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Interview with Ron Elliot

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Ron Elliot

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Interview with Ron Elliott- 9:30 AM, 2-23-96

CL: This is Casey Lewis interviewing Ron Elliott at his farm on February 23, 1996. What I first wanted to talk about today was seasonal cycles and how they effect you, like fall, spring, winter, summer. And how do the seasonal cycles effect how you operate here?

From one season to the next. How does that change your way of doing things around here?

RE: Well, seasonal cycles probably effect... I'll make a statement right off the bat. I have my seasons that I prefer. I prefer spring and fall. I could pass on the other two. I would say the reason I like fall and spring is that I do not like real hot weather. And I am getting so I don't really like the real cold weather either. So, those are two that I would... I prefer spring and fall. Spring, in that planting comes and then in fall when the harvest comes. I would say... I think I answered that question... I'll say yeah that's my preference. Now, what was the rest of it you wanted to know...?

CL: How you operate, how in changes in operation? I know in the spring you plant and in the fall you harvest. What do you do in the winter and summer that is different from those two seasons?

RE: The summer is an extention, is really an extension of your planting time and you're harvest too in the summer time with especially the hay. In the winter time, why a lot of things go dormant for us as far as just maintaining the livestock and make comfortable conditions for them to, you know, fare in the colder weather and climate. I would say that's the change. We go from a planting and harvesting situation to a maintenance, I would call it a maintenance type. With the seasonal changes I would say maintenance is involved. Keeping things comfortable and bedded and clean and all that.

CL: Is the winter particularly harsh for the animals?

RE: In my mind I would think it is harsh but I think the animals are, by design, since they are not human, that they take the elements a lot better than... of course I wouldn't want to be out there. But I think by design they take it better. They could withstand the cold however I think that they can... if you provide a wind break for them and so they don't get wet I would say that is a primary concern for livestock outside. I think that's what I wanted to say.

CL: Do you think besides sheltering them from the wind and the cold your way of operating the cows is different from season to season or is the daily routine pretty much the daily routine throughout the year?

RE: The daily routine, especially with dairy farming, I would say stays about the same, especially in the morning you do the milking and chores. The only thing that would change in the season would be once the cows have moved out to pasture and like that. You don't have to... their needs for water and of course they're feeding themselves basically- they're grazing. So, that

changes a little bit as the season for winter ends and the spring comes up. You know it's kinda nice to get 'em out...

CL: Yeah, get 'em out of the house. Like your kids going to college or something.

RE: See you later!

CL: Do they tend to give more milk in the summer or does it pretty much stay the same all year round?

RE: See the thing with the seasons... I don't care where you're at... in the winter time, real cold weather's a stress and in the summer time heats a stress, heat and humidity is a stress. So, like I say, usually you don't end up with too much stress in that spring time and that fall. Those two times of the season are probably the least stressful. So, I would say that... I'll just emphasize it again. Some real, real cold blistering weather and the real heat is just stressful times and I don't like either one of 'em.

CL: I don't either. Well, are the calves born at a certain time during the year or is it spread out throughout the year?

RE: That is basically spread out throughout the year. I would like... I prefer, again, I don't like to calve, have cows calve, during January and February- that's just a bad time. And, again, I don't really like to have cows freshening in July and August, in the real heat of the summer. But, if I had a goal and I wanted to meet the goal I would say I don't want to calf in January and February and I really don't want to calf in July and August cause of the stress of stressful times of them.

CL: Has it always been the case that you can, kind of, decide when your cows will calve or is the technology, with artificial insemination, that's allowed you to kind of manipulate when they will calve and when they won't?

RE: Well, I would say it's kind of both. Take your preference and, therefore, plan according to your preferences. I do think that if you try to make too abrupt of an adjustment why you sometimes have a financial, well definitely a year later, have a financial reflection of your decision. And then again you can't take the biggest percentage of the herd and then say I'm gonna do this and then therefore lengthen your days open for a cow or whatever just for the sake of your preference. I mean, you want to do it over two or three years or it's bound to have some kind of financial reflection. If you want to make a change it's probably best if you do it maybe two years or three years and not just try to, BANG, do it all at once cause I think that to do it all at once would reflect a grave financial blow, perhaps.

