Interview with Walter Ness

Interviewed by Norman Achin
for the
Northwest Minnesota Historical Center

Interviewed on August 2, 1989
at Livingston Lord Library, Moorhead State University
Moorhead, Minnesota

Norman Achin - NA
Walter Ness - WN

NA: My name is Norm Achin. The date today is Wednesday, August 2, 1989. I am interviewing Mr. Walter Ness. Mr. Ness, why don't we start a little bit with a little bit about yourself, when you were born, your educational background, job-related things?

WN: I was born at Edmore, North Dakota, September 14, 1925, and grew up on a farm there. I went to grade school out in a country school and then on to Starkweather High School. Then I came to NDSU [North Dakota State University] in 1947, graduated in '51 in the agricultural field, Ag Economics and Animal Science. I've done some graduate work over the years as an Extension Agent both in Arizona and in Colorado.

I was raised on a farm, as I mentioned. My dad had about 400 acres. He raised a lot of livestock. The grain consisted of wheat and durum, flax, oats, and barley. We didn't have many row crops back in those days. He kept us busy with a lot of dairy cattle and sheep and swine.

NA: Now you mentioned you also had some early beginnings in Extension in Colorado. Did that involve sugarbeet agriculture at all?

WN: The main course there was agricultural policy.

NA: You went to school there?

WN: Yes, on a short-time basis, both in Arizona and in Colorado.

NA: When did you first get involved in sugarbeet agriculture?

WN: They were talking about it, of course, when I was County Agent out along the Missouri River. The Holly Sugar Beet Company came in and discussed sugarbeet growing after the Garrison Dam
was put in. But as far as working with sugarbeet growers, when I moved to Hillsboro in 1955, I worked with the fieldmen and sugarbeet growers in Traill County, which is just north of here.

NA: Am I to assume, then, that you did not know very much about sugarbeets until you had come to the [Red River] Valley?

WN: Right, that's right. It was a learning—that's quite a crop, that sugarbeets. The ones that were producing it—like in Traill [County, North Dakota] and Cass County [North Dakota]—were, in most cases, topnotch farmers. So it was fun to work with them, because not only did they do a good job producing beets, but they also had done a good job in their other crops, too.

NA: So county extension agents, in effect, went around and talked to growers and were—in a sense, they taught for the other crops but they learned for sugarbeets?

WN: Right. Especially the fieldmen at the old American Crystal [Sugar Company]. They had well-trained sugarbeet [advisors]—we [county extension agents] got together quite a little with them [American Crystal Sugar Company fieldmen], over a cup of coffee or in our office.

NA: I'm sorry, fieldmen?

WN: The fieldmen. They were each assigned, of course, quite a number of growers and they'd done an excellent job with them.

NA: What were your tasks as a county agent? You learned a little bit about sugarbeets. What were your primary tasks?

WN: Our primary task, of course, was to be acquainted with all the research that was good for the farmers from NDSU, and a lot of other, private research, too. It was our job to be knowledgeable about that and pass this information on to the farmers, by either individual office calls or educational meetings. We conducted a lot of tours over the years, too. But it was information that would be helpful to them in their overall operation.

NA: How much time, proportionately, did you spend working on sugarbeets? As you said, sugarbeets is, obviously, a major crop in this area. It has been for some time. You knew about the other crops from your earlier training. How much time did you spend working on sugarbeets?

WN: I imagine, after 1960, when the NDSU participated and secured sugarbeet specialists, I imagine, then, we'd spend, maybe, 5 to 10% of our time with the sugarbeet growers and with the meetings. But as the time, up into the '70s, then I'd say we
spent maybe 15 to 20% of our time with the sugarbeet growers.

NA: In the late '80s, did you consult with a bank, perhaps First Bank, to help beet growers secure loans for specific operations? It seems that I recall reading something about that.

WN: Yes, I worked with First Bank, with their loan officers. I'd go with them out to visit the sugarbeet growers that were their customers. It was real interesting. And then I also visited, of course, several sugarbeet growers that probably weren't our customers, to see whether they would be interested in our ag[riculture] department at First Bank, if we could be of benefit to them in their operation.

NA: What did you mean "benefit"? What would these loans be for?

WN: Well, as you know, the sugarbeet crop takes a considerable amount of investment—cash outlay—and before the harvest, in a lot of cases, the operators did need an operating loan to carry them through until the harvest time. That's where the bank and the other financial institutions could help the farmer make sure that everything was up to par, do the proper outlay—whether it be chemical control or labor or machinery. That's where we kind of fit in there.

