there they are taking off land that people down here as soon go hunt and fish in or something. Overall it’s not a good system yet.

I wanted to say something about the social aspects. I think it had a major influence on me. though. I'm trying to find the interpersonal solutions to things. I saw so much in our own family and related people, a tremendous amount of alcoholism, I think, work ethics that probably weren't the healthiest in the long run. I think there's a lot of that today, unfortunately.

I don't know if this is switching gears or not, but I want to tell you why I ended up here at Waseca. It really happened this way.

I went to a country school, too, for awhile, for three years, again which was kind of strange. There were 13 kids. It wasn't strange, it was normal if you would have looked back five or ten years, but there weren't many people my age that went to country schools. I was right at the tail end of it.

But they consolidated the schools, so the 13 kids in the school, which I was in the largest class with 4 students in there, we went to town school, and it didn’t really bother me. There were some nice things about going to the country school, but it was also exciting going to the school in town Looking back, it certainly was a better education.

I remember a little bit of a debate going on in the community about its consolidation, remember that part of it was that the kid is going to get a better education here in town. There’s no doubt in my mind that it was a smart move to get us into a larger school system.

In math, for example, once I'd figured out--this was when I was in third grade--when I out that each day the teacher was going to give us some math assignment right out of the just took the book home, and I did all the math assignments for six months. Then I had to do. So she didn't know what to do about that, so she let me go sit in the library. I remember one day coming out, I had made this 20-foot-long beard. I did a lot of foolish things.

Today, I suppose, I think education has come a long way in using it. The teacher wasn't that qualified to handle 13 individuals all going at a different pace. I have some good memories of it, but it wasn't very good education.

My only conception of what college was, and I think this "Little House on the Prairie" books and Mary going away thing in the world. So I was determined, as a young kid, was right on there with joining the Army.
I grew up in the '50s and had a couple of uncles who were in the Korean War and came back. I had uncles who were killed in the Second World War of which I was just becoming aware of that. I had an uncle who was in war and then who died at home, and I have a very vivid remembrance of that. And this was back in the time when the wake was held in the home and all of that. So as a small child to go to my grandma's house, and there's my uncle who the day before was fine and healthy and then in the night he died at home. I remember that very vividly. I had another uncle who died of kidney disease at home, and I really developed an anti-military stand which really started to show itself in later years. Certainly I feel very strongly that way today.

But it’s interesting tracing the roots back. I can go back and my uncle in my Studebaker and his motorcycle. And really it’s ironic because some of the stuff coming out of “MASH” and that really fit even though I was a small rural farm kids in central Minnesota. It turns out that I can see the other end of it. They’re over there, we’re here, and it has an impact on me today.

I got involved in FFA and Vo-Ag. My father was not supportive. My mother was. sister tried to convince me to take Latin instead of Vo-Ag because I'd go to college.

And I said, "I'm not going to college." But I managed. I took Vo-Ag and I figured I'd always pick up the Latin later. As it turned out I didn't need the Latin. Although actually in college I happened to have an English class from a person who taught us a lot of Latin and looking at the origins of the English Latin, and that turned out to be extremely helpful, and I really valued that, too.

The Vo-Ag sort of opened up some other dimensions for think, I had to establish a separate identity from my father. He didn't believe in the idea of Future Farmers of America, me because it was one of the His philosophy was very because he said, "How can you?"

And he looked at the neighbor kids who were going off to these meetings instead of staying home and farming.

I was also in 4-H for a year and then quit because he was against it. important to me, and I didn't want to be doing things he didn't want me to do.

When I got into FFA, I was in an odd situation in that I was a real good student, and the real good students weren't supposed to be in FFA. You were supposed to be in something else. I wasn't in sports. We lived way out in the country. Then I kept doing better and better academically.

I remember in ninth grade which was the first year I was in Vo-Ag and had a science teacher who really had a number of us students competing with each other. I really got
turned on to school then. It was good, but I remember constantly coming out on top in science that year, and yet at the same time in Vo-Ag and it just didn't work.

In fact, one day one of the students in the class made some comment about me being a farmer which didn't bother me a bit. The science teacher just really chewed him out and gave him this whole lecture about the goodness of farming. And I was sitting there somewhat bewildered, "Hey, I don't care what he calls me." He did it as a derogatory but not meant harmfully but teasing guess, or something.

Anyway, I had a close friend then who was determined to go to college. In fact, ironically in the ninth grade because he hit--the roots of this are deep in that when we went to the country school, he was my best friend, but he was always the kid I looked up to. He had everything. He had a new bike. He got all these things, and his father was on the school board. So he always did better, very popular kid. He went to a different school, but he was always real popular.

By the time we got into junior high and into Vo-Ag, it starts switching. He's singled out. Clearly he's going to be the FFA president and all of that. By the time we were seniors, as it turns out, he didn't go on to college. He may have gone to the community college for awhile, but he had gotten in trouble a bit with the law.

I helped him get through ninth grade science and math to the point of where he was just copying my work to my helping him along. We both ran for FFA president when I was a junior, and I got elected. He was upset about it. It was just his father and mother were real good friends of the Vo-Ag teacher and all of that. Everything was just a classic. I ended up on top in that sense.

But in ninth grade, see, they would have a freshman in ninth grade compete for the c___________ contest which was a big deal. And, of course, he won that. I think he went to the state convention. I didn't even try out for those things because I assumed that I couldn't because I had to be home working

In fact, my mother, one day, happened to be reading the paper and saw that some of the kids in my class had been off at a FFA contest somewhere and she said, "How come you weren't involved?"

And I said, "Well."

And she said, "Did you make the team?"

And I said, "No, I didn't even try."

She said, "Why not?"
And I said, "Because I couldn't go anyway." And told her, I said, "I had to be here working."

And she kind of got on my case saying, "No, you're going to go. I know that it's or we think it's difficult because somebody's got to do your work and we've got to take town and then they usually leave early in the morning and all of that, but you've got to for yourself."

And that happened three or four times that time. The 4-H one came and went. I look It was okay not to be in 4-H, except in some ways it was kind of one of the last times that I "I'm going to let that go."

It’s real interesting to me now because I see all these kids coming in, and many of them have been in 4-H or FFA and some not. I start inquiring why they were or weren't and how much parental support. And even with my own kids, I look at that.

Anyway, just a couple of things that happened in high school. I got real interested in Public Law 480 when I was a junior. I'm not sure exactly why except I had a speech teacher who was really a difficult teacher and challenging. But it was good, and he was one of those that made you get up and give speeches. He would chew you out and do all the things that you just--again I relate it to what happens today when I hear a student complaining about a faculty member being too tough, and I know the day is going to come when they are going to say, "This is the best teacher I had." And it was the case with him.

One of the things I had to do was to give a speech on something. I did research on w 480, got fascinated by it, and the whole idea of foreign aid and using food as foreign of the irony of it was that this guy was real big in the American Legion. I ended up being the boy stater for Brainerd that year.

I was extremely patriotic, even though what was happening on Public Law 480 when I was researching and finding out that it all sounded great on paper and the theory that we're going to give this food away to help people out, but the motive behind it was in part, some of it was, we were trying to build support for our own way of life and all of that, which even that wasn't so bad. But a lot of it was just the way to help the American farmer help and all of those things.

Anyway, I got involved in some hunger programs while I was a senior in high school, got elected student body president, which again was really an anomaly because a real farm kid wasn't suppose to get elected. In fact, one of the students who had run against me, I still remember very vividly in my mind him just rumbling in the hall, "I got beaten by a farmer."
I had no intention of doing any of these things. But some students talked me into so I said, "Okay, you can put my name in."

I think I got elected in part because there were, maybe, seven or eight candidates, and they were all sort of town kids. Their parents were really well known in the community, and I think what happened is a lot of kids voted for me because they didn't want--between either splitting their vote or kind of voting for the underdog. But I always felt more comfortable being in an underdog role.

I decided to go to college by that time. I had decided I was going to devote my life to on the food and hunger problem, and I decided it was an economic problem. So I decided college and study economics.

I had this idea, I wanted to go to the University. I'm not sure if there was a except I knew they had the ag programs. But I had this idea that if I went to the I would either have to go to St. Paul or Minneapolis.

I didn't realize at the time that I could have--probably if I would have known more, I probably would have gone into ag economics. I'm glad I didn't, though, now looking back.

I ended up going to Morris, in part because nobody else from Brainerd went to Morris, and I wanted to go where nobody knew me; I wanted to just sort of start out new.

Anyway, I did and by the time I got there I decided it wasn't an economic problem it was a political problem. So I majored in political science, and as I got into the political science and a ways, I came to the conclusion that it's not really a political problem either. Sociology answered the questions more for me.

I had a roommate, a very good friend, who was a psychology major and now has a Ph.D. in psychology. He was defining things as a psychologist would. For me I wasn't doing that, I lean very heavily that way today. But sociology, whether from a social psychological approach or social organization, was a very helpful way for me to tackle those problems.

When I was in college, I continued to stay involved with a Vista worker who was working with some rural youth. There's a lot more to this, but I don't know if I want it in. I guess you can tell me to quit if you want. I'll tell you how I got to where I am today. There's a few more things in there.

When I got to college in 1969, the Vietnam thing was really getting hot. When I went to college, I was very patriotic, very hard-core American. Somewhere in there, I guess, and I
think it was a liberal arts education that really helped me to start seeing things, between
my own religious faith and attitudes about what was right and wrong.

We had a lot of black students at Morris, not a lot, but enough including a fairly large
group that year that had come in from Kansas City without realizing that it was basically
a white college out in the middle of rural America. So there was a fair amount of
controversy. We had some international students.

The net result was that somewhere in there, my sophomore year probably, I'd really over
to having a much more questioning attitude and eventually becoming a Vietnam which
was never that dramatic in Morris.

We did the marches in the streets and that kind of thing. I had a high draft number. I don't
know what I would have done had I gotten a low one. I don't know, though I think I
probably would have--the thing then that you did, you either left the country or a few
people went to jail. I'm not sure. I don't think I would have gone, I really don't, because I
was pretty adamant. But, as it turns out, it never became a major issue because of my
lottery number and then eventually the draft.

But I completed my degrees there and went to the Twin Cities to get some practical
worked in community education, and I never lost my interest in farming.

One of the summers when I was back at the county fair, I ran into the ag teacher was very
influential in my life which was interesting because he really was extension agent and had
no influence in that.

