Interview with Anne Kanten

Interviewed by Dianna Hunter
Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project

Interviewed on June 6 1989
at her home near Hawick, Minnesota

Anne Kanten: AK
Dianna Hunter: DH

AK: We'll be having lots of nice birds in the background here.

DH: Anne, tell me a little bit about yourself. Who you are and where we are. For starters.

AK: Tell you who I am. Well, I guess I've been a lot of people in my life, Dianna. And today, in this place, I guess I'm more reflective, I'm more relaxed. You know, I've got dirt under my fingernails. I've been out in my garden. I sit and look at the trees, I walk in the woods. I have new neighbors that I'm getting to know and enjoy. And I'm trying to figure out what birds are all about. How they live and what they eat, and I have enjoyed that.

So it's a whole new piece of my existence, right now, that I'm still trying to balance, however, with a telephone that still rings, and meetings to go to, and still budgets to talk about, and ag policy to fret about and to be angry about, and to just keep busy with the ag issues along with a more contemplative life style.

DH: Okay, we're here at your country home near Hawick. Did I pronounce the town right?

AK: I think that's right. But that little town is a grocery store and a post office and a hardware--no, blacksmith shop. And I think people would relate probably much closer to this place if we said it was near New London and Spicer, up in the glacial ridge area, which is a fun, exciting, interesting part of Minnesota. It's lake country, it's very heavy tourist country. You go into New London on weekends, and that's a little town, but it is absolutely bustling. There are some interesting shops, and campers, and people, and visitors of all sorts
that come to this part of Minnesota in the summer time. So it's an exciting place to be.

DH: How far are we from your family farm?

AK: We're about one hour and ten minutes. Oh, just a little bit over an hour from the farm. The farm is west of Willmar, near the little town of Milan. And that's where our son Kent, his wife Kim, and my three grandchildren, now have taken over that operation.

And Chuck is still very much involved, helping Kent, particularly this summer since we've moved out here. But he's said he doesn't mind the drive back and forth. He goes back and forth in my little beat-up Volkswagen. And so that works well. And I think it's good that we're a little bit away from the farm. Kent is an excellent manager, an excellent farmer, and he certainly wants our help. But it's good that grandpa and grandma just sort of back off a little bit, I think too.

DH: And that's often a problem between generations.

AK: Uh-huh.

DH: How long did you farm, Anne?

AK: Chuck and I were married in 1952. And he took over his father's farm. And his father had received that land from his father. So Chuck and I were the third generation, and our son Kent is the fourth generation, and my grandkids the fifth, on that farm.

And we were there for thirty years. We were married in December of '52, and it was December of '82 that Governor Perpich called and asked if I would come to St. Paul. So we had thirty years on that farm.

DH: Governor Perpich called in '82, but that was after a pretty vigorous career already in farm issues for you, wasn't it? When did-how did that all start?

AK: I guess it started when I met Chuck. I'd grown up on a Iowa farm, but not really connected with the land. My mom and dad were immigrants, and when my father lost his business in the '30s, he had made a lot of investments, and many of those investments were in Iowa land. So when the banks closed and he lost a great deal of
money, he kept this little piece of land, and he moved us, as a family, out to that piece of land.

And I wasn't very happy about that. It was moving me out into a different community. It was an old broken down farmhouse. It was very, very hard for my mother. There was not running water, and it was cold, and it was—just very, very difficult times for us, when we moved to that farm.

And my Dad was sort of a gentleman farmer. He hired most of the work done, so we didn't own a lot of machinery. We'd milk some cows and we had a big garden, and so we survived, until 1941, when we moved to a much nicer farm, a larger farm, with a bigger home, and so then things were better.

But I had no real connectedness with land or with agriculture, or the farm. And I only saw it as someplace to leave. And because education was so important to my Mom and Dad too, they made sure that the four Knutson kids had higher education. And so the farm was someplace to leave, and it was some place that I wanted to leave.

And I went to St. Olaf College, and became a secondary school teacher. But it wasn't until I met Chuck that I began to understand what land was all about, because he could talk about a family history, intergenerational connectedness, and a kind of belonging to a place, which I never felt as a farm kid in Iowa.

And also, my roots were very, very deep in my faith, and in my church. It was a tiny church, sitting in the middle of an Iowa cornfield that gave my mother any sense of stability, in this new America, which she was having trouble with. Because this little church gave her language, and gave her a community, that was important to our family. So our whole society and our community was focused around that little rural church.

So my church was always important to me. So when I moved to Milan, Minnesota, and became a farmer, I began to look at the stewardship issue. What does it mean to be a farmer? What does it mean to be a steward of the land? What does it mean to be a part of creation? To participate, I think, in creation with the planting and the birthing of animals, and to deal with God's gift of land. How does this all fit together?
So some of my early speaking in agriculture, was just from the stewardship perspective. That we have a responsibility, a rather awesome responsibility as farmers, to care for this gift. And to produce food. For a world. Because I still see land as a very theological issue, and one that we as farmers have to take very seriously. I have a friend in Chicago who calls land "placenta." It's responsible for all life on this planet. And farmers need to think about that.

Well, anyway, in the speaking on stewardship, that went fine until 1976, when we had an absolute, devastating drought. Nothing grew. It reminded me of last year, of '88. And I remember preaching, on a Sunday morning, in Cottage Grove, Minnesota. They wanted a farmer to come and talk about a farmer's perspective on land issues. And in preparing that, it suddenly clicked in my head that the church needs to be concerned not only about the land, as gift, but the church also needs to be concerned about the people who live and struggle on that land. And who are hurt by drought, or hurt by political decisions. And that the church needs to also be in that area.

But when I took that message to my church—this was now in the late '70s—the church didn't quite know what to do with it. And so I—it was that reaction I think of the church that said, "Hey, maybe I better look at the political reaction. I need to look at where policies are made, and how they are made. And to help my family and to help me and help my neighbors and help my church understand more about this whole business of agricultural policy."

So it was really the church that got me going, and that moved me eventually into the political arena, and the soap boxing that I did in the name of the family farm.

DH: How did that change take place? Maybe can you give me just the story of it. How did you begin to get involved in the political arena, and about when was that, and what were the events that transpired?

AK: Okay. Well, first it had to happen in my head. I had to begin to ask a different set of questions. And to look for a different set of answers. So I went to my county library, and I said, "I need to read some books on agricultural policy, on the history of policy." What is it, in the first place? And how does it get made? And what is the
philosophical direction of this policy that we'd been living under in this country of ours? And why is it that in such a high risk business as agriculture, that if it fails for a year, why is there not enough resource in that business to keep a family going, and alive and well?

I went to my banker once and asked him, "How much of a return would you have to have on a high-risk investment?" And he said, "At least 25 percent." Well, as farmers back then, we were running at perhaps 1 or 2 percent return on our investment, and hardly that sometimes.

So I went to my library and began to read. And then in the fall of 1977--'77 was also a partial drought for us. We only had a part of a crop. And it was a time when also prices went down. We had come out of those glorious years of the early '70s when prices were good and we were going to feed the world, and it was fencerow to fencerow agriculture, a real positive hype in agriculture. But with the drought and then '77 when the prices went down, a lot of people began to wonder what was going on.

And I remember there was a meeting in Willmar of the three farm organizations. Farmers Union, Farm Bureau, and NFO had a meeting together, and invited all the farmers to come and to talk about what they had to offer farmers during some difficult times.

Chuck and I didn't go to the meeting. We were in the barn, making our Christmas sheaves. 'Cause it was a Saturday, and we had the three kids, we had our assembly line going, and we couldn't afford to spend the day at a meeting. But I listened to it on the radio. And it was nothing more than three farm organizations, again defending their political stance, their philosophy, and I didn't think really offering much to the farmer.

But at the end of that meeting, there were two fellows from Colorado, who got up to speak. And said, "It's time for a new grassroots farm organization. One where we don't care what your politics are, we don't care where you've come from before, and we will only have on agenda, and that is to keep families on their farms."