NA: Just to clarify, one final question on this topic. You were a County Extension Agent and you were working with First Bank to secure loans?

WN: No, I was retired. I had 32 years in as a County Extension Agent and then I retired. I was hired, then, on a part-time basis to work with them [First Bank].

NA: I want to shift gears now. I want to talk a little bit about sugar beet growing, specifically—the task. As you were learning about sugar beets, what did you find were typical problems that the farmer faced in growing sugar beets, either that were similar to other crops or dissimilar?

WN: I imagine that the cost of producing a sugar beet acre was, maybe, one of their bigger problems back in the old days. But I recall, in first working with them, getting the stand established—so many plants per hundred feet of row—was another. And then the weed control, back in the older days. Now they have some excellent weed chemicals and, if Mother Nature cooperates, they work very good. Of course, rain is a big thing all the time. So Mother Nature has quite a control on that.

NA: As you were receiving publications and information and seminars from the Extension people, either at the University of Minnesota or wherever, did you run into any sort of advice or any sort of new growing techniques and so forth that you thought
prudent to pass on to the sugarbeet growers, that they might not get anywhere else?

WN: Oh, yes. That was part of our job, of course. And then at a lot of our educational events, we utilized growers that were very successful in various things, too. In addition to the research that was conducted at NDSU, we also got growers to participate and relay their experiences on to the other growers at various meetings.

NA: I understand that you've been highly instrumental, then, in establishing—what can we call them?—workshops. Or, specifically, I guess, the Sugar Growers Institute, along with Bernie Youngquist at the Crookston Experiment Station, etc. What can you tell us about these early workshops, from the earliest times on through?

WN: Why, I think, as I recall, when I was agent up in Traill County, I wasn't very familiar and I'd go over to Crookston for their annual winter show. Bernie always had some good educational meetings in regards to sugarbeets. Then as we started working here in Cass County, Ozzie Callenbach, who was the County Agent at the time, we had joint meetings then. And then we worked together with Bernie Youngquist in getting the Sugarbeet Institute started, quite a number of years ago.

NA: After that, did your involvement cease at that time or did you continue to be involved, year after year, with the Sugar Growers Institute? And if so, how did the Institute evolve?

WN: It all got started—the machine dealers and the chemical dealers and the fertilizer dealers—we met with them. So we decided then, along with Bernie and Ozzie, to start an event at the Red River Valley fairgrounds, [in West Fargo, North Dakota] which was new at the time. We had an educational meeting along with all the agriculture related business with sugarbeet. [They would] put on their display, whether it would be machinery or various other aspects. That was started in the early '60s. It was such a successful event that we ran out of space at the Red River Valley fairgrounds. The Crookston winter show buildings were the only ones that could handle that, so, about ten years ago, we decided to have a two day event up there, rather than [having a one day Institute in West Fargo and] moving it from West Fargo up to Crookston [for a second one day Institute].

NA: You said that when the Sugar Growers Institute began, it had, what, salesmen for pesticides, herbicides, and machine dealers, and so forth. Is that correct?

WN: Right. They had their machines on display plus their booths for all the other—like the fertilizer, the chemical—and it went
over so well that it just kept growing. Now it's called the International, because we draw people now from all over the United States and Canada to this event. And I've enjoyed working with it. Even when I was working with the bank and also, now, at the Holiday Inn, I'm still on that particular committee.

NA: Oh, you are? What were your responsibilities? Did you work with publicity, with Dr. Youngquist? Did you work directly with Dr. Youngquist on it?

WN: Oh, yes.

NA: What aspect or aspects?

WN: Well, we'd get together two or three times a year to plan the program, along with the gentlemen from NDSU, Al Cattanach and Allan Dexter. Then they'd have growers on this committee, too. There are about 15 of us that get together two or three times a year and set this up for the next year or discuss the past year's event.

NA: Okay. Were you ever involved with going out to individual beet growers or to the sugar Growers' meetings and giving them, sort of, the lowdown on what was upcoming? Sort of giving them a preview or anything of that sort?

WN: We've done it, mainly, through publicity on the Institute. Otherwise, though, at our regular farm educational meetings, we'd always discuss what was coming up in regards to whether it be the sugarbeet educational meetings or the Sugarbeet Growers Institute.