My dad didn't believe in those people at all. He had no confidence in the county agent
or anything. They were really not a part of our life. I'm really wrestling with, now at age
38, my relationship with my father in all of this, not with him personally, but the impact
that he had on that as I work with extension agents now in Vo-Ag and a lot as I work with
our students and their parents.

Last Friday, for example, I had a father in with his son who is the oldest of nine kids. I
tried to talk to the son about what his interests were and stuff. And his father kept
interrupting him and saying, "Well, he's interested in this or that."

I was just marveling at it because I know that college is going to be ideal for this kid. He's
going to change a lot, and there's going to be some controversy when we comes home and
he's got a mind of his own. In the end his father will be very happy for it, but it's going to
take some adjusting.

But the day that I left for college, my dad was still trying to talk me out of going say,
"Couldn't you stay home and go to the community college?"
Part of the reason I went, though, was that I don't think I from--I always felt compelled that I had to learn more. I just had to really would have loved farming. I had so many things going for me.

Part of it was I felt I had to leave because I had younger brothers and sisters who really chance to grow up and fill the roles that I had. When I was a junior and senior in high school, I helped make major decisions on the farm. I think it was really good in helping with a lot difficult decisions. I think it was good, but I said, "I can't stay here now and do this."

My older brother had left, and I really valued that. It was very nice having him gone because now I was the oldest. And my older sister had gone.

So I did that, and sure enough it turned out that way, because my younger brother then really changed I think, in that he then got involved. In turn, when he left for college, it happened all the way on down to this day to my youngest sister who has now left, but she comes home on weekends. And I think it’s just been a tremendous growing experience.

That, again, is another value of family farms. It's real hard to explain to people. I am wrestling with it now as I'm raising my children in town. I used to think that anybody who lived in town could not possibly amount to anything, and yet, I know that’s not the case now. But I’m not sure how I can replicate some of those experiences for my kids.

But part of the reason I left was I wanted to provide that room for my younger siblings. It wasn't anything I could explain to my dad or talk to him about, but I know it was an important part what I did.

Anyway, the ag teacher I mentioned earlier, I ran into him at the county fair, and he said, "You know, you really should get into Vo-Ag." He said, "I thought you'd always thought you should be a Vo-Ag teacher." I never had an interest in being an ag teacher at that level, and yet here's what I'm doing today, but it’s in a different kind of function. When I worked at the Minneapolis schools, and I had this idea. I was working intercity and I had this idea that I wanted to . . .

[Tape interruption]

**WN:** . . . was all along I had never abandoned this idea of finding better ways to organize people to do things. I came across the idea of cooperatives. The consumer cooperatives and the new wave cooperatives were a hot item in the cities. In fact, there was a lot of political controversy.

But, also, a couple of things that happened, one is Metadine [phonetic], Canada, on a trip
up there with my wife and elderly farmer, we were washing dishes one night and started
talking about stuff that I thought could be done differently in agriculture. He started
talking about some things that they had up there and the way they had organized some
smaller farmers.

It turns out they were cooperatives. They were kind of different up in there in that the
philosophy is more of a radical, sociology approach, I suppose. They've had successful
machinery cooperatives. Part of the reason why they are different up there, the Depression
is when a lot of our cooperatives got started, the farm ones, and after World War II
because our economy rebounded so well and the technology took off.

Farmers like my dad didn't need cooperatives as much. It happened in our family. Instead
of working with the neighbors you went off on your own. My dad never had much to say
about the cooperative. We didn't get involved. We got power from it and sold our milk
there, but he wasn't really involved even though my grandparents had helped start the
dairy cooperatives.

The other irony in all of this is the friend I had in high school, as a young child, his dad
happened to be a board member of the cooperative and a real strong person, and to this
day this sort of comes up as it’s a part of my psyche underneath, I guess.

Anyway, I got involved in that, and I met the person, Ed Spedum [phonetic], who was
head of the Minnesota Association of Cooperatives, and got really intrigued by it. I
started doing a lot of reading.

I also got really interested in the idea of studying the future through some people I met, to
the point where I quit my job and went to the University of Houston and got a degree in
studies of the future. But from the day I left here and went down there into this large
urban area, I really had committed myself to--I'd never gotten off track on the
cooperatives in agriculture. But I felt that I was doing my boot camp, my military service,
working in an intercity school and learning how to do things.

But while I was at Houston, I had an opportunity to work with Ervin Laszlo as a student.
Any time I had to write a paper, do anything, I was exploring these areas, and had a
faculty member down there, a sociologist who was listening to me one day as I was doing
some planning.

I had a chance to do internships, one at NASA, which part of my reason for going down
there was I was interested in becoming a shuttle astronaut. This was the first group, and
they had 10,000 applicants. I decided the competition was too tough in that. But I had a
chance of doing an internship at NASA or the Congressional Clearinghouse of the Future
or this thing on cooperatives that I was hatching in my mind. And I decided to pursue
that.
He suggested to me, this faculty member, one day who was a close friend. He said, "You know, in ten years I can see you teaching in a small agricultural college in the upper Midwest." Six months later that was just what I was doing and came back, worked with a consulting group for a while and came here.

I really tend to look at things in a great big picture, I think, a lot. In the last several years, even before I came here and I was doing some workshops and doing some speaking and stuff, and doing it, I guess, as a futurist, but my impression of the future was not the same one that was accepted by people like Earl Joseph and a lot of those. They were really pushing the high technology

I think I've always been pro-technology, and I understand the technology in agriculture very well. I'm not a technician, but I think I understand it. But I've been very interested in the social and economic consequences.

At the same time, people like Wendell Barry and all of those counter-movements have been very much a part of my life. For a year I was on the board of directors for the Minnesota Association of Appropriate Technology. Of course, in that group I was by far the most pro-technology of the group. The others were really counter-culture type folks.

But coming in here, I think, I've had a different sort of a mind set. I've never really at odds with people because one of the skills I've developed over time was the ability to be a of the mainstream and yet have counter-culture values yet and ideas and keep raising them.

I've been able here to do somewhat through the futures things. I can talk about the future and the value of embryo transplants and genetic manipulation, all of that, but, I think, also I can raise questions on it.

I guess a couple of comments I would make about where it’s taken us in agriculture is that most people are underestimating the impacts of those technologies, the economic impact, the political impact. It’s a social thing. It troubles me because I think that the danger in underestimating what the impact is going to be both bad and good is that you lose a lot of opportunity to shape things. You end up people becoming reactionary or fighting things out in the legislature, which is ultimately where a lot of it is going to have to get decided, but there's a lot more issues on that.

Churches, for example, do a little bit on this, but I think they, at times, have not--I've on some programs in churches where--but the issues are going to be more difficult to deal with what people realize, the biology stuff especially.

The computer stuff hasn't turned out to be as difficult philosophically or morally. There were projections a few years ago where every farmer would have a computer in their
home. Of course, it's not turning out exactly like that. Other things are happening that people didn't anticipate. There have been a lot more applications of computers, but computers are not going to be the controversial ones. They are having a big impact.

There are things, for example, like video auctions, or I think one of the interesting ones is going to be telemarketing, the electronic marketing where a farmer can sit in his or her home and play with the figures on the screen that are live with the Chicago Board of Trade. You can do that at the county elevator. The time is condensed so much and very easy for a major up swing or down swing to occur. Even in the October crash a year ago, the fact that the boards opened in Tokyo before they did here, had a major impact. I think a lot of people underestimate how that has changed their lives or going to change it.

From my own interests, I guess, I sort of put into context all of those types of things I talked about in my childhood and upbringing, as well as I have a real strong sense of where I'm going and what I want to do, the international stuff, the economic development in other countries, that are all very much a part of my thinking yet, the cooperatives as a strategy. I'm involved in a number of things in that area, the need for leadership, the need for alternative uses of products.

I think that we've got to--we don't have to but we could, we could if we wanted to, we could find ways of learning from these things. You could take a snapshot out of the 1950s when these technologies changed. I'm familiar with that one, or the '60s or even now the '70s or the '80s, and we could learn an awful lot.

People in cooperatives, quite often, have looked at the 1930s. Any video tape or slide show or book they always talk about the 1930s, and that's helpful. But it's not enough because now we have to start looking at the '40s and '50s, and we have to look at the 1970s. I don't think people are real comfortable with looking at recent history and learning from it. But recent history now is very important. I think you can learn a lot from history, but it's not just ancient history. And it's because time is compressed now and things are changing so rapidly.

I think even, for example, out of the farm crisis, if we could get this under enough of a microscope and study it, I don't mean tear it apart and analyze pieces, but to look at, for example, what happened between 1982 and 1984. There's an awful lot that could be learned from it.

An example would be, I think, probably what lenders did. What was the weight of learning by the lender, by the farmer, by the county agent, by the adult farm management person? Did the banker learn quicker than the farmer?

I suspect they probably did because the banker, at least in my mind, has more time to study that because that's what he or she is being paid to do. They've got a whole bunch of
farmers that they are working with and accounts, and they can learn an awful lot and learn what to do.

Whereas, the farmer, the finance part of it, is only a little part of what he or she has to do. You've also got to be studying genetics and what's going to happen when the bovine hormone hits and all of that kind of stuff. Yesterday when you turn on the news and you find out that people are being told not to eat cheese on the first day of Dairy Month. I mean, holy smokes.

On the news today at noon I heard about Meryl Streep, and they are carrying on a campaign against the apple thing. And the whole nutrition thing, the eating habits, there are some fascinating stuff if you look back between 1963 and 1973 that happened in people's eating habits, where it's when the diet pops came out. Now, I think, diet pops have overtaken the traditional or the regular stuff which has an impact on the sugar growers, by the way, but also says an awful lot about what people are doing. For several years the new cereals that came out, the selling point was how much sugar they had. Some of them had more than 50% sugar. All of a sudden there was a new cereal that was low in sugar and pretty soon the trend went away.

You don't see a lot of products being marketed now except there's a few mavericks. is the Jolt or something, and people will buy that type of stuff, but overall there has been a shift away.

I think the whole idea of international is something that farmers and rural people and ag educators are only vaguely--they aren't anywhere near where they should be in terms of understanding the impact of it. The importance of agriculture in world development, in other countries, as well as in our own.

I don't know exactly what's going to happen, but I do know that other countries are not going to replicate what we did. It's not going to take them 200 years and an industrial revolution to get from where they are now to where we are now. It’s not going to happen like that. Some of them may get from where they are now to where we are, or they will exceed where we are in terms economic stability, but they'll do it like in a decade or less.