I liked what they said. But I got busy over the weekend, but I think it was on a Tuesday morning, a friend of mine called. A woman from up near Appleton, who had been in Willmar that Saturday, and she said, "Anne, we've got to talk about this new farm organization." And
she said, "A few of us are going to get together at the civic center in Appleton." And I think there were six of us. Six women, who got together and talked about this idea, and that this was something that we in Minnesota should pick up on, or what could we do to get some excitement going here and to get farmers interested in their own future.

And we just decided to call a meeting. And I remember I went home that night, and at dinner I told Chuck about the meeting we'd had in Appleton, and there was this new organization. And he said, "We are not going to join one more thing." He said, "We can't afford to chase around the country any more." And we had volunteered, you know, everything that a farmer does is volunteer. And we had volunteered to the limit. And Chuck said, "We just can't."

And I said: "Well, let's at least go to this first meeting. We've got to come along and listen, and just see who else comes, if this is something that we can get excited about."

And that's all it took. It just took Chuck and I together being at this meeting to know that this was something we could work with. That it was the kind of agenda that we thought was important.

And so that meant opening up a little office. In Appleton we tried to get a place that was rent free, or cheap, anyway. And it was a series of meetings, just getting farmers together. It was traveling around the state and speaking and talking about this new organization called the American Agriculture Movement.

And the agenda was: keep people on their farms, with parity prices for agriculture. So it was a simple message. And people responded to it. And I think '78, '79 and '80 were tremendously exciting years, when farmers really responded, too, in an attempt to change the direction of agricultural policy.

And it just meant being on the road, and doing a lot of speaking. And it also took us to St. Paul, to Washington, D.C. And everything was listening and learning and sharing, and just telling people what was going on in the heartland of the United States.

DH: How many people were actively doing that out at Appleton, or wherever, with American Ag?
AK: Well, there certainly was a core of very strong activists in the Appleton area, but there were groups all over western and northwestern Minnesota. We had a great deal of difficulty organizing in southern Minnesota. Land values were still very high down there. I remember walking into Congressman Hagdorn's office in Washington. He represented sort of southern Minnesota. The districts are a little different now than they were then. But when we went to see him, he almost threw us out of his office. He said, "I own land back there. Don't tell me there's a problem." He said, "My land is worth $3000 an acre."

Well, that wasn't the point that we were trying to make, I guess. And you didn't have to be very prophetic to see that there was trouble coming. Although there were a lot of farmers that didn't believe us back then, we were the doom and gloom folks. We were the radicals. We were a lot of things. And all we were doing was just being very honest.

DH: Anne, would you tell me a little more about that time? And maybe about your trips to Washington?

AK: Okay.

Well, in the fall of '77, there were quite a bunch of us that traveled around the state and held meetings. The real movers and shakers of the American Agriculture Movement were Colorado and Kansas and Texas and Nebraska. And it was decided that there would be a major lobbying effort, in January of 1978, in Washington.

And what we were trying to do then, was to write a new farm bill. Immediately. To get more money into agriculture. And we had a congressman by the name of Rick Nolan, who was tremendously helpful. I mean, he had been out in the fall of '77, and had rallies. I remember he spoke at a rally, I think it was in Madison, Minnesota, and we had, I'm sure, well over a thousand farmers there.

So it was to lobby in Washington in January. And there was quite a contingent of Minnesota farmers who went to Washington to participate in that. And so Chuck and I also wanted to go, so Paul Thompson at our local bank said, "Take the bank van. Put some farmers in it, and go."
And we did that, but we had another interesting passenger, by the name of Larry Long. Larry Long was sort of a vagabond singer, who traveled with his guitar, and wrote some songs for all sorts of causes. And in '77 he had been involved with the power line struggle. And had been spending some time in that area. And when he heard about the American Agriculture Movement, Larry was always concerned about land and those kind of issues. So he came down to Appleton, and needed a place to sleep and somebody to feed him. So he spent time at our house. And when we went to Washington we said, "Larry, you've got to go along." So we sang our way out there, through all the snowstorms.

And I remember arriving in Washington on that January morning. And we'd been driving pretty much through the night, and hadn't had much sleep. And didn't know anything about Washington. Had a terrible time figuring out where to leave the van. Walked a long ways and came up around the front of the Capitol, about mid-morning, and saw, I don't know, maybe thirty thousand farmers. And it was just overwhelming.

And I remember Chuck giving me a big hug and just saying, "We are not alone."

And if the American Agriculture Movement had not done anything else, one of its gifts were the fact that it brought people together, and it said, "You are not alone." It's lonely for farmers out on those tractors, because you think and you wonder what you've done that is wrong, and how you failed, and what could have been done differently.

And then to realize that there were farmers from Montana, and the state of Washington, and Florida, and Texas, and New York, all the heartland states, and they were all there. And they all were hurting, and they were all frustrated. And just to know that we were all there together, that we were there as Farm Bureau, and we were there as Farmers Union and we were there as NFO, and as Republicans--in fact, we didn't even ask who we were or what we stood for. We just knew that we had an agenda to keep families on their farms.

And we lived in Rick Nolan's office. He had an ag aide by the name of Randy Henningson, who had his Ph.D. in ag economics. And Randy was brilliant. And between he and Rick Nolan, we worked on
legislation. And Randy was farm kid from Ortonville, who cared so deeply about these issues, too. And he educated ag aides from all the other offices, and we just had a tremendous kind of charisma and excitement going in Washington, because we had made a commitment as farmers that we weren't just going to go and go home, because legislators always say, "well the farmers are in town. Just be nice to the farmers because they're all going to go home pretty soon." And we decided we weren't going to go home.

And so we set up a schedule, where farmers from each particular state would stay so many days. And then another group of farmers would come in, so there was a presence in those halls in Washington. Those wonderful farm hats always were there in the hallways, and in the offices, and always talking about the issues.

That was '78. Chuck spent an awful lot of time down there. I was home. Becky was in high school, and Eric was just first year at college. And Kent was at Kandi Vo-Tech.

But there was a strong, a strong contingent of farmers. And I also worked at the office in Appleton. That was the state office of the American Agriculture Movement. And it was there that I met Elmer Benson, the former Governor of the state of Minnesota, back in the '30s. And Elmer would come down to that office every day, and we would talk.

And he knew history. He knew Roosevelt. He was a Senator during Roosevelt's time. And he knew so much political history, so much agricultural history, and I just grew to love Elmer Benson. I mean, we talked, had coffee, and talked for days and weeks during the winter of '78, and certainly through all that year.

And then we decided that we need to have a more profound visibility in Washington. We had to make a greater statement than we had--

DH: This come out of your talks with Elmer? Or the group decided?

AK: No, I don't--it wasn't just--no, it wasn't just Minnesota that made the decision. Out of all these states that were involved in the American Agriculture Movement, there were representatives from each state, who served on a national steering committee. And it was out of that group that the decision was made, that we're going to take
our tools, the tools of our trade, to Washington, D.C. We're going to take our tractors.

And the wagonmaster—the genius, putting that whole thing together, was a rancher from Texas. And I think that that tractorcade of January 1979 was probably one of the most profound historical events that the Kanten family has ever been involved in.

DH: What was it like to be there?

AK: Well, it was extremely well organized. So that the farmers came from all parts of the U.S. The routes were laid out, the highway patrol was assisting in all this, on where to go and how to go and how we should converge. Our son Kent decided that he would drive the old John Deere. And Chuck would go along with the pickup, sort of as a supply person, carrying the things that they would need along the way.

And the tractors that were to come from our immediate area were to meet in Appleton, on an early morning in January. I can't remember—it was one of the early days in January. And I remember going up that morning, and I could sense that Kent was a little bit scared. And he really wondered: "You know, Mom. Drive that tractor all the way to Washington, D.C. Are we ab-so-lutely crazy?"