NA: Now, as you went around talking to farmers and so forth, either about what you had learned about sugar beets, or finding out about sugar beets, did you ever encourage them to join a cooperative or some sort of organization that concerns themselves specifically with sugar beets, to learn more about it or whatever?

WN: Oh, yes, the [Red River Valley Sugarbeet] Growers Association has been very strong. Back in the early days, when American Crystal [Sugar Company] decided to sell the ownership of their Company, I was very happy to work with that committee to encourage farmers to participate with the cooperative, and also join the Red River Valley Growers Association.

NA: You retired in what year, again?


NA: 1983. That was, approximately, a decade after the acquisition of American Crystal. What was the difference for you, as an Extension Agent, working with the cooperative and, in
some instance, perhaps, the Company, in the early days, and then, in a sense, the cooperative and the Company, which are not, basically, the same by a legal standpoint, but a much different group?

WN: Well, it was kind of interesting. As soon as it had become a cooperative, of course, the overall working relationship was better. In the early days, the working with the fieldmen, as far as those that worked directly with the farmers, our relationships were always very good then. We exchanged a lot of good ideas. But as soon as it was formed into a cooperative, then they give the Extension Service and NDSU more responsibility to carry on the educational portion of it.

NA: Did you see farmers securing labor for their crop? Were you in any way available as a resource for them, in their securing and recruiting of labor?

WN: No. That was mainly conducted through the labor departments in both states and the Red River Valley Growers Association. As a County Extension Agent, I had very little to do with that.

NA: Do you remember anything about some of the early machineries, some of the early machines used to cultivate or harvest or even seed sugarbeets? From the early days, anything you recall? Were you involved in any way, giving new tips on new types of machinery coming on to the market, or anything of that nature?

WN: Well, our machine dealers, here, in the Red River Valley, really kept up on this, because they knew that it was an important commodity. Usually, we would get together with them in regards to what was new and coming up. Our NDSU ag[riculture] engineers kept us updated on that. But as far as doing much, until we established the Sugarbeet Institute, as far as displaying the new equipment that was available, we didn't. That wasn't a major role, as far as the extension agent was concerned.

NA: But were you involved in any way with--oh, I know I lack some of the technical expertise, but some of the growers had their own innovative inventions, and so forth. Were you involved in that in any way?

WN: Yes. We were involved from the aspect that we would have, maybe, a farm tour, say to a farmer up there by Halstad, that had developed a new type of spray. That's how we were involved there. We'd conduct tours to that, if we knew that it was a good deal for the rest of the farmers.

NA: In your estimation, based on what you've learned about sugarbeets or what you've heard from the farmers, are sugarbeets a good crop, would you say, to have in a dry season?
Particularly one that we've had over the last couple of years.

WN: Well, it's surprising, if they get that stand established, and sometimes during the summer months--like, a year ago, and also this year--the sugarbeets kind of stand still for a while, when it's dry. But they can respond very fast if we do get ample rainfall, which we hope for again, this year. Last year, they looked like it was going to be a real small crop, and it was, out in the Cass County area. They never did get ample rain. But the rest of the valley seemed to be able to--they got the rain, and the crops recovered very well. We're hoping that this year will be the same way.

NA: It's almost hard to see that we would have a wet season in the foreseeable future, but what about a wet season? How would sugarbeets respond to a particularly wet season?

WN: They'd be hindered, too. Anytime you have surplus rain, the oxygen portion of the soil is cut back. Therefore, any growing plant doesn't do as well as it would be if it was more on balance. But I think the wet seasons that have been the hardest on sugarbeet growers is during harvest season. That's where it's been very difficult.

NA: To get into the fields?

WN: To get into the fields, to get them harvested. And then there's always that danger of an October frost to freeze them in, and that's happened a few times over the years.

NA: Now, just sort of a general question, and in summation, how did you or other promoters of sugarbeets, in the early years, persuade Valley farmers to try and grow them? I know, in the beginning, American Crystal had a heck of time trying to get people to grow sugarbeets for the factories that they had existing at that time. Were you in any way involved in that, or called upon by the Company or by anyone else, to try to get farmers to grow sugarbeets?