Others may never in our lifetime be able to get up to a level just because the competition is too tough. It’s like a plant growing in a parking lot. They just aren’t going to make it that way.

Let me quit for a minute so you can ask a different question.

MR: So you came here to Waseca right out of the University of Houston?

WN: Yes. Actually I did an internship the year before I came here which I was
developing a project on the future of cooperatives. I was also doing a number of workshops and stuff as part of this consultant group that I was working with. I knew more about agriculture than the other people did, so I would get asked to do that.

They were city people who were really in amour with new technology and had no concept of what you mean when you say "family farm." It's one of those things that I think you either understand or you don't. It's real hard to explain to people, and it's real hard to know whether--I can hear people discussing it now and say, "It's time to abandon that idea and go on."

I can also argue the other case where somebody really gets going about trying to link the idea of a family unit with an economic operation like a business called a farm. It is absurd. Well, maybe it isn't.

I think people who are doctors or teachers or any other kind of profession, they have families, too. And each one of those families are involved with that operation in a different kind of a way. But I don't think we understand that very well. Maybe someday we'll look back and understand it, but part of it is because there used to be everybody was basically a farm family, and now there are only a few of those around. But we haven't gotten used to that idea yet.

WN: I was hoping to put that one off a long time. I don't know. I think somehow you have to define it in a time context. But probably you also need to start looking at geography and all those kinds of things because, maybe, a family farm in southern Minnesota is a lot different. You have to look at age, and are you talking about extended family and all of that.

Let me try and see if I can come up with a more--I don't know how I would define it.

MR: Is it like pornography, you know it when you see it?

WN: Yes, right. In my family we have some family farms that are very definitely there.

I have a younger sister and her husband who have a family farm. The kids are now involved with it. The kids aren't that old. They've got an older neighbor, well, friend, relative, I guess, that has been involved, that helped them get started. That's part of it. It's a classic one, I think. Their income comes from the farm. It's well run. There's no doubt in my mind that they'll succeed, no doubt in my mind that they'll probably do that until they retire, and they are very happy doing it.

I have another brother and his wife who started just a few years later than they did. If you walked onto their farms you'd probably--they look alike, but yet there's a different philosophy operating that.
My sister-in-law works off the farm part time. My brother's approach and relationship to his kids is different, I think. He thinks nothing of staying home playing with the kids in the morning. His neighbors are out there plowing. His wife's in town working. She works until noon, maybe, comes home and then watches the kids in the afternoon, and he does stuff. They are very comfortable with that. That's a family farm, too. But now you've introduced a dimension of that off-farm income.

I have another brother who is farming very much a family farm, but they've got a few different enterprises going in that he does hoof trimming and they've raised rabbits. I don't know how big they are in rabbits right now. He's done some work for an AI company. They've really primarily been focused on doing well in the dairy industry by some real concentrated effort into improving their herd production and have just done a remarkable job of coming from here up to here in a very short period of time.

They did just buy a farm now, but for several years did not own a farm. I think probably their purchase of it has done more for some security reasons so they can't get asked to move as happened to them before as opposed to owning something.

I remember my brother making a comment early on when he was renting, my folks had said to him, "Well, if you don't own any land, how can you be a farmer?"

He wasn't that interested in growing crops. He was interested in concentrating on the dairy industry.

So I think that the dimensions of income being somewhat--certainly as a major source of and, maybe, even if you have other off-the-farm income but you're doing it to support that a family operation. It seems to be, too, that somehow the dimension of the family all buying into is important.

I've seen situations here where, maybe--I'm thinking of some of our students where, maybe they live on a farm, and maybe the husband is very much involved in the farm. He may or may not have some off-farm income, but the wife is not really mentally, philosophically a part of it. I don't know, maybe that's not a family farm. It looks like a family farm. It probably fits all the definitions of USDA of a family farm, and yet it really isn't. It’s his business that he operates and the family lives there but I think the fact of that wife not buying into it, could be the opposite, or the kids.

I think, maybe, that's why when you see the ones where the children are growing up and they have absolutely no interest in it that suggests to you something. Maybe, this wasn't really "family farm." It was some kind of a business operation.

MR: So there are sociological and cultural and economic factors involved?
WN: Good point. What I would say is that I think that the sociological and the cultural and political are extremely important to the definition of a family farm. And I think ag economists tend to ignore that and overlook it and try to say it’s not important. I don't think that's true at all. I understand why they do that because they tend to look at it from the economics, but I don't think it’s realistic either And there's nothing wrong with it. Every occupation, every family, your family is involved in one way or another.

There are some unique parts of this. The fact that you're living in the country which means you don't have real close neighbors, and you have a lot of political support in the sense that generally family farms are thought of as something very good, and there's a lot of legislation really making sure that we have family farms. So you've got some unique things there.

The technology part is changing in that there used to be a need for more family members involved, and now there's less need for a lot of people involved with it. But, on the other hand, it’s maybe easier for other family members to help operate the farm because things are automated. You don't have to evaluate the family members by how much muscle they have which meant if you were doing that you'd probably value men over women and son-in-laws are very important.

There's a whole value system that comes out of there when you have to value physical labor. If an individual woman has an interest and a capacity for hard physical labor, they're of more value. But there's a lot of other ways of valuing people besides that. I think that's the case now, whether it’s intelligence or ability to run a computer or skills that you can market off the farm.

MR: Is family farming still a viable way to operate agriculture in this country?

WN: I think that family farming as a part of agriculture, is a viable option. I don't think that it’s very realistic for us to think that all of agriculture can be built around the family farm anymore than it’s realistic that agriculture can be built around corporate farming. That’s a problem we get into where you tend to think it’s got to be one or the other, and, in fact, I think where we really need the blend of it is. I think the family farms, not only can they survive it, they are an important part of it and it’s part of a system. You need those.

At the same time, I think we need some corporate farms, and we need some integration of various industries and stuff I think it benefits the whole system, and if we would accept that then we would probably come up with more intelligent laws. I think it would also mean that people would perceive that they are losing some of their independence and freedom because what you'd have to do probably is come up with legislation that says quotas. We are going to support x percent of the population on family farms. We'll
support x number of thousands of family farms in Minnesota. But after that we're going to say that's all we can really afford.

What happens now with the laws, is we debate whether we're going to have farm support programs or mediation, all of that, then the idea is you save all of them. Now that's starting to change in that mediation and some of things, we are accepting that it's okay to let some of them go. So we're getting better at that. I think we're even getting better on the idea of the corporate farms or the integration. Some of its okay, and we, maybe, don't need to worry about it, "If we get some of it, the whole industry is going to go that way," because maybe it isn't. Maybe 90% of the pork will be produced a few farmers, but there may still be enough options for the other 10% of the pork production to come spread out from a large number of people. I have no idea if those are realistic numbers.

I think if we thought about it more, which means we have to debate it a lot and try to answer all these questions you're answering and get a lot of people thinking about it, and we could come up with it and say, "Okay."

I think Canada has probably done a better job of that at least from some of the perspectives that I guess that I have in terms of the dairy quota system and stuff. They've had some interesting things that have happened up there in cooperatives, for example, machinery cooperatives. Maybe four farmers get together and buy one piece of machinery and work out a system. Then what you do is you establish legislation that helps support them, whether it's a tax law that's at least equitable if not favorable.

To me, if you're a liberal, you will argue for a tax laws that are favorable to that, and if you're conservative then you at least ought to argue for the tax laws being equitable as opposed to trying to do away with them which becomes the other extreme.

**MR**: There's a lot of dramatic debate about corporate farming and family farming. Are you trying to suggest that what we really have to do is find niches for each of them in the agricultural system?

**WN**: I do. I guess I'm not enough of an optimist to believe that everything will just work out great if you let it go. I think you've got to legislate some of those things. I think you have to be able to debate a lot of it in a big enough context and do a lot of free-wheeling brainstorming without people panicking and saying, "Well gee, if he gets his way then it's going to destroy things."

I think that's what is happening now in the legislature, got all these issues going on, everybody's watching the clock, the calendar. So you start getting down and then decisions get made in the final hour about establishing greater Minnesota corporations or mediation laws or this or that. I don't think they've done a whole lot of harm. I think they could do more good than what they're doing. But, maybe, for example, we figure out that.
I happen to be a real strong believer in the alternative use of agricultural products, by the way. I just think it really has a great potential for not only agriculture but solving energy problems, the ecology and all of the that. It also has some potential problems, but we ought to be able to think our way through those things.

Maybe we decide that there's a certain amount of mushroom growing that can go on in the state, or specialty crops or specialty animals or whatever. If we say, as a goal, we want to make sure that the idea of the individual owning a business is important, okay. So we say we want to protect that, and if you can work it into a family, fine. If you want to get a few people together, fine. Whatever. But decide that these things are important, and then try to build laws that will protect the opportunities for people to do that.

Maybe there are some parts of the industry, growing corn or soybeans or raising hogs or poultry, that it’s just not feasible for poultry to be produced and a whole lot of farmers owning a chicken coop. There's a lot of this that goes on where a farmer raises enough eggs for himself and a few neighbors, and that's great. But, by and large, the poultry needs of the state and the world aren't going to be met by a lot of individuals. It’s probably not the most efficient way. So you can say, "Okay, well let the poultry industry be more concentrated."

There's limits that we should probably allow. We don't want to end up with one poultry farmer. But you can regulate some of that. Regulated begins to be a real difficult word to accept. As long as we have this idea that we're also independent and stuff, and it’s back to our heritage in this country and all of that.

Jefferson or Thomas Payne talked about the need. They said, every 19 years we ought to rewrite the Constitution because people ought not to be ruled from the grave, and every 19 years is the time in which a generation turns over. Of course, we really value those people, and we pride ourselves on the fact that we've kept the same Constitution that they wrote, but they really were advocates for constantly looking at and renewing it. I think the whole idea of freedom and capitalism, all of that, today is a lot different than it was 200 years ago, just sheer numbers of people. It’s very difficult to let somebody just go out and do whatever they want. There's potentially too much damage that could be done by any one person, whether it’s pornography.

There was a thing in the paper this morning with the Alexanders, or somebody wants to sell chemicals or this kind of a product or—

[Tape interruption]

**WN:** There's just so much damage that someone can do that you have to have some
regulation on it. On the other hand, even for the ones that are certainly—and I'm not even
Saying that people want to do harm, but the technological capabilities now are just, I
mean, if somebody came up with a new kind of plant (Inaudible portion) or not.