We went, and we had breakfast in the cafe in Appleton, and just a lot of people came, and we had just a good old send-off. I mean, it was a celebration, with speeches and songs, and the guys climbed on their tractors. And there were six tractors from Appleton-Milan that went. And they were to go south. And around Sioux Falls pick up the Dakota, Montana and Wyoming tractors, and were then to form in their line. And then they would later pick up Nebraska and Kansas, and --I don't know. It was all beautifully strategized and laid out.

And then I stayed home and ran the office in Appleton, while they were on their way. But it was the telephone conversations and the excitement those guys felt, driving those tractors, the support they felt as they moved along. And then Elmer and I were at home base.

And then just before they were to go into Washington, D.C., Becky and I flew out. Eric was at Augsburg, and he just didn't think he could miss school. So Becky and I flew out, and met them.
So that morning that the tractors went in, Becky was in the tractor with Kent, Chuck and I were in the pickup. The tractors converged from six different areas, into the city.

And we were told that there would be police at every intersection. That we should not stop for red lights. They just wanted us to move, to get us out of the traffic pattern as soon as--as quickly as we could. But it didn't all go so smoothly. There were little harassments along the way.

DH: Like what?

AK: Like policemen stopping us. Trying to foul us up and to let other traffic in, and the--see the farmers had CBs, so we could talk together. So we made a decision, when a line stops, or is broken, then everybody stops.

And--now, we were convinced that this was not so innocent, that there was a strategy to discredit us, and what we were trying to do. But we got the tractors through, and of course there were people in Washington that were very upset, because of all the nonsense that went on. That they just would have let us do what we were supposed to do, and what the police and the highway patrol had told us to do, it would have gone much better. But there were delays, and there were harassments along the way.

We got to the mall, and then they ordered us to park on the grass at the mall, and we said, "No." We were told that we were to park on the cinder paths. We'd figured it out. There was enough room. We knew where we were supposed to be. And the police got very nasty. Ordered us to park on the grass. And so there were some tempers that got short.

And I don't think Washington knew what to expect. I think they were afraid of tractors. There were all kinds of rumors saying that we had filled our tractor tires with gasoline and we were going to blow up the city. And we'd all stopped in Philadelphia and bought hatchets, or whatever. I don't know. But there was anxiety, that people didn't look at us as farmers who had come with our tools. But had really been frightened by these big machines that came through the traffic. And that made it difficult.
But our agenda was still to park the tractor and lobby. We had a full day agenda of appointments to lobby that day.

DH: There was a rally too, wasn’t there?

AK: Oh, yes.

DH: Did you speak there?

AK: Oh. I guess I spoke at many different places. Yes. Yes. Even at the Washington Cathedral. They wanted to know what these crazy farmers were up to in Washington. So there was—and we had to do that, for our own morale, and to keep our own energy up.

And we had a headquarters, we had a base, an office. And there was also a Lutheran Church, that sits just off the Mall. And every night a 6 o’clock we would meet in this church. They opened up the church for us. And then we would get assignments, and then there would be reports. You know, what went on today? Who did you see? What offices did you got to? What kind of a reaction did you get? Where do we go tomorrow?

So there were assignments, and so it was a structured event, that I give farmers all the credit in the world for. And I was never prouder to be a farmer, ‘cause a farmer could go into a Senate office—they went to the money people. The federal--

DH: Reserve?

AK: Yeah. The Federal Reserve Board. And to a lot of very prestigious places like that. And the farmers could hold their own. I mean, the farmers knew what was going on. And the farmers, I think, have a breadth of knowledge that is really quite remarkable.

And I still think that the American Agriculture Movement sort of skimmed off the cream of the crop. I mean the quality, the intelligence and the ability of those farmers was absolutely exceptional. And I was very proud to be a part of that.

DH: Had you been active in political events. You mentioned being active in the church, and talking about stewardship. How did you learn to do all this lobbying? Was that just sort of play it by ear? Or did somebody have some knowledge that helped you?
AK: I guess, maybe I was naive. Like a lot of the farmers were. We just simply thought that if we went to Washington, and told the story, and told the truth about what was happening, that we could change things. We simply thought that maybe those folks in Washington really didn't know, what was going on out here, and all we had to do was to tell them and they would fix it. It was that kind of naivety I think that most of us as farmers had.

And I still think that's the proper way to lobby. That you go and you tell your story, and you tell it honestly and truthfully to the best of your ability. That's what it means to lobby. And we didn't have any training sessions or anything. We simply went to tell the story.

DH: When you talk about that naivety, you almost talk like you were wrong, though. That Washington did know what was going on, and it wasn't just a simple matter of you telling the story. Is that what you think now as you look back on it, or what?

AK: No. In a sense, I don't think people in Washington knew what was going on. At least a lot of them didn't know what was going on. But whether or not they knew what was going on, didn't make any difference. Because there was a sense of where we want our agricultural policy to be in this country. Which means cheap food. Cheap raw materials. Increase in exports. And what this does to people, and what this does to community, didn't seem to be important to anybody.

And that's what really hurt. That somehow there were voices bigger than ours. When we walked out of those offices there were other voices that came in, and said, "This is what we have to do as a nation, to keep our exports in line, and to be able to keep our competitiveness, and to keep the raw material cheap in this country. And what that does to farmers is beside the point."

DH: Who were some of those voices?

AK: Well, sadly to say, some of our own political people were part of those voices, who are--who listened to corporate business, international traders. People who have certainly not wanted to change our policy.
If across the board, if our whole economy had been hurting these last eight years like the farmers have been hurting, I think we would have changed some things. But the thing is, that there were an awful lot of people that benefited from what’s been going on these last eight years, and have benefited from the price—from the fact that the price of raw materials has been kept very low. And they didn't want to change anything. They liked it the way it was.

DH: You mean like manufacturers who get the product and then add value to it by some kind of processing to sell it?

AK: Absolutely. Absolutely.

You’re getting warm in the sun here.

AK: -- presence in Washington was very, very educational, for the farmers. To go to the hearings, and to listen to the policymakers, and the economists, and the debates that went on.

But in Rick Nolan’s office, we had the flexible parity bill that we had worked on, and that we were lobbying for. And in the House of Representatives, when that came to an actual vote, the day that the vote was to be taken, we thought we had it won. In fact, the Washington Post had already written the story that the farmers won. But we lost it by one vote. And the reporters themselves were surprised by that, because we had done our work well, and we thought we had counted right, and something happened.

But I’ve often wondered, to lose by so little, how many more farmers would it have taken if we would have had one more congressman on our side? What if we had gotten some more farmers from southern Minnesota? What if we had gotten some more from Iowa? You know? To come so close on a parity bill, just to get parity back in farm legislation, would have been very significant, I think.

DH: Now parity is almost forgotten.

AK: That's right. We don't even talk about it any more. It's such a low percentage of parity now, it runs between 40 and 50 percent.

And the economists, never wanted to talk about parity, because they didn't think it was an accurate way to measure. Because they say we produce more corn and more wheat per acre now than we did back
then. But we also know that that formula does allow for those sorts of changes. So, as farmers back then, we didn't give up. We kept talking about the parity issue.

But the tractors eventually had to go home. Although they had their presence there for several months. And Washington then was a much more relaxed place than it is today. You know farmers had their sleeping bags and they used to sleep in the USDA building.

DH: Is that right?

AK: In the hallways, or in empty rooms, or whatever. And today, you have to--there's guards and police, and you have to identify yourself and have passes, and all sorts of things. I mean Washington is a totally different place now, than it was back then. And that is really disappointing, I think, that things have changed that much.

But I think the farmers were so disappointed. We had put so much money, so much energy into '78 and '79. We did continue to work into 1980. There was still a presence in Washington, and farmers continued to move out and in. We established an American Agriculture Movement permanent office, that is still there. And Jim Nichols says that today--that is the American Agriculture Movement still has a real presence in Washington. There are still farmers that come and go, and work out of that office. We have an office in the Methodist Building, which is right on Capitol Hill.