WN: Well, back in those years, it was a little difficult to encourage them to get the beet growers, because the profit part of it wasn't there as it is, and has been, the last ten or fifteen years. But I've always felt that it's one of the better crops for the area. In fact, when they started the cooperative, I was a little disappointed that we didn't have more acreage in Cass County. I felt that there should've been more total acres. That was about the time when the sunflowers came in and the profit picture on them looked excellent, too, at the same time. Of course, that's switched. Now the profit there isn't near as great as on sugarbeets--the potential, I mean.

NA: Was there competition then, would you say, between farmers
trying to decide between sugarbeets or sunflowers?

WN: Oh, yes. And the soybean, too, was pretty lucrative there for quite a while, and still is. So there's competition. And then wheat, of course, is still the standard and easier to grow, less expensive. The profit picture there has its ups and downs. But still, wheat is an excellent crop for our area. But, personally, I think, totally, we should have more sugarbeet acres in. But, as you know, the capacity of the processing plants limits the number of acres.

NA: Right. How did you specifically get growers to grow or try to convince them? Sugarbeets, by your admission, is a fairly good crop; the other ones are good, as well. Did you take an active role, then, in encouraging them, saying, "This is the thing to do"?

WN: Oh, yes. After NDSU secured their sugarbeet specialists—whether it be in weed control or all the other aspects of sugarbeet growing—we had several meetings, along with Al Bloomquist and other ones, when they were making decisions on joining the factories back in that particular year. Or two years, I guess, we worked at it.

NA: What part did the railroad play in the growth of the sugarbeet industry in the Valley? Would you have much to say about that?

WN: Oh, yes. Back in those years, both the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railroad, which is going, of course, to be the Burlington Northern, they had they're ag development people. Those gentlemen cooperated with all the promotion and education efforts that were put on, whether it be by the American Crystal or Holly Sugar was in here for a while. They were very cooperative with the companies because a lot of the sugarbeets, back in the old days, were hauled by railroads.

NA: Right. Now early on, the railroads—it must have been some sort of railroad and Company cooperative effort—-but the railroad cars, some of them had specific demonstrations set up on cars, with literature and so forth, and they would go on a circuit around the Valley. Were you involved in any way, in either putting that together or . . .

WN: They had an educational train when I was County Extension Agent out in McLean County, which is out [on the] Missouri River, on promoting all types of educational work in regards to not only sugarbeets, but other crops. I participated in it, in the early '50s.

NA: In what way?
WN: We'd set up the program. Our specialists in the various fields were on the railroad educational train, but we made sure through our letters and contacts that the farmers—like, for instance, in McLean County, where I was at—to be sure to attend it, whether it be up at Garrison, North Dakota, or down in Washburn or Underwood. That was our participation in that.

NA: You commented a little bit on the Red River Valley Sugar Growers Association. How would you rate the overall success of the Growers Association in encouraging sugarbeet industry in the Valley? In the early days and later on.

WN: They've become stronger as the years went by. I think it's an excellent idea that we have a Growers Association, because they can work with the national Growers and have a lobbying effect that will help the sugarbeet industry in the long-run.

NA: Now, in the early years, how did the Sugar Growers Association gain members and what was your involvement? You said that you were interested in this, you thought it was a good idea to have a growers association. When you went around to talk to potential growers, either about growing sugarbeets, etc., did you happen to mention that this was a good deal?

WN: We always encouraged them to participate in all the various commodity groups, whether it be barley growers, wheat growers, sugarbeet growers. We feel that they gain a lot by participating with their commodity group. And I've always encouraged it.

NA: As an outsider, in effect, to sugarbeets and sugarbeet production, in terms of you don't produce it and so forth, how was your standpoint? Can you describe something about the relationship between the Growers and the Company and how that evolved over the years up to, say, the acquisition, when it changed dramatically, of course?

WN: Oh, as I recall, the American Crystal Company had their fieldmen. They made their decision on the acreage, the price, and all that. As I mentioned before, those of us in the Extension didn't get too much involved in it then. So as far as how the Growers felt about their Company, I guess I didn't pay that much attention to it. Until they were going to sell out and not be able to produce sugarbeets, then they were pretty worried. That's of course when Al Bloomquist and the group got together and organized the cooperative.

NA: But you weren't involved in any way, neither giving advice or something?

WN: Prior to that, I wasn't.

NA: And after that?
WN: Oh, then we worked very closely with them.

NA: In what way?

WN: On conducting educational meetings. In discussing the potential of the farmers owning their own cooperative.

NA: I see. Potential in terms of what? Acreage yields?