History certainly tells us that those things that they are invented, something like that, it’s
probably going to come along and we'd be better off accepting it and designing in the
legislation rather than trying to fight it. We could get better at doing that.

Part of the reason I'm a real strong advocate for looking at the idea of cooperation, not
just from the traditional sense of what a cooperative is, but the idea of a new look at what
it means to be interdependent. I guess I would put the emphasis on the word
"interdependent" rather than "independent" or "dependent." We just don't live in a world--
you can't go out and build your house in the woods anymore and just isolate.

My example, I guess, I would use is I look at the area that I grew up in. As a child, places
were homesteaded. Over the next 20 to 50 years basically, you could see a generation
replacing the original settlers, and typically it was an offspring of the original ones that
lived there.

But you'd go out at night and if people turned their yard lights Out and it was dark. Now
in that same area you go out at night, and it’s not really dark. People have got their all-
night lights on, they don't turn off.

Instead of these original homesteads that were spread out, now all over, buying 40 acres
and scrape off an area and put a trailer house in or build a house. kinds of homes popping
up in there. You stand there and you kind of think about compared to then.

Right where my dad lives, for example, growing up there my dad was always elected the
town constable with two votes. He'd vote for somebody else, and my mom and somebody
else would vote for him, and he'd get elected.

Now the neighbor across the road works for, I think, he companies so he can drive to the
Cities and fly wherever. And he's mountain lions. It’s just different kinds of occupations.

It’s a whole different community. And that's different. It’s just different. The idea of a
town board, I don't really know what town meetings are like there anymore, but it
certainly isn't the same group that would have been there even 10 or 15 years ago,
different value systems. We have to accept that. Things have changed. We live as part of
a global community.

MR: But maybe the problem is that culturally our ideas but independences haven’t
changed.
WN: Right, yes. I don't think we understand it, and the dimensions of--there are really several dimensions, but a couple of key ones are just the fact that the numbers of people living in an increasingly congested area is one, and the other is the time dimension of time changing quickly, and then values changing.

I can remember growing up as a child there that if a woman had a child out of wedlock, it was just something everybody knew about and it was a major thing. I think now nobody would think twice, and a lot of little things like that, alcohol and drug problems and stuff. They are much more accepted, different values.

I think a lot of farmers don't understand it, but it’s been a refuge for some, "Going to retreat back into it and as long as I'm there nobody's going to bother me," and felt fairly secure because everybody likes farmers. But that's not really true anymore, either.

MR: To bring you back on the campus, you were doing consulting work with a cooperative, and then you came to Waseca campus. What did you do then?

WN: I'll sort of talk about what I've done personally but also what the college is doing because they've really become very much intertwined.

I came here originally officially the coordinator for part-time students. I was really intrigued by the idea of a rural agriculture college providing continuing education for farmers. It was because one of the things that had motivated me from the time I was in high school was I looked at the kids that I was graduating from high school with and maybe a couple of them went on to college for a little bit, but mostly they didn't. The broke kids tended not to do it as much. I just always in my mind thought I wanted to be able to do something to help people like that keep on learning including people like my parents. So the idea of working in an adult education program in a rural area really appealed to me.

Some of the earliest things that I was doing, which the college had already been doing, was working on taking commodity marketing classes off campus. We had a project funded from the Governor's Council on Rural Development for that. We had gotten a Rural Family Life Center started in which we are starting to work with primarily rural women in some of the issues of self-esteem and alternative careers and stuff like that.

I was doing that over the first few years in the off-campus classes and classes on campus, and also they were in the process of developing a cooperative center here which I started teaching the cooperatives course and eventually became involved in a lot of different activities related to that to where, I think, today we've really got an outstanding program going in that whole area.

Four years after I had been in that position, I became a division director for programs in
ag business and food industry and home and family Services then, also, coordinator for the other centers including the Rural Family Life Center. I've been able to do a lot of the things that I had wanted to. I've been able to pursue my interest in international aspects and public assistance primarily through the cooperatives route.

We've done some projects with Uganda and farmers here. In fact, we have a staff member who is going to Uganda in about two weeks and is going to be spending a few weeks there doing some checking on educational needs in that country which I'm really pleased to see we've got someone going back there.

I've been able to continue doing some things in the futures area in that we've got the futures built into our curriculum in which we're trying to get our students to be more aware of what's happening, change, and raise some of those value issues, as well as, keeping them aware of technology changes.

The academic programs that I'm involved with, the food industry one, is of great interest to me because a lot of people in agriculture and in general don't really understand the food industry. They see the farmer and they see the grocery store and restaurant, but they don't understand what happens to food in between. People are becoming more aware now of some of the concerns, but it’s usually coming out in a negative way, "What are you doing to my food?" pesticide problems, the grapes and the apples and now the cheese issue and all of that.

But there are a lot of other things that go on in the food industry. Obviously, we would not have the quality of life or the life style, life standard, that we have today if it weren't some major advances in food technology. So I'm very interested in that.

In the home and family area we have programs working with rural elderly and with both of which are of interest to me. I guess as a person, a sociologist by training, I'm intrigued by that.

Then the business area, we're doing a lot of things in preparing people that are going to go to work in cooperatives and private business in agriculture. We have quite a few students in our ag business program who are planning to farm. But they are taking a bigger look at it. They're saying, "Maybe I'm going to work for somebody for a while or get involved in ag business or I want business skills and then going to farm."

Part of our curriculum here, one-third of it, is in the arts and sciences. That's important to me because I think it’s important for these students to understand more than just how to do something. So they are studying the chemistry and biology, obviously, but sociology and psychology and those liberal arts disciplines.

Then there are other programs on campus, too. I think we're fairly unique as a college of
being focused in what we do in rural services to communities and agriculture. Part of my own job here and experience has been working with our Rural Family Life Center in which in the last few years we've done a lot work with farmers who have been losing their farms or looking at career changes. We've done a lot of career stuff for them.

Part of my own role has been helping them understand how changes are occurring and looking longer range at the future and looking back over their lives, I guess, in the same way why recounting my own personal experience is important because, I think, for them a lot of that's important too.

"Why are you doing what you're doing? You've been farming for 22 years and there are other choices, right?"

And they say, "Right."

But yet when you start exploring it, there are other choices,

"I didn't have to choose to do this, and maybe I want to keep farming for another 10 then maybe I want to do something different for the next 20 years."

I think we're seeing more people getting out of farming in a healthy process, and we'll also see more people getting into farming at various stages in their life, or various parts of ag business which is the other dimension, too.

Farming is not an industry in itself, it’s a part of a great big system. So people understand the system of agriculture, under agriculture in a Systems point of opposed to farming and everything else. Farming is a subsystem of a system.

We are doing quite a bit here with alternative crops and enterprises and ag utilization, alternative uses of agricultural products, and I think that's important. I'm really interested in how we get people who have been trained in traditional agricultural fields like agronomists and ag economists and animal scientists to think about new ways of doing agriculture and not only to respond to the animal rights people or the "Small is Better" people or any of those. They get into debates over it, and neither one knows if they were really right or not. They're convinced the other one is wrong. But to help them see it in a systems point of view.

I think our primary role here as a college is to help people prepare to go out and work in those jobs. That's what we get paid for, funded for, and all that. But I think there's another role we play here, too, and that's just helping to raise those issues. You do it in a lot of ways, whether it’s through the sort of discussions that go on or social programs at times. People do a lot of speaking. They go off campus a lot to different types of programs.
We have a very extensive agricultural library here which is used a lot by the community. When I say agricultural, I'm defining it real broadly with horticulture. We have a lot of interested people here in environmental issues and ground water and waste treatment and sustainable ag and all of that.

And leadership, we've got a leadership project going here that, I think, is important because one of the things we've got to do is help develop leaders in agriculture and in rural areas.

One of the draw backs of some of these changes, as women have taken on new roles or people have worked off the farms, is that--and I think all of that's is good, but one of the losses that we've incurred is that we lose a lot of substructure that goes on, women getting involved in DHIA and 4-H leaders and all of that.

I think a lot of women didn't get a lot of recognition for that, and it doesn't really pay dollars and cents, and yet it’s been a real important part of the social system out there. I think there's probably less time for that. There are fewer women that are going to just stay home and be homemakers or housewives, and they don't have time to be 4-H leaders.

It could be men, too, but I think the greatest loss that we are incurring is in the women simply because they were doing so much of it before. Now there isn't time because they've got other things they are being asked to do or choosing to do. So we need to figure out how we make up for that loss. We've got to design it in somehow or protect it so that we don't lose it completely.

There are probably better ways of getting it than taking it out of the backs of women because women certainly ought to have choices, and the family ought to have a choice. But it’s got to come from someplace, otherwise we'll pay a price in the long haul. There just won't be those sources there.

We are trying to do some things in helping people get started, and I think this is one of the odd things here. We have, for example, farmers who had come in when we were advertising that we had classes going on for how to get out of farming. We did that because we knew there were people out there who needed help in walking through that process in finding new alternatives.

But we had some that told us, they said, "I kept seeing these announcements of your classes, but I was determined that I wasn't going to come because I was so angry at you for doing that. You're an agriculture college. You're suppose to be helping people stay in farming. Why are you helping us get out?"

I guess it made us more sensitive to that because we, in fact, were doing a lot of things to help people stay, and we were doing things to help people get started. We run a "Getting
Started" class. In fact, the people who are doing the "Getting Started," of which was also myself, but they were saying, "Why are we encouraging people to get started when we know a lot are leaving?" But that's part of the whole system. People are getting started. You've got one farmer who's losing every thing; you've got somebody else here you're helping get started. But that's life.

So what we've tried to do is be more balanced in advertising things so they would understand that we are trying to help them do all of those things. We recognize that it's probably painful to be sitting in a class next to somebody's who's very eager to get out of here and, "I'm going to start farming," and you're sitting there in the process of losing your farm and your life's dream and going to have to do something else. I mean, that's a strange situation, but that's reality, too.

I think we've seen some real good examples where the people have helped each other, even people that surprised me who I knew were really being hurt by losing their farms and in a lot of pain, yet able to say to a younger person maybe sitting there, "I lost my farm, but I think you can probably make it, and here's what you should do or not do. Here's the mistakes that I made." That's really gratifying to see when they get to that point. A lot of them couldn't do it right away, but by the time they were here awhile, they could start to say, "I've got to come to accept that."