Jim Nichols—who really had problems with me when I first came to the Department of Agriculture, because he didn't know about women, and he also didn't know about these radicals out of the American Agriculture Movement--now says that that office in Washington is the best, the best source of information, probably the best agricultural lobbying office that there is on Capitol Hill. So that has always made me feel good.

And the movement is very positive and visible in most of the states. In Minnesota, we are not so active. I think that that core of people, that really were the energy and the genius behind it at the beginning, I think just plain got tired. And so there are some new faces, and some new people in the movement now, but it does not have the energy that it had before.
And somehow—Lou Anne and I have been trying to figure out, you know, what we can do to sort of bring interest and energy back. And last Thursday I talked to a reporter, who has spent much of her life in Washington. And she's doing some work for the Smithsonian, that in the summer of 1990, there is going to be an emphasis on Agriculture and Food Production through the Smithsonian Museums. They want to have a little farm on the mall. And they're doing some filming, from the heartland, to tell the stories. Some of the ag hearings, Senate and House hearings, will be held on the mall.

And I said, "Diana, you know you can't do that in Washington, without the presence of farmers." So, we're going to try to figure out how to get some farmers out there, for the summer of 1990. Because a part of that—a part of the hearings that will be discussed on the mall, of course, will be the new Farm Bill.

And what is so significant now, is that we used to think that we could affect policy by going to St. Paul. And then we thought we could affect it by going to Washington. And now we discover that we have to go to Geneva. We have to look at what is going on at the GATT negotiations.

And there was a real question this winter and this spring, whether we would really even write our own agricultural policy. It might be international policy, that's sort of even taken out of the hands of the U.S. Congress. And that has been a concern for farmers.

But I think there is a sense now that Congress has to take that initiative. So there will be hearings in the summer of 1990. So we got to figure out how to get the farmers back, more actively, back into that process, and to be visible in Washington next summer.

DH: You just mentioned Lou Anne. And I think we kind of chronologically skipped your meeting with Lou Anne. Or maybe I'm wrong on that. When did you meet Lou Anne? Tell me that story.

AK: Okay. I'm not exactly sure about the first time that I met Lou Anne. She was not involved in the American Agriculture Movement. I mean, I didn't know Lou Anne any of that time. I wish I would have. But it was later on that Lou Anne became concerned about what was happening again to her family farm, and to some of her neighbors, and what was happening with policy, and the fact that we were being told consistently that the problem was that farmers
produced too much. And that if we somehow didn't produce so much, the price would go up. Well, there is some sense and there is some value in that, but the problem is much deeper than supply and demand. I think we've come to learn that.

But Lou Anne said, "if the problem is we produce too much, let's not produce so much." So she had this idea that we ought to take our plows out there and just plow down some of our wheat field. We called it the plow down, and she did articles in the paper, and I think did some speaking, asking farmers to participate in the plow down. And I thought that anything that a farmer does to change farm policy or to give us greater income is worth attention. So the Kantens plowed down some of their wheat field.

And the morning that Lou Anne had called a press conference out in her wheat field, we went down and joined in on that press conference. And that was probably the first time that I really had a conversation of any depth or meaning with Lou Anne. But it was a time for farmers to hang together, and to say something together. But I knew that Lou Anne was certainly something special. Her tenacity, her commitment, to try something, and her ability to deal with the media and to tell her story, I think, was very significant.

And that was, of course, before I went to St. Paul. And then when the crisis began to deepen, and Lou Anne helped the neighbor with his FmHA records, and then helped the second neighbor, and then helped the third neighbor, and eventually went up to northwest Minnesota to help a group of people up there, that was when we began to talk about this idea of farmers helping farmers. And could we find some money in the department to help do that, and could we then give those farmers some training and some expertise to help that become a reality? So that's how the Farm Advocate Program was born.

DH: We haven't talked at all about that rally in St. Paul, that farmers held. Were you involved in that? I may be getting my years mixed up, but didn't that come before your appointment?

AK: Well, there were a number of rallies. We rallied in St. Paul in December of 1977. That was my first trip to the state Capitol. When we went to St. Paul with trucks and tractors, and it was 20 below zero. The Governor was out of town. But we had busloads of people
that came. We had two busloads out of Milan. And that was the first rally, that I remember in St. Paul.

But then there were certainly other rallies after Groundswell became active. It was America Ag and Groundswell, and some of the people who worked together and brought as many as 10,000 farmers to Washington. And that's—that was after I was at the Department of Agriculture.


AK: Oh, no. This was St. Paul. This was St. Paul.

DH: Okay. Let's see. We might have skipped some items chronologically.; I'm not sure. But you started talking about the beginning of the Advocate Program. That came after your appointment. Why don't you tell me about your appointment. Were you expecting to be appointed Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture for Minnesota?

AK: I was not terribly involved in the politics, in the political mainstream of Minnesota at all. In fact, Chuck and I sort of struggled as to what we were politically. I somehow got the message as a kid growing up, that politics was kind of a nasty business. And nice folks didn't dabble too much in that kind of stuff. And I remember at St. Olaf there was an active Republican club, Young Republicans, and there was an active DFL club, and I thought, "That's not for me." I wasn't ready for that.

And even after we lived at Milan, we used to take turns going to caucuses. Sometimes we'd go to Republican ones, and sometimes we'd go to Democrat ones. And sometimes each of us would go to a separate one. And we were just sort of floundering through this, not quite knowing--and this was because we didn't understand agricultural policy, and that whole arena.

But with the American Agricultural Movement, this began then to make some sense in my head, and I was figuring out where I belonged, politically. And I certainly belonged in the Democratic party. There was a sense that there was more concern for people. And certainly during the Roosevelt time there would have been great amount of thought and energy put into helping farmers from that Democratic perspective.
But I just got a little more politically smart after being in Washington and listening to which side was saying what. So when Rudy Perpich decided to run for Governor, I went to a couple of meetings where he was, and asked some questions, what he stood for, what he thought about farmers, what he thought about the minimum price bill, which was another piece of legislation that the American Agriculture Movement was supporting.

It was in, I think, October, of the fall of '82, before the election, that there was to be a huge rally, bringing farmers and labor together. All the Iron Rangers were coming to St. Paul. And I got a call on the telephone and said, "Anne, bring some farmers to town." And there was to be rally in the Prom Ballroom.

And I don't know, Dianna, how this even fits together, but somebody in St. Paul called me and asked me if I would get some farmers together, and if I would make a little speech in behalf of farmers at this rally, at the Prom Ball Room. And I said, "Sure."

So it was a difficult time. It had been very, very wet. The fields were full of mud. Farmers were trying to harvest their corn, and harvest their sugar beets, and it was a mess. And I remember it was difficult to tell those farmers you have to leave the fields and go to St. Paul. They said, "You're crazy."

So there weren't a lot of farmers, but I did get some farmers to go to St. Paul. And I did make a little speech. And on the platform was Governor Perpich, and Joan Growe, and all the DFL candidates. And I don't know for sure, but that might have had something to do with Perpich at least knowing who I was.

I had also met the Lieutenant Governor. We had a rally in Montevideo, that summer. That we brought several thousand farmers to Montevideo, to listen to Wayne Cryts, and some other American Agriculture Movement people. And the Lieutenant Governor was there. Of course, I didn't know who the Lt. Governor was. But she got me off on a little park bench. And we talked about some issues that day, too.

So there were a number of those little pieces that perhaps came together, but I had no political aspirations. I certainly was not looking for a job away from the farm. So when Governor-elect
Perpich's office called that first Saturday afternoon in December, I was totally, absolutely, flabbergasted. I didn't know what to say. I just said, "I don't know. You have to give me some time to think about that."

