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Interview with Pat Feeney, Part 1

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Benjamin Halpern questions and comments in italics.

Interview with: Pat Feeney

Date of Interview: 4/07/2016

Location of Interview: Rural Piatt County, IL

Transcribed by: Jessica Craig

Date of Transcription: 11/4/2016

Length of Interview: 0:13:30

BH: Today is April 7th, 2016. My name is Benjamin Halpern and I am in rural Piatt County, Illinois with Patrick Feeney, a fifth generation farmer, we are going to be talking some about Pat's history on the farm and some of the changes that have taken place over the years. The interview is being conducted for Dr. Debra Reid of the History Department at Eastern Illinois University. Debra has composed the interview and well as the questions and we will be following Dr. Reid's questions. The material will be put into Dr. Reid's hands and deposited in the Eastern Illinois Digital Archives called The Keep and it will be eventually made available to the public. Pat are you okay with that?

PF: I'm good with that.

BH: Okay, so we will begin. Pat, when did you begin farming?

PF: Right after I got out of college I had a job, actually it was an accounting job, with a grain firm. I worked there for a year and then started farming a year later. So I actually started farming in 1972.

BH: But you grew up on this farm, and I'm sure you helped out with your dad in the meantime.

PF: Oh yes, absolutely. I grew up working. When we were little we used to plow before school, work after school, seasonally. They had livestock, so we worked with the livestock to.

BH: During the years you were growing up, was the emphasis on grain or livestock or both?

PF: The emphasis was on grain on the farm.

BH: What role did your family play on the farm? I know you have a brother and several sisters, what role did each of you play?

PF: Well I was the oldest and I have four siblings, a brother and three sisters, and we all grew up on the farm. We worked together, lived together, and played together.

BH: Talk about your mom also, your mom also played a role on the farm.

PF: Yes, absolutely. Mom lived at home and raised the kids. She went back to teaching when she was about 45 years old and taught, I think, 13 years before she retired.

BH: Patrick's mom and dad, by the way, are Margaret and Luke Feeney, they are friends of mine and life-long residents of this part of the state. Were there extended family, or other people who helped out on the farm?

PF: Oh, yes. My dad was also the oldest son, and he had two brothers that worked with him, with grandpa. When grandpa retired, dad and his brothers took over the farm. So I spent all my youth working with my dad and my uncles.

BH: Did anyone else in the family need to take other jobs to make ends meet? Or between the livestock and the grain, were you able to support all of you that way?

PF: When I was young, everyone worked on the farm. Then my mother was the first to work off the farm, teaching. My wife, Marilyn, taught for 30 years, and we have 3 boys. So when our youngest one was about 2 years old- Marilyn taught before the boys were born, took 8 years off, and when our youngest son was 2 she went back to teaching and taught for 30 years. She just retired 2 years ago. So Marilyn worked off the farm, teaching to, supplementary income.

BH: I'm sure that was a big help giving how prices fluctuate.

PF: It was a huge help because of the income, but also because of insurance.

BH: Talk a little bit about the seasonal routines on the farm.

PF: It seems like we used to have, we still have seasonal routines, but it seemed like when I was younger there was more down time in the winter. We're busy all year long. It is still a seasonal business; we prepare our equipment usually the season that we finish. So if we are combining, we go over all of our combine trucks get them ready for the next season. Then we get the spring tillage equipment out, and the planting equipment out, and we go over tit again and then we plant. Till plant during spring- summer, then we go over all of our equipment and get it ready for the next season. So during the spring and the fall we put in a lot of hours planting and harvesting and then the rest of the year we are working on equipment and organization. We just call it book-work but there is a lot of office work in here.

BH: How has that changed since you are growing up here?

PF: It has changed a lot in my lifetime. When I first started farming, it was pretty simple. We just kept very, very simple records. It was just a simple checking account, in and out. Now we've got operating loans, land loans, huge financing, juggling that and making payments. Trying to make some money.

BH: How did that change? Let me back up a minute, first of all what kinds of livestock did you have during your lifetime?

PF: Well, the livestock they only had when I was kid, and it was cattle and hogs. Feeder cattle, and also some hogs.

BH: When did that change?

PF: I was probably only 14 when they got out of the cattle, maybe 15. Then we had a few hogs, maybe for a couple of years after that. So we've been out of the livestock business for a long, long time.

BH: So that would have been during the 1960's.

PF: Yes, well the late '50s, early '60s.

BH: Did that change things a lot?

PF: Well, no, not really. As I said before, the focus on our farm had always been grain. So it did make things a little easier. We didn't have cattle or hogs getting out all the time.

BH: What role would you say other businesses played, in the running of the farm? Specifically, you mentioned that you had loans through banks, I'm sure that you had a grain elevator or a cooperative. I'm sure there are implement dealers, describe that interaction and how that has changed over the years.

PF: Everyone that we have dealt with has gotten bigger and bigger. The banks, there have been bank mergers, our local bank is a lot bigger than it used to be. Our local co-op used to be a single location where we would take our grain. Now it is the second largest cooperative in Illinois with about 27 locations. Where we buy our fertilizer, we used to go into our small local town and deal with one man. Now our fertilizer company, that is also a cooperative, has grown and merged. I think there are 75 people working for this company now, and when I was young it used to be just 1, well 1 man with 1-2 guys working outside. We have a lot more dealings with the FSA and the USDA and government regulations. So that has grown, and expectations are a lot higher, for everybody. We are still a family farm, and we consider us a family farm, but with farms in our area, it's a big, big business. Nobody can make a living on 80 or 160 acres anymore.

BH: Is there any interaction between neighboring farms like there once was?

PF: No, not at all. We used to spend a lot of time helping neighbors, and neighbors would help us. It would be unannounced. If you finished planting and you were done, and you looked across the field and saw your friend or neighbor still planting you would go over and help him. You'd help him for maybe a couple of days, he'd come help you in the fall for a couple of days. Those days are gone. Unfortunately, I think the perception is, it's sad that we lost that, but we've kind of lost our neighbors and gained competitors.

BH: Tell me now, how you would solve some of those same problems or tasks that when years ago you would have neighbors come help you with something that needed to be tended to. How do you do that now?

PF: We do it ourselves. There is a lot more attention and planning with our equipment and with our line of equipment. We spend more time organizing and planning. For example, our planting

schedule, we try and set that up a month ahead. Of course, it changes daily, hourly. But we have a general plan, and we try and stay to that as much as we can. We try to diversify a little bit. We are going to be raising seed corn this year for the first time in a long, long time. So we've got a lot of things going on but we can't expect neighbors to come in and help us.

BH: You have several people working out here on the farm. Are they full or part-time or are they both?

PF: Well we've got 3 full time and in the spring we will have 1 full time seasonal. So we were lucky enough to find a young guy who was looking for something to do for a couple of months, so he will help us through planting. In the fall, we will have even more, 3 full time, plus another 2-3 full time seasonal.

BH: Do you do any work with the University of Illinois extension?

PF: I used to do more than I do now. We do use the University extension, often times I'll go in and look at their record keeping, their recommendations, and do use some of their periodicals. For the most part, we just get online and pull up the University of Illinois Ag Department and get our information through there.

BH: Do you get any information from farm publications?

PF: We do. We get all the farm publications, and probably don't spend as much time reading the publications as I did when I was younger, but we are getting more detailed information from the university and from the internet.