We've had one thing that's interesting, our math book here was written by one of our faculty members. There are a lot of practical examples in there drawn from agriculture.

We've had some of the people who have lost their farms just say, "Boy, that just drives me crazy I'm sitting there learning math which I never really wanted to do anyway, but I realize I have to. The way I'm learning it is all these examples of things that keep reminding me."

Using an example, to teach a math concept of how much fertilizer to apply per acre, at what rate, etc, and the farmer is sitting there in the spring of the year learning this so he can get out of agriculture. It's been real awful but I think it's also helped them learn because they could understand the concept. But probably if we were doing it again, we'd do it a little bit differently. I don't know exactly what, but…

And we still have people coming in. We just had a grant proposal now that we submitted to the Kellogg Foundation for some more funds to help strengthen the staff for the Rural Family Life Center and a hotline that we've got doing.

I had a farmer in yesterday. He had actually been in the college here 15 years ago for one quarter, and then he stopped. He's been farming, still farming, and he's working as a paralegal helping a legal aid office for farmers. He's been farming full time and working there full time, and his wife works full time and struggling to keep going.
But he came in at 8:00 yesterday and said, "I've just decided that I need an education. So we got him re-enrolled, and he's starting classes this summer and taking about a half a load this summer and this fall, and he's going to come full time in the winter. I had a couple of them like that this week.

I guess it’s gratifying to me as much--I've seen a lot of the pain and misery, but it’s been gratifying seeing the people start to learn stuff. Some of them really get motivated.

Some of them have gone back farming, too. They've been able to work things out, but they're saying, "This has been just great." They never would have saw themselves going to college. Some of them said they were envious. They saw their friends go to college, their neighbors or their neighbor's kids went to college, but, "I never went to college. I stayed home and worked, and now I've got a chance even though I'm kind of being forced in to it."

So, I think, they've really benefited from that sort of experience. I had one this week who her husband encouraged her to go, so she finally said, "Okay, I'll go." So she did, and after two weeks she found out she really liked it, and he decided he didn't like her going. So he's been trying to talk her into not going.

But she said, "I'm going to stick it out." She said, "He doesn't want me--I did everything for them, did the laundry and made food for he and my kids. I'm still doing all those things. I just put in more hours." And she said, "I wait until they're in bed before I do my homework. And I'm not going to go this summer even though I want to. But I'll stay home because the kids are home. I don't want to create any more waves. But I'm registered for fall, and I'm going to be back." I think she'll do it, but it’s stress on that.

I think talking about this is so easy this time of year. We're really busy. We just got the Sort of things that Sort of happen at the end of the year; there's a lot. Just a lot gets concentrated.

But you see a lot of stress in the students, the younger ones especially, because they are going home, some of them, from farms. I've got one advisee, in fact I just talked to her out here in the hall and she's smoking. Now when she started smoking, I don't know, but she's actually a very prominent person in one of the state dairy breed associations and done real well. But dealing with the transition of a farm kid and, "What am I going to do when I get out of here?"

You try to help them along and help them see options. We have a lot of students that are really highly motivated. They know where they are going and then stick with it, and then others who--she's been a very good student, but then reaches that point where, "I've got to really do some soul searching."
In the past, a lot of farmers haven't had time to do that and farm kids. And, I think, one of the things we are trying to do is either build in some time for them or encourage them to do some of that soul searching that's got to go on. The older ones don't want to quit. They don't understand why we would have a break because they are used to working all the time. And maybe you do get vacation for a couple of weeks in the year, but, "I don't want to take a quarter break. I want to be back and keep going."

So some will come around during the quarter break even. That's been really rewarding.

**MR:** Is some of this reflective of society changing in a sense that people used to get a job out of high school or college and expect to work for the company for 30 years?

**WN:** Yes.

**MR:** And the same thing is happening in farming that people realize that they might come in and out of it.

**WN:** That's exactly right; that's a good point. I think it has taken a while for that to catch up to farming, but I think that's a key part of it. You state it that way, and I think it’s a real good way of putting it, and it makes you wish, "Why don't people see that and understand that?" It would be a lot easier to deal with the stresses if you could just understand that.

You and I could probably take a look at that a little bit more objectively because we're a little bit removed from it, so it's probably easier. But still that's what people have been doing for a long period of time.

In the sort of work that we do, we learn how to do a resume. We either keep it up to date, or if we decide after a while that we wanted to change jobs or we thought our job was threatened, we would crank it up again, and you kind of get a sense of how you'd go about making those adjustments. But I don't suppose many farmers have resumes, and yet there's no reason why they shouldn't. There's no reason why they shouldn't have the same kind of job-seeking skills and job enhancement and professional development plans that any of the rest of us would have.

I think one of the things that happened in the last few years is--I think one of reasons that made the farm thing more painful was--well, farmers were being told that "It's not enough to want the job just because you like it. It’s also got to be economically rewarding. It’s got to be sound financially."

At the same time they were being told that, a lot of the rest of society was going in another direction. They were saying, "Money isn't everything. If you want to do that, go and do it. Don't worry about how much it pays."
So you're just kind of going at cross purposes there. It's kind of like farmers were way out of kilter from that, and those urban people were now trying to do what farmers all along were saying, "Hey, I want to farm. I'm not trying to get rich. I just want to farm. I want to do it because I like doing it."

People used to laugh at them and say, "But that's crazy. Why would you? There's something wrong with you. You must not be as good as somebody else because you wouldn't do that if you know you're not going to get rich at doing it. Why are you still doing it?"

That's what other people are now doing. The rest of society is saying, "Hey, it doesn't matter whether I get rich or not."

And it's not realistic anymore, either, which is something else in our Society that the boomers need to understand. We are not going to be able to probably achieve the same kind of advancement over our parents. We may be able to, but our children aren't going to be able to.

There's going to get to be bottlenecks in certain types of jobs and stuff like that. So we are going to have to be able to learn to live with less automatic growth and income and that sort of thing. We don't know how to do that very well in our society because we're too used to automatic increases or that you're guaranteed that things better be better next year because if they're not better then they've definitely gone backwards. There isn't any such thing as just kind of staying the same. It's not acceptable, and staying the same is like going backwards.

**MR:** So at a time when society's putting a greater emphasis on job satisfaction is at the same time that farmers were, a lot of them, had to leave the farm.

**WN:** Yes, and being told that job satisfaction doesn't count. They were saying, "You want to farm because you like it, but that doesn't count. That's not of any value."

I could see it in a situation like this. Maybe a banker or somebody could tell them that, "Sure, you like to do it, but you're losing money so you better get out."

And yet, at the same time, maybe of you have to ask the banker, "Why are you a banker?"

"Well, I like it."

I think, generally as a culture, we're moving more towards, you do the job because you like it, the satisfaction, and not just, you don't move around just because it pays well or you don't stay in a job just because it pays well or there's guaranteed security.
**MR:** In talking to some rural women I find a lot of them struggling with the concept of being a woman and a woman farmer. Do you find that in some of the people that you advise?

**WN:** Yes. I don't think that the people that we would have here in the college, it’s as difficult for them because in general a college setting is kinder to that sort of thing. It’s more acceptable to talk about it. The women who come here, the older women, have already either had to wrestle with it or else it isn't as important an issue as something else.

I think the younger women coming here, they are much more comfortable with it, and the men are much more comfortable with it. I haven't for a long time, in fact, come across a male student who really adheres to this idea that, "I'm going to get married to someone who's going to stay home and take care of the kids."

I think the women students here don't think that way either. Now the ones that are more likely are the ones that don’t come here or to an institution like this either. I'm Saying this after talking with some high school. You talk to some high school and you'll find--and I don't know if the proportion is decreasing or not--female students who's clearly their intent is somebody will take care of me and others who are struggling with it and rebelling, But they're too young or they don't have enough other life experiences to put it into a right context.

But it’s been a really healthy environment here. We've just got a lot of different patterns. And, I guess, I tend to think if you ask me the question, I think of a lot of individual students that have been able to handle that real well. But I don't think they are, maybe, typical of the whole population.

**MR:** What is the interaction been between students that are coming to college right after high school and, maybe, a farmer that's making a career change? Has there been a lot of interaction between students?

**WN:** Yes, and it’s been pretty positive here. I can remember back when I was a student at Morris, and there was one older student on campus, and it was really a strange thing. The person really stood out. I think if you went back to any campus now, you'd have a hard time--you wouldn't find anything like that.

Here, I think, the people have gotten along well. I think it’s been a healthy situation in a lot of ways in that you see younger students working with older students.

I had a situation a year ago in a cooperatives course that I teach. I had done a session on financing cooperatives, and I had a number of people who came in that night just for that class including a handful of young farmers who were on a board of directors of a
cooperation who came in just for that session. Then I had some young ag production students on campus who signed up for that particular class. And it was real interesting to watch in there the farmers, who were slightly older, came in and boy, they really rolled up their sleeves and they were working on this like it was the most important thing in the life. Originally when I had split them up, the farmers didn't waste any time. They just all got together and said, "Let's get going on this."

They were debating different principles. The other students were kind of just more comfortable with each other and didn't see the importance. But pretty soon they got to where I could see a few of them starting to watch these farmers, and they were--you just read their minds--they were just saying, "Boy, there must be more to this than what I realize."

Pretty soon they were starting to ask questions and there was some good discussion going on.

I think, in general, that's what's happening here a lot. We have a lot of students that are interested in the ag finance program or in combining finance and business management or office management. A lot of times we'll see the younger students working with the older students who have been out there a while.

The older students are much more comfortable here now. They just fit in so quickly. You see them; they've got backpacks. They are dealing with the same issues, and they've become club officers. This is great, at homecoming last fall, the clubs all have candidates that come in there and I bet one-third to one-half of them were older students. It was just great.

Sometimes even an older, like a 32-year-old women and a young 18-year-old guy were the two candidates, and it worked out great. They are very comfortable.

I think it’s extremely healthy for rural communities and stuff. I think the opportunity for people to see themselves as life-long learners and stuff.

I could say a lot of good things about what we're doing, but I could probably build you a longer list of things that I think we should be doing and other institutions should be doing.

Look at my wall chart here of rural history, and I think one of the ideas that I've had is that if an individual farmer, and I think there are probably some older, retired farmers that could draw a picture like that, paint all of the changes that have gone on in their lives. I think there's really a need to get that captured right away, both in video and in writing and pictures and whatever.
But you could also do that, say, if you were a young person trying to chart out where the rest of your life is going to be going. And maybe it’s something that you develop as you go, a professional development type of thing.