But it was one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made in my life. To decide to leave the farm. To leave, not knowing where Chuck would be. Would he be in Milan and I would be in St. Paul? You know, what—but to leave the farm and live in the city, and sit at a government desk, was extremely difficult for me to even think about. But it was the right time in history.

Rebecca, our youngest, was off to college. So my kids said, "Mom, you've got to do it." And Chuck said too, "Anne, when the Governor calls you have to take that pretty seriously."

But I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't eat, and I couldn't bake my Christmas cookies, and I was--I just had a very difficult time with that. And it was a friend—Anita Adderly, who sits on the Public Utilities Commission, who wrote me a letter. And she'd heard about what the Governor had done. She wrote me a letter, and she said "Kanten, it's time for you to put your life where your mouth has been." And that really haunted me. And I ended up saying, "Yes."

But I still remember the day that Chuck and I came to St. Paul to look for an apartment and all. And I just wanted to say, "Chuck, let's just go home and forget this whole, ridiculous idea." Just--

But Nichols and I had several meetings. And I said, "Jim"—nobody talked about what the job was. It was only, "Will you do it or will you not do it?" And I said to Jim, "What am I supposed to do?" So he got out this chart, of the Department of Agriculture, which I had never seen before in my life. And he said, "Well, this is your job, and all the regulatory divisions are under your desk.

And I said, "Oh, no." I mean its rules and regulations, and law? I said, "Jim, I don't know what that's all about." He said, "You'll learn."

But my salvation was that each of those divisions and the regulatory part of the Department of Agriculture, are headed by six of the most magnificent gentlemen I've ever met in my life. The people who are the technicians, and who are the experts, and who know the law, and
who know the regulations, and they were just wonderful to work with.

Although they had some apprehension too, because when my name was released to the press, The Minneapolis Tribune printed a story saying "Radical Farm Woman Appointed to Department of Agriculture."

So the people there didn't know what kind of a crazy lady is this, and what does she stand for, and what's she going to do when she gets here? And so it was building trust, in a number of ways. But it was six of the most exciting, learning, excruciating, years of my life. I'm very glad I did it.

DH: It must have been something like slamming into a brick wall. Because you were coming from this really creative, politically active role, which you couldn't really play as a government employee. You had to be much more fair-minded and even-handed to fit that role. How did that feel for you? What was it like?

AK: Well, it was two different hats. In dealing with the regulatory people, certainly it was to acquaint myself with the rules and regulations and the law, how this all worked. But always, always, always to remember: How the farmer fit into this.

And I think that's what's been so important at the Department. That when you write new rules and regulations about grain, or dairy, or agronomy, that you remember that what you're doing is dealing with families, and farmers, and agriculture, and people's lives, and peoples' future. And I don't think I ever forgot that. I don't think I ever compromised what I believe and what I thought, about the whole of agriculture and its future in Minnesota.

And Jim Nichols didn't require me to do that. He gave me an awful lot of latitude, to be who I was. Still to travel and to speak, and to say what I thought was good and right. And that never changed. My heart and my gut stayed the same, as I sat at that desk for six years.

DH: Maybe this is a good time to talk about the beginning of the Advocate Program. That seemed to me to be one way that you did make sort of manifest your concern for the farmers and their families.
DH: How did the beginnings of the Advocate Program come about, from your point of view?

AK: Okay. I kept in touch with Lou Anne, when I sat at that desk. And Lou Anne began to tell me about the kind of work she was doing out here with farmers. And how difficult the '81 Farm Bill had really made agriculture. The fact that the focus was to lower the price, and that the rules and regulations of the lending institutions, the rules and regulations for ASCS, RSCS and Farm Credit and everything else were getting very complex. And that farmers desperately needed access to information.

FmHA was beginning to make some tough moves on farmers, and farmers needed help. And farmers saw Lou Anne, someone who had the common sense and the intelligence, and the compassion, to help them. But Lou Anne said, "I don't know enough about this, either. I need access to information. I need help."

But then what began to sort of spin around in our heads, was the fact that there were farmers who needed help, who first of all didn't want to admit it, and those who would even admit it found it very difficult to walk through a professional door to get help. They found it very difficult to walk into a county extension office, or even to share with their lender what was going on. Or many of them couldn't even share with their spouse, or their own kids what was going on. So there was the beginning of a lot of pathos that was going on out there.

But it seemed easier for that farmer to pick up the telephone and to call Lou Anne Kling. So the idea that maybe we ought to "clone" Lou Anne Kling, and then equip them with some knowledge, seemed to be a credible idea. And I remember going to Jim Nichols about it. And he thought that was kind of a political hot potato.

And so it's like how you do a lot of things when you work with men. That you sort of sow the seeds and let them meditate on them a little while.

And then I remember talking to Senator Stumpf. It must have been when Stumpf had come over for a meeting, or something. And he really grabbed on to that idea. Because it was his part of the state
that was really hurting. And so I said, "Well, you've got to talk to Nichols, too. Let's just kind of get something brewing here a little bit."

DH: Stumpf is from northwest Minnesota?

AK: Right. And he did talk to Jim. And we thought, "Well, maybe it's worth a try." Jim says "I've got $50,000." Couldn't find $50,000 today in the Department. But back then. He said, "We'll come up with $50,000, and you and Lou Anne get some farmers in here. Let's give them a training session, in the Department. And then maybe for a month or six weeks, let's have them help other farmers."

I said, "You bet."

So, we called--I called different organizations. I said, "Do you know a farmer that, first of all would have the compassion to help another farmer? Who'd be willing to spend time in doing that? Who'd come to St. Paul and get themselves trained to do that? And help farmers in this state for about six weeks?"

Jim made it very clear it was to be a kind of volunteer job. He said, for instance, 20 hours a week, 5 bucks an hour, and we'll pay some expenses. We'll put some gas in the tank, and we'll pay your telephone bill.

So, with that in mind we had our first training session. And I should go back and even look at who was on that agenda. I know Lou Anne certainly was. Mark Ritchie was a part of that agenda. I got to know Mark through some of the work of the American Ag. And Mark was and is a genius. Mark knows just about everyone in this globe.

So Mark was a part of that training session. And we had farmers in Conference Room A at the Department of Agriculture, sort of wall-to-wall farmers that day, who had come to be trained. And that was the beginning. And they had, I think, two days of training. And we sent them forth.

And I remember the people in the Department being so impressed by the fact that those farmers stayed in Conference Room A, hour after hour after hour after hour, and stayed after everyone else went home, and just stayed, to be trained.
Then we did some PR. pieces. We sent out a press release. We got it hooked up with the Attorney General’s hotline, so that people could call in, and be referred to an Advocate.

But I think what I remember perhaps even the most was after they had worked for about a month, we called them back to St. Paul. There were a zillion questions. There were a zillion different cases. They needed some updating, they needed some advice from an attorney.

So we brought them back to St. Paul, and they were at the Capital Holiday Inn. And I remember one of the first sessions was just to go around the room and tell us what you're doing, are you busy, what kind of stories do you have to tell, and what's happening? And I remember standing in that room, listening. And the stories were absolutely incredible. And the only thing I could say or think was "We've asked too much of these people." 'Cause they weren't working the twenty hours, you know, and their phones were ringing all times of night and day, and people or farmers were coming. And it was just one difficult story after another.

And there were farmers who couldn't take the pressure. So there were a number of Advocates who left. They just couldn't handle it. And of course, when the six weeks were over, we had a zillion problems to deal with.

And so, the idea then was that we have to have some funding. We have to keep this program going. Because by that time it was—we were looking at '84. The depth of the crisis. So it was decided that we would go to the legislature and ask for funding.

So that's how it came to be. And then this nucleus of people who still carried the commitment, we continued to train them. And we went to the legislature, and we fought for money. And it was tough. We had a lot of political kind of questions, who wondered what in the world those Advocates were about. Was it just Anne Kanten's political organizing? Or what was going on here?