WN: Acreage yields, plus what their returns would be if they made that original investment in a share or an acre basis. Those of us in Extension were involved at that time.

NA: You were involved. Did people like Al Bloomquist call upon you to help, in effect, convince the Growers that the acquisition was a really good deal?

WN: Oh, yes. We worked very closely with Al and the other committee.

NA: So you primarily held meetings, then, to try and get growers to consider this option, and it was a good deal from your standpoint, as well.

WN: Oh, sure. And on the individual basis, too. There were a lot of inquiries at the time. When the farmers would call into our office, we had the answers.

NA: What would you say--on average in this period, it was a very tense period for all concerned. On average, how many calls would you get? How many inquiries would you get, concerns from farmers at the time, compared to earlier times?

WN: Oh, I'm sure it increased by tenfold, rather than only getting maybe ten calls at seeding time, we probably would get--or on this acquisition, I'm sure back in those [days], we'd get maybe 20 calls a week.

NA: Now, other growers associations were also at work, most notably the Western Sugar Beet Growers, which included, I believe, five or six states including Minnesota and North Dakota, of course. Were you in any way involved, either speaking with those organizations or informing them in any way of any of your findings in sugar beets and so forth?

WN: No. They'd participate. They'd come up to the Red River Valley out of Colorado and the other states. But normally they would work directly with our sugar beet specialist at NDSU, or with American Crystal fieldmen, and other ag-related groups.

NA: How did the purchase of American Crystal by the Growers
Association affect the overall activity of sugarbeet growing, the sugarbeet industry, in the Valley?

WN: Oh, it was probably the best thing that ever happened to the sugarbeet industry. Because they found, at the time, that they could increase their production. I imagine the fact that the United States is an importer of sugar—I don't recall the figures right now. But as long as we don't overproduce, realizing that the world sugar price is less than what our growers receive—still to be able to have a dependable sugar production in the United States is a lot better than depending on shipping it in from overseas. I happened to go through that era when we were rationed, as far as getting so much sugar per month. You see, if we let our industry go and something happened, we certainly wouldn't want to go through that again. Because sugar is a pretty important commodity.

NA: Just as a final question, can you share with me the influences of some of the people and their contributions to sugarbeet industry in the valley? Hank Peterson?

WN: He was a great garden-crop grower and also an excellent sugarbeet grower. But as I recall, Hank, he attended all our early meetings. He was there to help with the educational events. He was one of the outstanding original sugarbeet growers.

NA: What about Hugh Trowbridge?

WN: Same there, and he still, he and his son are still active sugarbeet growers down south here. When it comes to getting information from a sugarbeet grower, whether it's Ted Peet or Hugh Trowbridge or Hank Peterson, the information you'd get from them to pass on to other growers was always topnotch.

NA: Topnotch. What about Ted Peet?

WN: Ted was very knowledgeable and an excellent producer. He'd be more than happy to help us, in our educational work. He was so knowledgeable and Ted is still active, too. Not, maybe, in the production end of it, but he's still around, too.

NA: Well, not so active in the production end of it, in terms of right out there in the field, was Dr. Bernie Youngquist. As you mentioned, you worked quite a bit with him. What about Dr. Youngquist?

WN: Yes, he's retired now, Bernie is. He's enjoying his retirement. I visited with him recently. But he's still busy and put out quite a book on that Sugarbeet Institute. I'm sure a lot of people have a chance to look that over. But he was a true educator, Bernie was.
NA: What about Al Bloomquist, who came on board as executive secretary?

WN: He'd done a terrific job over the years. Not only with the old American Crystal, but in getting the whole Red River Valley concerned about the sugarbeet industry, whether it was going to fail or whether it was going to come strong. And I'll give Al Bloomquist a lot of credit for getting it going.

NA: Now, Dick Fitzsimons, later, took over Al Bloomquist's job. Do you have anything to say about him?

WN: That was a good follow-up. Al Bloomquist, of course, went on and is one of the topnotch lobbyists for this industry still at the present time. Dick Fitzsimons was very knowledgeable on sugarbeets and he followed in and does a terrific job with the Growers Association.

NA: Did you happen to have any other questions that you might want to have covered? Did you have anything else you'd like to add on anything we've discussed?

WN: I hope, after interviewing the people in the sugar industry, that this will be an excellent project for you, with the hopes that, in the long run, it will be a benefit to the whole area.

NA: Thank you very much. I think we've had a very good interview.