I don't know if we'll see the day when you have to have credentials to be farming. I think already we've got certain things that are happening. You have to have a license to do this and that. There's a lot of little bits and pieces. I would not want to predict that someday you'll have to have a degree to be licensed as a farmer, because I think we'll do all kinds of things to resist that.

But I would bet, if you added up all of the different things, you have to have a license to do this, this and this, you put all those together and you added them up, we're probably already getting to a point where it’s more than equivalent to a lot of professions where it says you have to have a certificate which you get only by getting a four-year degree. It’s a little bit disguised, but in fact you have to have it. You have to have it legally, but even just from just the point of view of being successful you have to have a lot of that.

So if you do and you're a young person starting out, and we have students who are sort of thing where they're saying, "In ten years I think, maybe, I could own my own I'm going to do this for five years. I'm going to do that. I want to get that kind of an experience."

Buying that farm or buying that piece of machinery which traditionally that was something that was a top priority and debate whether or not you're going to farm that base and whether or not you thought you could buy a farm. That's probably irrelevant now for a lot of people. The same way with to be a person doesn't mean you have to own a house.

The whole idea of ownership, I think, is going to go through a transition in our society in that we have placed a lot of value on owning your home or owning your farm, owning your business. And, I think, it's going to be more possible and acceptable to be an entrepreneur or to be a farmer or to be anything and not necessarily own the land because you don't really own it anyway. It’s written down and it’s in a court room somewhere and you hand it over to somebody else when you die or else it gets handed over for you.

But I think the idea of ownership is going to go through--and that's something that I think we really need to look at in agriculture, the whole concept of ownership. And we're seeing it popping up in places, the stewardship question and certainly the farm crisis that we've seen. A lot of it was, "Who owns this thing? Do I or the bank?"

I had a situation in my family again where a brother was trying to buy a farm and the lender who held it had promised him that he would have a chance to buy it, and then he found out that they went ahead and sold it to somebody else and they wouldn't tell him who they had sold it to. He was debating whether he should take legal action.
They were saying, "Well, this loan officer had no right to tell you that he was going to give you first chance."

My brother started pursuing it, and they finally did tell him who bought it, and he found out who it was. It was a neighbor who they got along well with and it changed things. So then, maybe, owning wasn't that important.

So it turns out this idea of ownership, maybe it was more a security thing that I don't want somebody else buying it that it's going to remove some opportunities I might have for using it.

They found out that they guy who had bought it was saying, "Hey, yes. Maybe I can rent it to you if you need it, or if a few years down the road things change, maybe I'll sell it to you or something."

And they said, "Maybe, that's probably better. I can't afford it now anyway, but you can."

So I think this concept of ownership is going to change. Our homesteading heritage isn't so far back, but that's kind of a strange concept, too, the idea that you can go out and put some stakes in the ground and say, "This is mine. And if you can get to a place and you write it down then it's yours and sort of yours forever. If you can make a lot of money off it, then it's yours to keep and if you die it's going to—it's kind of a strange concept that has worked fine, I guess, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be here forever.

And in agriculture, I think, that's a real key one that we've got to wrestle with, estate and the transference of farms from one generation to another or farm families, I think, way over-estimated as one of the thorny issues.

So it troubles me, maybe it's the sociologist in me coming out, but you hear them planning has been debating on farm subsidies and all of that, and maybe it doesn't really matter what the price of corn is. I think it probably does, but maybe the price of corn isn't anywhere as important as how a father and a son-in-law get along together or a mother and a husband, I mean, just all of those types of things, maybe are a lot more important than subsidies payments. They are more important than what we give them credit for, I think. But they're not easy things to talk about and you can't draw charts with them, economic charts and trend lines and all of that, so people think it's better to stick with the stuff you can put numbers on.

**MR:** I know that the college is involved in some way with the mediation program. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of that program?

**WN:** Generally I would rate it pretty positive in that—positive. and I think that it was an intermediate solution that helped buy time for people and for individuals and bought time
for the whole system so that we didn't have to do anything too drastic too quickly. And I think we probably learned some things. I think the type of training that went on primarily for mediators was good. I mean, we have a lot more people out there now who know how to help resolve these sorts of things.

On the college here we've had a faculty member who's been a mediator, and we've had family members who have gone through it. I think overall if you're asking, "Has the program itself been successful?" I would have a hard time answering that, and I think any body will for some period of time. I don't know what the whole program costs. I suppose whatever it costs it's pretty insignificant compared to the kinds of money that gets spent for a lot of things. So I generally would have to rate it fairly high as a successful endeavor. I think the whole idea of it was pretty intriguing, the idea of getting people talking about it and stuff.

I think there are a lot of things that could have been a lot worse. We could have had a lot more law suits, and we could have had a lot more suicides, and we could have had a lot more damaged families than we did. And I know there were probably a lot of those yet. But I think it really could have been worse. I don't know that we're out of it entirely either.

Partly I'm kind of going on just from a number of individual situations that I'm familiar with and our students that started out real rough and then they managed to even work out ways that they got back onto farming. And maybe they aren't going to stay with it over the long haul, but they bought some time that gave them a chance to get out for a while and then get back in and say, "Well, maybe there are other ways of living my life, too."

I don't know how many, but I think probably a lot of farmers might be trapped, not really want to. I don't know what the extent of the people who are farmers and farm families are in there entirely by choice. And maybe that's true of all occupations, and we kind of go through that there are times that we wish we were doing something else.

But there may be a lot of farmers who even though they said, "I want to farm," they might have been more out of a sense of frustration and, "Well, I don't have anything else I can do."

If they really were presented with some other alternatives that were realistic and doable and comfortable enough they might say, "Hey, yes. This isn't entirely a perfect occupation."

I know of one family in particular that we worked with here that really became very aware of that and they vocalized it a lot, too.

"We just were sure we were going to be farming forever and it was the greatest thing and
we were dragged kicking and screaming off our farm. But quite honestly, looking back now, well we've thought about it, it wasn't that great. We struggled most of the time and we kept telling ourselves it was good because we didn't want to be depressed and stuff. But when we really had a chance to be honest about it, there were a lot of other things that we wanted to do, too, that we never got a chance to do, and it really restricted us in a lot of ways. We never would have been able to continue our education or learn anything more."

And now here we've got just the whole idea of learning has really opened eyes for I think that's been probably been the major force in my life, is learning stuff. You really find stuff out.

One of my goals in life is to someday teach a political science course for farmers. I just, time I was a kid and listen to my dad and relatives and neighbors and they were always political issues and government programs.

There's a lot of poor understanding of political Systems and how they operate. It happens even in college faculty members, I think, and the general public and everything. Most people don't have a very good idea really of how power is exercised and how it changes and who has it and who doesn't.

There's really a need. I think, for farmers in general and agri-business people. They could benefit a lot from knowing more about how politics really works. They could have more political power just by knowing more and not just by numbers of votes. But I haven't done that yet.

**MR:** Does the evaluation of the mediation program depend on whether your goal is to save every farmer that was in it or not?

**WN:** That's a good point, I guess I wouldn't.

[Tape interruption]

**WN:** ...was not necessarily to save every farm, but to help put some time into it to decrease the tension, to help save some farms that should be saved, to help other ones ease out of it with a minimum of destruction to themselves and to the lenders, to do some education in the sense of maybe, walking through this and ending up 'without a farm, but "at least I learned something." I'd be real hesitant to tell that to any individual farmer, but if you stand back and look at it, I think. I guess I don't recall when they originally started the program if that was their objective, but I would hope that that wouldn't be the criteria whether it was successful or not. At some point it’s just how many lives did you save or how minimal was the damage.
Again I think of examples here of people who came and said, "We're going through mediation, and we might be able to save our farm. I don't think we're going to, but don't tell anybody that. So I'm going to start going to school because I think in the end going to lose it, even though I'm going to do everything I can to save it."

And I say, "How long do you think it will take?"

"Well, maybe two weeks, maybe a month, two months at the longest."

Then two years later they still don't know; it's still dragging on. I wasn't surprised by that by any means because I know those things take time. But, in the meantime, if they had known back when they came in that it was going to take two years, they would have been really depressed and not knowing what to do. During that two year period that went on, they started taking a few classes, for example, and met some other people. By the time that time came by when they actually lost the farm, it wasn't so bad.

And, again, I'm thinking about a particular family that when finally the day came when they had to vacate, it was a lot less painful. In the meantime, they had come up with some other options, and probably today would say they are better off for it. They wouldn't have said that when they came in.

I saw a lot of them doing some real deceitful stuff, too. I have to say it somewhat carefully because some is hearsay and some of it I don't know if it's freely illegal or not, but it sure sounds like it's bending the rules, or they were really out to get the banker or the lender. They were really going to figure out a way around it if they possibly could.

That's not very healthy for them as a way of dealing with the problem even though they thought they had no other choice. Again at least some of them I'm aware of grew passed that to where they got themselves back into a more neutral zone and then either corrected the situation or were able to bend in that path all together and do something more construction.

I keep thinking of all these individual people, but it's been good. One of the things that intrigued me about this was that, see, the kids that I graduated from high school with were really in that band, one after the other, I think very typically, they, and not just the individuals in my class, but of that era, the very typical thing to do was graduate from high school without any strong intention of farming, but to monkey around for a while, get a part time job, drive a truck, do this or that. After a couple of years the parents would say, "I'm getting tired of this."

Or they would get married or have a girlfriend or boyfriend or something and they'd say, "You've either got to move out, do something with your life, or else stay home and farm because this isn't working. I want to know where you're headed, and we've either got to
expansion or cut back."

There was a lot of tension. The kid is making recommendations, "Well, why don't you do it this way or that way."

And the dad is saying, "Well, jeez, you're not here to help out anyway, why should I invest my money in expanding or rebuilding the barn if I don't know if you're going to be here."

So they forced decisions. I know a number of them that, "Okay," the kid said, "Yes, I'm going to farm."

And so the parents would form a partnership, and they would expand, or the kid would just get started on their own. Boy, a lot of them lost it then. They had no education beyond high school, and they didn't work that hard in high school. They just got by. They weren't really sure they were going to farm anyway.

During those critical years right out of high school when they probably should have been in a vocational school or a college or doing something or learning how to learn on their own, they were monkeying around, just kind of frittering things away, no supervision, no responsibility now, develop some bad spending habits and probably a lot of bad habits that really got hard to overcome. Plus then you start farming and going into a lot of debt.