But to take a bunch of farmers, so-called "non-professionals," and expect them to have the expertise to help other farmers. It was just tough to sell legislatively. And I took an awful lot of criticism, and it made me angry. But the legal aid attorneys, Humphrey's office--
DH: The Attorney-General?

AK: Attorney General. Some of the lenders, some of the bankers, began to say: "Hey! These Advocates are really doing something. They are helping the farmer to come into a lender's office with papers in order. Knowing what was to be negotiated. What they were willing to negotiate. It was saving lenders time. And it was getting the farmers to get their records in order. And there were some good things that were beginning to percolate out of this program.

And since then we have increased our budget, we have indeed, again, increased the number of Advocates. It has become a model for many, many other states. We have received Willie Nelson money. We have done a lot of good things. We've gotten Bremer money for training. I think it is recognized as one of the best and most popular programs to come out of the crisis of the '80s.

But that doesn't mean that it is always easy again to handle legislatively. I mean, this year again we had a problem. Because there was a sense that, after all, we're kind of out of this crisis now, and maybe we don't need that program anymore.

But the Advocates are a most wonderful bunch of human beings, that I think you could ever put in a room. Because they are so dastardly smart and intelligent, is one thing. But their commitment to help other farmers is most remarkable. And I feel very, very good, that I had a bit of a part in putting all that together.

DH: You've been known to give a few soul-stirring speeches at Advocate meetings, too, to help keep that spirit going.

You know, here we are in 1989. Ten years of crisis are even--going to start in '77. Twelve years of crisis. And a lot of people do have the impression that the farm crisis is going away. Do you think it is?

AK: No. I'm not sure the farm crisis will ever go away.

DH: Why's that?

AK: That is because we are a dwindling population of food producers in this country--that agricultural policy, the way that we look at it now, is a new international kind of perspective, where we
are one of many, many players. And it's a world where corporate voices are getting, I think, stronger. More powerful. Just because the large are gobbling up the less large.

And food is still probably the most, the most important economic entity, that any, any power can try to control. Because that's where profit is. That's where the big bucks are in the international arena. And as farmers we are being forced further and further from that arena.

And we tend to just want to do our own business. We want to go out in the spring, and we want to smell the good clean dirt, and we want to plant the seeds, and we want to care for them, and we want to harvest them, and we'd like to take them to the market, and have enough left in our pocket to take care of our families.

And somehow, in this international agenda, that isn't always important. That what they want are shiploads and trainloads of cheap grain. Or they want cheap peas and broccoli, or whatever else. So that is can be processed and moved into the market for a profit.

And as long as farmers are that kind of naive entity in the process, we'll always have a problem. And we have always had a problem. You read books on the history of ag policy and economics. Agriculture has always been a problem.

Part of that is our own doing. Because we are split politically and philosophically, and we speak with so many voices. To go to Washington and lobby, we found it much easier there to lobby an urban congressman. If you talked to a congressman from New York, or Chicago, or Los Angeles, who understands profit and loss, who understands the importance of having food, we found them much more receptive.

But if you talked to a congressman from Iowa, or Kansas, or western Minnesota, who is lobbied by different farm organizations, and who is lobbied by the different grain commodities, and lobbied by all the different food processors. I mean, they don't know who to believe. They listen to all these voices, and they try to sort them out, but then how do you decide whose philosophy you're going to support when you push that green button to vote? Somehow farmers need to speak together, share together, what our vision of the future is. And we haven't done a very good job of that.
DH: I've never heard that analysis before, of having it be easier to deal with a legislator who is from the urban area rather than from the rural. That's an interesting observation.

When you speak about international agriculture, you speak from experience, too. You've been to Brazil; you've been to Africa; you've been to Norway. Probably I've left out some place. If not more than one. Could you tell me about your travels?

DH: I think you told me once it was a trip to Africa that got you started in being interested in stewardship. Or at least it gave you a forum to speak from, I think were the words you used.

AK: Right. Chuck and I went to Africa in January of 1975. We really went as what were called lay mission observers from our church. It was a new program where they asked lay people to go and look to see what the church was doing in these places. And then to give a lay person's critique of what we thought that was. Which meant that when we got back home, Chuck and I spent two years traveling around Minnesota and talking about Africa--what we had seen and our interpretation of what we had seen.

And because Chuck and I are farmers, we looked at certainly what the church was doing with the gospel, but also what the church was doing with agriculture, and then our interpretation of what the African farmer himself was doing.

Our first place was Tanzania. And it is--it is a cultural shock, to go and visit those kinds of villages. And I know to visit the Massai, in Tanzania, I mean, it was so exciting. And I really love those people. It was--it wasn't the sense--you know, I've been afraid in the big cities here, in this country, sometimes. But I wasn't afraid in Africa.

To be in the culture, Chuck and I sometimes the only American, white faces. But it was a wonderful sharing time. And we visited their farms where they grew their vegetables and their bananas and their corn in Tanzania, which was their main grain crop. And wherever we went, we were always asked if we would come back and stay. "Would you come back and help us to be better farmers?"

The struggle of what goes on as peasants on an African farm, I constantly made the analogy between what goes on there and what
goes on here. For instance there was a sense that to be on the land in Africa is to be peasant, it is to be poor, it's to be, many times, woman's work. Women are the agriculturalists.

And I relived some of my own feelings that I felt, as an Iowa farm kid, and as a Minnesota farmer, that we, too, are viewed as peasants. And that somehow it isn't important that we make the same kind of income as the rest of the citizens in this country make. If you look at the figures, we've been behind most times.

So there was a closeness. And whenever we spoke through these interpreters, and we said "We are farmers," I mean, there was a bond. Right away. From their perspective, too.

So it was just the struggle. It was the struggle with drought, and it was the struggle with disease and with bugs, and it was the struggle of how to get fertilizers, and how you paid for it. It was a struggle of how you get your commodities to the market. It was a struggle of being ripped off in the market place. I mean it was the whole agenda. Certainly on a different economic level than we experience in this country. But the problems are exactly the same.

We went to South Africa, where we saw the rich wealth of the white farmer in South Africa, who grew the sugar cane, and the vegetables, and the black who was assigned to the homeland, which was the rocks and the land that was not very productive. Chuck and I were just beginning then to think about raising sugar beets. I guess '75 we had our first sugar beet crop. The South Africans were raising sugar cane, and how the government subsidized that program and made it very worthwhile for those farmers. And they were to be our competitors in the world market.

So it was all of those kinds of issues that came to the fore. But it was also to see the struggle of the women. There is a sense that women were still responsible for the production of food. Women are still responsible for feeding that family. It was women who would get up early in the morning and go for water, maybe walking miles. Walking for fire wood to build a fire. Going to the fields to hoe, and to plant, and to harvest. The tremendous burden on women.

I thought, well, to be a farmer here, I like to get up in front and say, "I am a farmer." And I am. But I don't have to struggle like an African woman to be a farmer. I mean, her success or failure with
being a farmer is a life and death question for her family. And that whole piece has been important to share with women here, and for women here to realize that on most other continents it is the women who are the farmers and who are the agriculturalists, and who fight those battles in the market place.

And I think women here have—we've not held up our end as we should. I think the crisis of the '80s has brought a lot of women to the fore, has gotten a lot of women educated, and has gotten a lot of women into understanding policy and understanding lenders' regulations, and so there have been some good things. But the experience in Africa was a good perspective to have in my head when I talked about agricultural policy.

Brazil was also that. Chuck and I went to Brazil in November of '87. And we went there to look very specifically at land reform.

There is a confrontation building in Brazil, as they attempt to be our competitors with soybeans and corn, for instance, in the marketplace. And how they are expanding, how they are taking down their forests to expand for export. Brazil has a huge debt, and in order to meet the interest and to meet that debt, they're looking at export agriculture. And right now that seems to be basically soybeans.

So, there is a lot of things happening in the name of soybeans, and that means expansion of land holdings. It means that the small farmers, who have had that little piece of land, basically just to keep their family alive and well, are being forced off in the name of expansions. And there's--so there's that confrontation between the big family—or the big farmer, who is financed by corporate agriculture, or just financed by political wealth. That's even at the point of hiring the gunslinger. It's like the wild west, forcing those small, poor families off the land.

And then there was a Brazilian political decision, that is opening up the sub-Amazon to farmers, saying: "If you go up to Rondonia, or Amazonia, we will give you a piece of land. And there will be hospitals, and there will be schools, and there will be roads, and you will get this piece of land and it will be your responsibility to clear the trees. And then you can plant some coffee and you can plant some cocoa."
Well, we visited some of those farmers, who were given all of these promises, and who went and looked at their little plot of land and all those huge trees, and called the big lumberman to come in and get the nice big trees. And then with their ax or their chainsaw, and with burning, attempted to clear the land. And to plant in between the burned stumps some corn plants and some vines, and some coffee trees, or some cocoa.

But many of them, not being able to wait until these trees were mature, and having a crop to harvest, many of them forced to leave their little piece of land and go into the city and work for the lumber man, or work for the mining company of whatever. And then these little plots would be purchased by those who had money, and all of a sudden the little farms were big farms.

We went in the south, in Rio Grande del Sol, where it was mostly the small farmers, second or third generation Germans, who had come to Brazil. And I think of myself as a first generation American. But these were second and third generation Brazilians, small farmers, who were trying to make it, in southern Brazil. And again, the same problems. Always the weather. Always the market system. Always the sense that you are getting ripped off by the system. They were very angry at the presence of American corporations and the chemical companies. They were angry at the World Bank for coming in and flooding productive valleys.

I mean, it was an angry time for the small farmers in Brazil. And we went to meetings, and listened to their anger. The men and the women who sang in—they used music. And I think we've missed that in America. We have not used the emotion of music to tell our story. The Brazilians do that so well. But they are also strong, committed farmers, who say "We will not leave the land." And who stood for justice, and who stood to fight the system, in order to remain as farm families.

And I was impressed because the church was in the middle of that fight. And the church is not in the middle of the fight here. And I envied the Brazilians at least that. That the church took the lead in speaking about justice, and in the whole land reform issue, with the courage to defy what the government was saying and doing. And also, was also teaching, was also the advocate to those farmers on the crop rotation, and organic farming, all sorts of issues, they gave them the information.
And I remember the state senator in Rio Grande del Sol, who made a fiery speech, and who was angry at the American presence in Brazil, who was angry at the government and the political dollars that went into expansion export agriculture, and that was hurting the Brazilians. And he was the one who said, when I confronted him, he's the one who sort of shook his finger at me and said: "I wake up every morning to the Chicago Board of Trade, where you set the price. And when I go to plant in September and October, all I hear about are the huge harvests in America. And we Brazilians are told that we have to lower our price to be competitive." And I said, "Mr. Senator, I wake up to the Chicago Board of Trade, and I know they set the price. And when I go to plant in April and May, all I hear about are the huge harvests in Brazil, and that we as American farmers have to lower our price to compete."

I mean, when do we figure out that what makes the system work to the detriment of farmers, is that they pit us against one another? And we believe all of that "stuff." And somehow, as farmers, we have to talk together. And we have done that in several arenas now. We have brought farmers together from Europe and from Japan, and from Brazil, and from Latin America, Nicaragua. And we talk together of what we believe is to be the right direction of policy, as farmers, and not as corporations, or not as government policy pushers or whatever. But just as farmers.

And that's been extraordinary opportunity for me when I've been at the Department of Agriculture. We've had a number of those meetings, and it's been so upholding, and so supporting, just to bring farmers together to talk. And then to have those farmers to go back, and with a combined statement say, "This is what the world needs, if we are going to continue to produce food."

And the other piece that was so interesting, Dianna, was just this last March in Norway, when at the invitation of Lutheran World Federation we brought farmers--again this was Brazil, Africa and Europe, and the Scandinavian countries--and talked about capital growth and development versus protection of the environment. I mean, I think that's the issue of the future. The fact that the Brazilians are taking down the trees, the fact that we sell DDT and all the pesticides that are illegal here, we still sell them to the rest of the world to use. The fact that what we are doing with industry and
with factories all over the globe, that threaten water and threaten all of our natural resources.

I mean, how are we going to deal with this? And how do we deal with this as capitalists? You and I are capitalists, as Americans. And we have always believed that next year is going to be better. That if you don't grow, 3 percent, 4 percent, 5 percent, or as a business you don't have a 6 percent growth, then you just aren't a very good capitalist, and you may not even be a very good American. Because we're supposed to grow and get bigger, and get better. And that's the way we were brought up. And we can do that, if we just work hard, and use some sense.

Well, maybe we're at the point in this whole globe of ours now, where we can't talk about expansion, and we can't talk about growth anymore, because it threatens our very existence as a people. And that's what the meeting in Norway was all about. And it was interesting because I ended up being the only capitalist there.

But you put that concern together with what we are as farmers, what we are as stewards, and as agriculture we have to get our act together on every continent. And I think it's starting to happen. I look at my own son, Kent. The new machines that he creates in the shop during the winter. How to conserve the soil. How do you keep it from blowing? You know, the terrace that he has built. The careful banding of fertilizers and the chemicals, so that there is as little use as possible. And I think that farmers all over are starting to realize what our responsibilities are here. That's good.

But we learn from one another on other continents, and other places. And we need to go and see, and they need to come and see us. And the world is getting pretty small. And we're all concerned about the future of this planet.

DH: Talk some more about that. What does it mean to you to have your family still be on the farm? Do you hope that your family will always be on the farm there?

AK: My son Kent, is an excellent farmer. He's a very good manager. I spent yesterday working with him in his office. He has a computer. He has another little machine where he pushes a button and he brings in the markets, and he watches the markets change by the hour. He has a file system that is enormous. And he was behind, so
he said, "Mom, will you just come and help me get through some of this paper?" Because he's been working long hours in the field. He loves to farm.

Last summer was tough on him with the drought. I'm sure today is tough on him. It's very, very dry. And those little plants are so fragile, there is just absolutely no sub-soil moisture. It is just bone dry. And how long those little plants can continue, I don't know. We're going to have to have some rain.

The investment and the risk, is enormous. And it takes a special kind of person to deal with that. There are times when I'm glad I'm an hour away, because I have trouble emotionally dealing with drought. If you go in my backyard here, and you will see a rain gauge. It's probably four feet high. And Kent gave me that for Mother's Day. He said, "Mom, you're always so concerned about the rain." So he gave me this humongous rain gauge so I can keep track of the rain.

But, you know, I remember now in 1976 the drought. How I would be afraid to open my eyes in the morning because I would see the sun and the blue sky. And what I wanted to see was crashing of thunder and lighting and storm clouds.

But Kent has the stability to deal with that, and it's good for me to be with him, and to listen to him. To listen to his strategy, and the way his head works. I really enjoy that. I hope he can stay. I think he would be also very successful if he were to be a businessman, and any other venture. And there were days when I wished that maybe he should do that. But yet that piece of land is important, to him and to the Kanten family. And I want him to stay.

Now whether or not the next generation? That's another question. When our first grandson—grandchild was born, we planted a tree. When the second granddaughter was born, we planted a tree. And this spring we had the third grandchild on the farm, we had Timothy, and we planted a tree. We planted an oak tree for Timothy. But when we dug to plant the tree, it was just bone dry.

So I don't know if those kids will grow up with the trees. I don't know. I hope so. I've always said that at least I hope they have the option, to choose, whether or not they want to be on the farm, or whether or not they want to be somewhere else in this world.
We ought to have an agricultural policy that allows young people that opportunity. But right now, I know a lot of parents who absolutely refuse to have their children be the next generation. And I think that's very sad. It will be sad for this country, for this nation. And the fact that the Future Farmers of America took "Farmers" out of their name title--I don't understand why this country doesn't recognize the fact that to be a farmer is also of the highest of callings. That it should be something that we are proud of. That it should be a life that is good. Because, after all, we produce food.