The philosophy then was the more debt you had, the better off you were. I mean, just that was it. So they built big silos and they built barns and they expanded. Ten years later they've a family. They don't know how to market very well. They can't keep up with the debt. Gone wrong and that's gone wrong and they lost it. That's where I think a lot of them just got knocked out of there.

That could have all been prevented. It didn't have to happen. I guess I fault the education systems at the high school level and institutions like this to some extent and everything else. I don't want to harp on faulting people or Extension, but you look at those individuals, and you can think of a whole lot of other options they could have had, maybe getting another kind of a job would have been good for awhile, or getting more education or lenders could have been more careful, and then we could prevent that now.

I guess I can't do anything about what happened ten or fifteen years ago, but certainly the kids coming out today we ought to be able to help them.

I was in a high school here a couple of years ago, and doing a thing on future careers principal said he just didn't know what to do. He said that people in town are calling him they were just distraught because kids were graduating from high school, and they were just around town in the coffee shop.
And he said "I don't have any control over them. They graduated from here and they're on their own. What can I do?"

They were blaming the school for it. Their counselor had been cut back. They had one counselor who was teaching and doing everything else, and they figure they had about 15 minutes a year to spend with a graduating senior to talk about careers.

This particular school happened to have in their FFA several really sharp women who were officers and stuff. It was a very good program in the FFA.

But the ag teacher said, "What am I going to do?" He said, "The rest really ready for these sharp young women in agriculture."

One of them we actually have on staff here now. She went to school in cosmetology. He was trying to get her to come here, and we kept working on her. Then eventually she enrolled in here after she got her cosmetology degree and had been working in it awhile. Then she enrolled here and now, in fact, she's on staff here recruiting.

But I don't know what happened to the rest of them. The colleges aren't really out looking for them. Everything is so male dominated.

And he said, "You've got to take them the next step and do something to keep them interested, because we really need them. We can't afford to just let them disappear now."

And that's something we really need to work on more. I think it’s gotten better. I think generally we're getting better at it, but I keep thinking of a lot of things we could do better. I generally don't get frustrated by it. I think partly I have been able to accept some of the things that aren't going as fast as, maybe, we'd like just because I've been able to work directly with a number of individuals and seen them change and grow. Like the guy coming in yesterday and deciding to go back to school, and he's going to keep farming.

He said, "I think I can do it.

We've got classes scheduled at a time where he can work them in. There are a lot more now for home study and new technologies and stuff that I think he'll be able to do it. His wife is very supportive.

We've got a number of situations here where we've got husbands and wives here, or we'll get one spouse that will start and then the other one will, maybe, Start taking classes, too, as well as the situation I mentioned earlier where the husband doesn't think the wife should get an education. But she's tough, and she'll make it. I think if all goes well, the whole family and their marriage will be enhanced by it. There's a slight chance it won't go
well, but I know it’s good to see her saying "I think I'm going to try it."

What was the alternative? She's probably in her mid to late 20s, so she could spend the next 50 years or so without an education. As soon as their kids are gone, she'll sit at home the rest of the time, or at a job that isn't very rewarding. It might pay better than a job she'll get with an education, which is kind of the way our society is generally.

We've got all kinds of data that we can supply to point out that having an education pays better than not. But on the other hand, there are jobs where you can go out and get that pay better than one you’re going to get in a lot of fields that require a degree or training. But that's part of it.

**MR:** You mentioned one-on-one counseling. The former head of the Extension Service said that one of the things that destroyed him was that they could see the farm prices happening, and they offered classes on debt management, but without working one-on-one with farmers on their individual situation, it didn't seem to help and they couldn't afford to do that. Do you think that is a problem, that you really have to have one-on-one instruction on debt management to really effectively work a farm?

**WN:** Yes, I think that probably that's true. I think that one of the things that we've had going that's been good are like the adult farm management where they've been able to do that, and there are some real good folks out there.

I think when a student gets into a college setting here, that becomes an issue, too, or even the ones that didn't get in here, but would call in and they just need to talk to somebody or they need some career advice. We were trying to supply a lot of it, but you can get to the point, especially when we were getting a lot of calls at some periods where, you know, we've got our full-time students here of which many of them are going through the same thing.

We had a lady in the dining hall who had like 12 or 15 young students who were working for her on their work study, and she said one weekend she happened to have time and every one of them is coming from a farm family that was going through a severe struggle.

Our counselors were very busy talking to those people, too. It’s hard to be able to deal much with outside callers coming in when you've got so much of it internally. But within a college setting there, at least, you're in a class. You talk to an instructor before class, after class, a lot of interactions between students, and I think that was healthy.

I think as far as the debt management one, that's probably individual entrepreneurs out there, and you can't just do a lot.

We did some legal issues classes, and a couple of them had as many as 60 people in there.
Those were absolutely fascinating because then they always went much later. They were suppose to get done and they'd keep going, and some of the people would leave, but then you'd get into the individuals telling some of the individual stories.

We really tried to be careful about getting it individualized because the attorneys who were teaching it were really uncomfortable about standing up there giving legal advice for--not for free wasn't the issue, it was just, you know, everything depends on something else.

"I can't tell you exactly because it depends.

It always sounded like they were wishy-washy, but they were saying, story. I've got to know all the issues, and it depends on this and that. you that that's the way it’s going to turn out."

But you could really see it in there. There was only a certain degree that you could go, and then it wasn’t any of any value unless they sat down individually. So, we tried to concentrate on things like: how do you go about finding a lawyer; how much can you expect to get for free; how do you find out if the lawyer really knows anything about farm issues or if they are just trying to say they'll experiment on you; how do you sort those things out; how do you know if you need a lawyer or not.

That was helpful because you could deal with generalities, and then they could give enough examples. Plus we'd bring in a lender or two, too, and give them a chance to explain from their point of view. I think it was real tense at times, but at least the farmers could say, "Well, I understand."

The guy is sitting there and he thought he had a tractor for collateral that was worth $20,000 and he comes out and finds out it’s an old beat up John Deere. He's been tricked.

Well, maybe I didn't do that, but I know a neighbor who did something just like that, and I think it kind of helped them see the bigger point of view. That's so much of it, helping people buy some time or standing back and looking at it saying, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe there's some more ways of looking at this." It isn't a simple right or wrong, black or white. Because I think that happens a lot in those families or happens in the coffee shop.

The husband is happy, sure it’s this way, and the wife is torn between wanting to say, "Yes, I know you're right. I'm going to support you no matter what."

And on the other hand saying, "Jeez, maybe that's not right. Maybe the lender is right on this one."
Or two farmers talking in the coffee shop, and they've always been friends and support them. Yet one of them is thinking, "I don't know, maybe, you're not right on this one." How are you going to tell someone, especially when they are struggling and losing everything you see? So I think we needed those types of opportunities.

The people who have come to the mini courses in part just to get out of their houses, and they would come and then they would say, "What's the next? I want to sign up for it." And it would be a matter of some mechanism to get away from the farm, to get Out. We had it where one family member would come because they couldn't get the other family members to come.

I had a call last week, a reference for one of them, a lady who just, they lost everything, and I remember when she and her husband came in and they were just both in tears. It was just trauma. I mean, it was just awful. So they both came to school here eventually. He didn't finish, but he managed to go out and start an insurance agency. He's doing all right, and some real estate. She poked along here and struggled a lot. But she did it; she finally graduated. For awhile she had a real negative attitude and would come across that way. So some things are really working against her in terms of getting a job.

(Tape blank for approximately ten seconds)

**WN:** …and just going nowhere. But by the end, she had turned into a pretty positive person, and even to the point where you could joke with her about the stuff and tease her a bit which you never would have been able to do in the beginning, you know, and encourage her, and "Now don't worry." It became to where you had to poke fun at her age a little bit just to get her to loosen up and not be so concerned about it. I saw her a week ago. She was doing something down in one of the groceries or one of these where they give out the free samples and doing great. It was kind of the last thing I would have saw her doing. It's a temporary job while she's looking for something else, but she's the first one right inside the door and just bubbly and happy and honking that stuff. I had just gotten a call from a place that had called as a reference on her. She's all excited about it and stuff, and I think she'll do all right. I had really given her a pretty positive recommendation, even though in the back of my mind, they were asking questions like, "How is she around people?"

And I kept thinking, "Well, it kind of depends. If she goes back to the way she was, she may not be that good around people. But on the other hand, I've seen her grow a lot in the capacity," and I was able to tell the people this somewhat. I gave a little bit about her background, and I said, "She started out pretty rough, but by the end she'd come a long ways. I tend to think she's going to keep going in that direction, and I think she might be okay for that kind of a job. I think I should be willing to give her a chance."

When I saw her, she was explaining what it was, and she was real excited. I felt good
because I did the right thing. I think she'll go on, and if she gets the job I think she'll do all right.

We have these curriculum planning guides which we have the curriculum laid out, this is what it’s supposed to be, and there are always a few changes, subs and ways and stuff. This lady, by the time she graduated, there was almost no resemblance to where it was originally started. She changed majors and advisors and eventually she had so many different people that had advised her. So finally I took her on because she'd always get into a conflict with them. By the end though, it worked out. I really got to like her. It really became a self-defined curriculum. She had a lot of experience in her life, a lot of life experiences that eventually, by the end, she was able to translate into the rest of her life and say, "Yeah, here's what I am, and here's where I'm going, and it all is part of a big system," instead of trying to hide parts of it which she was trying to do for awhile and trying to deny that they had lost this or that.

She had been remarried. She had two husbands that had died, and I she was able to put it into a bigger picture and say, "This is all my life, good or bad.” She even tried changing her name.

**MR:** We talked about individual debt management, but do you see people having a greater interest in putting a sharper pencil to the cash flows or more interest in alternative marketing.

**WN:** Yes.

**MR:** . . . more nontraditional ways of going about it?

**WN:** Yes, and I think that's probably a positive benefit of things like the mediation and all of that, too, and some of the work Extension has done and stuff. There used to be talk about that.

But I really believe that in a lot of cases the lenders, when it got down to actually demanding that farmers have cash flows were really willing to go by. Maybe they'd look at it and it’s on paper, but you weren't as concerned about it because you figured in the end it’s going to turn out okay. The prices keep going up and your land value is up.

I don't think that's happening anymore. They just can't afford to do it in part because the cost of failing gets higher now. There aren't as many failing because there aren't as many left. So when you fail now, you kind of stand out more.