I've never understood why that was not the most important occupation in the whole world. To produce food. When 97, 98 percent of our population walks into a grocery store to get it, seems to me you should be pretty sure that that 2 percent that is doing its job and doing its job well, should be compensated for doing a good job. Somehow that never gets to be a part of the equation.

And that's why I think farmers need to have a little bit of anger, to decide that they need to change that.

DH: That's one of your speeches, I think. "I'm a farmer and I'm angry."

AK: Yes.

DH: [Laughs] You've spoken to what? Hundreds, or maybe even thousands of different groups in church basements and school auditoriums and what not.

AK: Yes.

DH: How did you do that? Have you got more than one speech that you build on and alter for the occasion or what?

AK: I can never give the same speech twice. I use bits and pieces, I guess, but I always have to think of who the audience is, and what will connect. But that's true. I think that we need to be a little bit angry. That we've been passive. We've been naive. We've been steamrolled over. We've been absent when policy's been made. And our voices haven't been heard.
And even '77, '78, '79, and '80, when we were very visible, in Washington, we came close, but we didn't get the job done. And then people, people give up. People get tired. People want to quit, and I'm saying, "We can't quit. Agriculture has always been a problem, and it's a problem in every generation. And we need to be visible, and we need to be spokespeople in every generation. We need to be fighters in every generation. And to just say because we didn't get it done this time, doesn't mean you don't go back next time. I mean, it's too important for my grandkids and your grandkids, and the very future of the heartland.

I had breakfast yesterday morning with the Bishop from this area. And he said it is so heartbreaking to drive through these small towns and to see what is happening. To local businesses, to schools, to hospitals. To see the professional brain drain. I mean people leave, and what is that going to mean for the future of this whole country?

I don't think we--I don't think that we've really thought through very carefully, if we are going to depopulate the heartland of the United States, what will that mean for our soil and our water and our families and our whole economy? We're all such capitalists. We've got to make money. We've got to do, and we've got to go. What makes money? And many times that just means we leave our small towns. And I can't blame people for that. I can't blame people at all. After all, I live here.

DH: Some people are talking about diversifying small towns, to try to solve that problem. What do you think about that as a strategy? Should we bring in the telecommunications industry, or others--?

AK: Well, I think that--I think we've got to work on that. But my Kiwanis speech, my Rotarian speech, from the very beginning, back before I went to the Department, and certainly after that, too, I just say, "The answer isn't just chasing smokestacks and factories, that you've got the greatest industry in the world just outside of your city limits. If small town, mainstream America would join with agriculture, we would represent 30 percent of the population in this nation. We could change some things.

But there is still that--I don't know if you'd call it competition, between main street and farmers. It still exists, it's still there. I remember in '77 and '78, going to small towns and handing out brochures, asking them to join us in going to St. Paul, or to
Washington, or coming to a rally. And merchants would say, "Ha! We don't need farmers." Seeing how absolutely ridiculous—and farmers envious of main street business and supposed prosperity, or whatever. Anyway, there has been that tension. And that we somehow have to continue to struggle with and address.

And I think the eighties have proven to an awful lot of folks, they need farmers. The Granite Falls AVTI just did a new study on what farmers put back into the community. And an average farm at Granite Falls, which is the family farm size of America, their numbers are that an average farm puts $188,000 back into local community.

Those farms are little factories out there. And if those farms had a good income, main streets would buzz and hum. And I'm a little bit resentful of processing plants and whatever else gets built in the little communities, because they know there aren't labor unions and they know that farmwise they'll come and work for minimum wage. They know that there's a work ethic out here, that perhaps is superior to that in the city. And it's just another way of taking advantage of good people. And I resent that.

DH: Earlier you mentioned that you didn't think women had held up their end in agriculture until some women got active in farm organizations. What did you mean by that?

AK: I think that women have not been too involved with meeting with lenders and bankers and the Farm Credit people and the FmHAs and whatever. That the men go to town, and they go to the courthouse, and they just sort of take care of all this farm business. The women have been the bookkeepers at home. Many of them. And that's certainly been important. But women have not been on township boards or county boards, or have certainly not been very visible in lobbying in the legislature. And not in the policy arenas, until the last ten years or so.

We have been what one woman called "the invisible farmers." That we have quietly done that bookwork, and we have driven the trucks, and we have driven the tractors, and we have taken care of the kids, and we have gone to PTA, and we've done all those things. But we have not been in the visible policy arena. And we have not been on the boards and commissions that make decisions. And I think that women are just coming to that now.
And discovering that the decisions that the township board makes or the county commissioners make, are very important to that farm operation. And the decisions that state legislatures make are very important to that farm operation. And that women carry an agenda and a voice, and a very articulate voice, that is important in the mix of things. When a woman sits around at the table, it makes a difference. I'm convinced of that. And we just need more of those voices. In all kinds of arenas.

DH: Well, what did happen--I don't know. The right question maybe isn't "why?" because that's hard to answer. But they're so many women in the farm movement. What are your observations about that? Maybe you do have a sense of why that is.

AK: In the farm organizations you mean?

DH: Uh-huh. Because the more recent ones, the ones that grew out of the crisis--

AK: Right. You're right. In the American Agriculture Movement, in the Groundswell that was very active in Minnesota, because women realized, I think, to lose that family farm operation, how important that was. And women realized the kind of trauma that their spouse was going through, that their kids were going through. The women began to realize what it meant to take care of the land. What it meant, the use of chemicals, and all, all of these issues--many of whom we've just taken for granted before. But it's like everything else. When it hits your family. And there were just that many more families that were directly hurt through the crisis of the '80s.

But I think too, the fact that there were women who were beginning to speak, that there were Lou Anne Klings and Anne Kantens and other women out there who had the courage to stand up and speak. I think that gives other women courage, to do likewise. And what Lou Anne has done in bringing women in this community together, to train them on lenders' issues and ASCS issues, and those sorts of things, that women--I can speak for myself I guess--but women, we are not as courageous and vocal many times, as the guys. We kind of have to be sure of what we're saying, is sort of the right thing to say, before we will say it.

Therefore, women, I think, want and crave more information to give them the courage to do what they have to do. I've seen guys, they
can get by with saying most anything sometimes. But women just want to be more sure of what they're saying. And, of course, that gives you more power when you say what you want to say.

But it's been really fun to see the women come to the legislature these last years, to testify in front of committees, and doing their personal lobbying in the offices of the legislators. The women have been very, very important these last years in St. Paul.

And these rural women conferences that have been held in Des Moines, I mean women have come from all over to be armed with facts, so that they can go home and have the courage to stand and speak. And I'm hoping we never lose that. That we've got to keep women in that arena.

DH: What's it like being a woman in government? You mentioned that when you came to the Ag Department Nichols didn't know about women and he didn't know about radicals from the American Ag Movement. Surely he's not the only one who didn't know about women, either.

AK: That's true. Particularly women at the Department of Agriculture. There aren't many of us in the world, I don't think. So that first year was tough. It really was tough.

But it's like everything else that women get into. You have to prove yourself. And it was simply that Jim Nichols had to get to know me, and to know what I stood for, and that I wasn't going to go off half-cocked on something, that I think things through, and move in a rational kind of way. And it just took him a while to figure that out.

The other directors in that division were very supportive, from the start. I always felt good about them, and it was a sad day when I left. And I still keep in touch. In fact, they're coming out here to spend a weekend.

And in the legislature, there are more women all the time. I think the legislature has come to realize that women are an important part of the policy arena. But it is--it was strange to have a woman speak for agriculture. But Pat Jensen is there now, and will do marvelously well. Because that's just the way it is. A woman has something to say in agriculture.
Would you like a piece of cantaloupe?

DH: That sounds great, Anne.