I think it’s going to be less easy to get bailed out as it was, maybe, at certain times along the way where if you were even marginally in trouble somebody was coming along in a
white horse and you just happen to be in the right spot.

There were a number of the people in the diary buy-out that happened to just walk off great simply because they were at the right spot at the right time. They made a couple of good guesses on it, and then things worked out.

But that's not likely to happen anymore. So the penalties are higher for failing, but I think the skills at doing that just a lot have increased and the demand that it be done well.

I'm encouraged by the alternative crops and enterprises thing because I've heard so many people site the bad examples or the fears that they have that somebody's going to grow some weird crop, and then it isn't going to work. There have been things like that, but it hasn't been as bad. People have been more careful, and I think there are going to be more chances for success than failure. There are more people trying it on a limited basis.

We had an initiatives project, the Southeast Initiatives Project, in our division which one of my faculty members was helping people with new food products. We had some strange ones come through. Some of them were pretty good ideas, and others where we just flat out tried to tell them, "From everything we know, we don't think it’s going to work. The machinery isn't there."

If I even mention the example--that's probably the only guy in the state who tried growing this particular crop, and I think he's finally abandoned it. There were just so many reasons why it wouldn't work. On the other hand, we were trying to help encourage people and provide them with technical assistance and some educational help if they needed it and whatever.

But I don't think there are very many of those massive failure type things. There were a few that made it in the news where people were led to believe they could do a lot more than was realistic, but I think by and large it’s been pretty solid. People have been careful probably even more than they should have been. We probably should have been more risky and willing to try things.

But I think the financial planning skills have probably increased a great deal, and that's certainly going to be a positive benefit.

So I think historically you are going to be able to look back. If you could draw a time line like that and identify key things that happened, you're going to be able to look in the 1980s and say, "We changed into a new era there. Farmers, in fact, got very good at financial planning."

That's going to be a net outcome, just as there were other key things that happened. That may well turn out to be one of the major things that happened is the financial planning
skills and the sharpedness of the pencils or how sharp the pencils were.

**MR:** You hear people talking a lot about marketing clubs and that sort of thing. Is that something a passing fad, or is that here to stay as the agricultural system becomes more segmented and specialized?

**WN:** Maybe if you mention something as specific as a marketing club, that could be a passing fad, though not necessarily. I think if you look at it a little more broadly or generically and say marketing concept skills, perspectives, importance of marketing, I would say no, it’s not a passing fad. I think that people have gotten better at it and will get to be. It’s just that there are more techniques in doing it.

We had a lot of interest in marketing classes in the early '80s and then a lot of other people were doing them, too. Then all of a sudden they just dropped. People had no interest in it. Part of it was because people didn't need to know of them anymore because all you had to do was read the government programs. There was no particular value in knowing how to market anything.

That's been changing now and coming back into a more realistic thing. It’s not necessarily going to help become an expert at marketing either. Maybe what you need to know is just enough to be able to hire someone who is doing it on a daily basis or is part of a bigger network or stuff like that.

So I think it’s probably a more realistic thing than in the early '80s. You would run a class in the late '70s and farmers were learning a lot of these different techniques. If they thought they were actually going to make a lot of money off it, they probably weren't being realistic. But if they were just suddenly become geniuses at it and get rich in a hurry, I don't know if any of them really felt that, but in terms of a general approach to things, recognizing that marketing is important and there are a lot of different ways of doing it. No, I think it’s changed the way people think of that, too. But there's still a lot more to be done though.

I ran into a farmer here a while back who mentioned that--there are examples of good farmers who say, "I don't go to the experiment station or I don't take any classes because I don't think they really help me. I don't need it." And then they may say, "Well, of course, I'm not really doing anything in the winter. I suppose I could."

And we have others who place it as a very high priority. They, maybe, aren't going to come on a nice spring day when they've got to get the crop in the ground or on a fall day, but they will certainly be there on any other type of day. Even on a nice day, they might decide that it’s more important to come to a program, although they’ve already told us loud and clear not to schedule things on those days and we know enough not to do it. But there's a lot of them that are taking advantage of it which really makes you wonder how
the ones who aren't are ever going to survive. I don't think they even understand how good their competition is getting amongst other farmers because, in a way a lot of them are competing against each other. And it’s going to happen in the dairy industry. There are farmers who just don't realize how good some of their neighbors are at dairy farming.

At some point, the system is probably going to have to shake down where some dairy farmers are going to have to go. It just seems like it’s in society’s best interest for the dairy farmers, that the ones that stay, are the best ones, that are most efficient and well run. You can't very well argue a case for inefficient ones to stay at the expense of the better ones. So I think those people really need to understand that, that if their neighbors are getting better at it, then they either have to get better too, or accept the consequences.

**MR:** One final question is, I know you’re interested in future issues. Do you see any trends in terms of agricultural education or agriculture in Minnesota that started in the '80s that will continue on in the future?

**WN:** It’s probably a little bit hard to say whether or not they started in the '80s because…

**MR:** The timeline?

**WN:** Yes. Maybe they've been around longer, but I think a couple of them we've mentioned, though: understanding the importance of marketing, and financial management certainly is really crossing a threshold. I don't know that it’s really hit people's consciousness yet, but the biology one is just critically important. I think certainly it’s probably not going to affect things until the early 1990s, and something is going to have to happen because there's so many different technologies that are coming together that can impact things whether it’s the chemical end or reproductive biology or any of those types of subsystems of it.

I think maybe the thing of the leadership one which is a little harder one to--it's not clearly as visible, maybe, as the financial management or marketing, but either something will have grown out of what happened in the '80s, or else a few years down the road we will notice--maybe we won't even notice it--there will be a vacuum out there.

There will be positions on town boards and county commissioners and co-op boards that either will be suffering for lack of leadership or nobody on them or poor leadership or something. If we were really smart and could figure out what happened, we could probably trace it back to the '80s and say, "We lost a lot of key people. We lost the people who left the rural areas or left farming."

Women who are taking on some new roles and, maybe, would have ended up as county commissioners ten years later are nowhere to be found because they were pursuing other careers and stuff, or on the other hand, maybe, there will be a lot more women on there
because of these changes, too. But I think the leadership one, we'll have some interesting ramifications that will show up.

Again as I said earlier, I'm a strong believer that the new product development in ag concepts are going to turn up. The water quality and environment stuff, again, I think underestimating the significance of those, and the nutrition.

See, there are things even like the baby-boom concept which I don't think people think about as far as its impact on agriculture or rural issues, but it will turn out to have an a little ways down the road here.

People retiring in agriculture at least there's apparently quite a bit of data out indicating there’s going to be a shortage of trained workers in agriculture. We've seen the job demand has been strong here. We keep hearing that a lot of young people from getting into agriculture. So there can realistically be a job shortage.

Bird's Eye, here in town, is so short of employees that they have got a program that they are paying a bounty. They had already started that last year of paying an extra fee to come in.

But they've got a program now this summer where they've got 200 people that are going to be staying in our dorms. They've brought in a lot of them from Montana, college students. They are paying room and board and stuff like that. I don't know where, like these companies that have hired young people for detassling and a lot of those things, where they're going to get their employees.

But I think even in a town like this where you've got the fast foods and the Hy-Vees and that, there's big demand for people on the short-term jobs. So it’s going to have an impact. How long it will take us to trace the roots of this I don't know. I'm really encouraged by projects like this because I think it’s almost trying to capture history as it’s happening in an area where we're not used to doing that. Maybe we'll learn from it quicker because we really need that longer perspective.

The other one, too, I guess I would just add is the cooperatives thing. There's a lot of interest now on the national level on rural development using cooperatives as an approach, and I think that one is really going to expand and mushroom, and eventually people will be able to trace it back and as an outcome. It’s not real clear yet, but I think it eventually will be.

**MR:** What types of cooperatives do you have in mind?

**WN:** Everything from employee-owned companies or worker-owned cooperatives to new kinds of consumer cooperatives in communications in rural areas where there's satellite or
cable TV type things. There are some interesting ones going on in Wisconsin: veterinary clinics and pharmacies and retirement homes and recreation centers and things like that.

I think we'll see more individual businessmen forming and Associated Press and some of those things like that are. But I alternative business forms.

We were all taught in school there are proprietorships and partnerships and investor owned corporations and cooperatives. It's really not true anymore. There are variations of those. There are joint partnerships, for example, Cenex and Land 'O Lakes things. These are done on a bigger scale. But we'll see partnerships between private industry and public institutions.

We've got some of those types of things going on here, many of them on a fairly small situation is real hard to define. But some of the things that come out of the greater corporations should probably look like that, at least I hope they are able to be innovative up with different types of structures.

I don't think it's unrealistic to say that to go a long ways into the future and look back, we could see some major changes in our economic system that could be traced back to this, some new approaches. It won't be so much either/or. It's got to be one way or the other, the integration going on in agricultural, vertical integration, for example, and different types of systems.

There's a cooperative that we work with here closely that's tried a lot of interesting things. They are actually serving as a bank, for example I think the banks in town aren't that crazy about what they are doing, but farmers are actually able to invest money in the cooperative and then get it back out again almost like a bank system.

There are some fruit cooperatives out on the West Coast that are doing this fairly extensively through some different payment systems, and we may see a lot more of this sort of thing going on. But there are different approaches. Some will work and some won't. Eventually it will just become part of our system. It probably won't be anything real radical, but eventually it will look different.

We'll have to say, "Gee, when did it start? When did it change because it doesn’t look at all like it did 20 years ago."

I would guess that a lot of these things will we've been talking about primarily.

MR: So you see these cooperatives and alternative business forms as being part of the new rural development?

WN: Very much so, yes. I’m on a national task force that's been tracking legislative
[unclear] and some lobbying and I keep getting amazed by seeing that it’s showing up in a lot of different areas. Tim Penny has been involved in some things and Rudy Boschwitz.

It’s not only a bipartisan issue either. It’s sort of appealing to different ends of the political spectrum, from people who are traditionally liberals and see it as a way of helping address some of those issues that liberals like to think about, and people on the other end of the spectrum who would see it as a way to help protect and preserve the free enterprise system because, in a way, that’s what it is, too. It’s helping individuals survive economically and do better as opposed to government doing it. So it can appeal to both ends of it if people understand it which a lot of them don’t. So there's a need for education.

**MR:** Which is why you're here?

**WN:** Yes. That's why we have enough to do.