CL: Do you know, before they had artificial insemination, do you know if there was any particular time of the year that the cows calved or...

RE: I have not a clue.

CL: How long has artificial insemination been used?

RE: It began I think back in the 50s. It was beginning to catch on pretty strong in the 50s. And, I can't put an exact year but it was all... it gets started by having farmers go together and form a co-op so I think that was probably one of the starting points of AI in the animal industry as far as cows are concerned. It started in the 50s.

CL: Have you see any changes in the seasonal cycles since you were young. For example, have things pretty much stayed the same? Have you done this in that season and this in another season?

RE: I would say that anything in the last few years, ten years or so, why extremes. I will say that the extremes have really magnified. I think, back when I was in my teen years, it was much easier to make hay and all in the summer time because you didn't have these... the rains seem to be... it was a little more convenient, so to speak, than they are now. And now, it's nothing to think that you'll have two or three days, and then have another pattern just slip in out of the blue and just put a kink on things. So, I would say weather extremes in the last few years have been, at times, down right damaging as far as trying to get the work done and move on to another season.

CL: What do you attribute this to? What do you think the cause of these extremes is?

RE: Well, I'm sure that the jet stream has a lot of kinks. And what effects the jet stream, I'm not sure. I would say that that... And I have had some say in the past that there is people or nations or things out there that are goofing with it or experimenting with it and trying to influence it in some way. And so if that's the case it only stands to reason that it might not have goofed them up but it goofs somebody else up around the flow. So, I would say, if that's going on, I would say that that is definately a factor.

CL: I know that you said before that this winter has been particularly harsh. Is that going to effect the other seasons for the rest of this year? Or has it effected this season thus far?

RE: Oh, I guess I'm one that believes that if the summer's harsh and all why we can just... if it's got a lot of heat with it, humidity and really is pressing down on us, I would say that the winter will balance that out. I guess I believe in this business which we do, if we have an extreme one way why then it will get balanced out somewhere along the line. I would say that last summer's heat and all that we went through, well, it was about time for a harsh winter to balance things out. So, I don't know, that's just a theory I can't back it up. I always said that the feeling that if we had a lot of moisture and all in the summer time well then maybe, just maybe, the fall will level things out and we'll have a good harvest time and we'll have a lot of rain delays and all that. So, that's just my thinking that it usually washes out, evens out.

CL: Why, this is kind of an elementary question, do you plant in the spring and harvest in the winter?

RE: Harvest in the fall?

CL: Harvest in the fall, I mean.

RE: Well, that's just a cycle of life, I think. You always think that spring's... after we've taken the blunt and the blow of winter and all why it's a time of creation and a time of regeneration. I guess that's why spring time is flower planting time as well as crop planting time. I would say that that's why spring's a good time when we start grass. And then the fall. I think we couldn't go from spring to fall without the summer because the summer is the heat and the timely rains and all. That's what makes the crop and gets you all ready for storing things up for a long, hard winter. I don't know what it would be like to... I'm sure there are places around, or some place in the world, where the season's pretty constant, you know, it's hard to differentiate between the spring and the summer and the fall and the winter. That's my theory or philosophy or whatever about that.

CL: Well, that makes sense. I was just asking that question for some reason or another. Is there any way to, kind of, predict how, or to know, that the spring will be this way or the winter will be that way? I know before you said that if you have a harsh winter then you may have a not so harsh summer and it kind of evens out. Is there any real way to predict that or is it just instinct?

RE: I think it's just a hope. We all live with some hope, I believe. That's just my hope. I just cross my fingers and hope that it will even out. I would say that probably the thing that influences, I mean, the most would probably be the jet stream. I don't watch weather, per say, that closely, but I do have a 24 hour weather box or whatever and I listen to that just about everyday. You know, turn it on and just kind of get the feel of how many days til the next rain or will expect some sunshine or whatever- even during the winter. So, I would say that's... I know there's no control over the jet stream that I think of. So, I do have everyday my ear to the weather somehow but not much other than that. Did I answer your question or did I go around it?

CL: Yeah. What did the weather box say for today?

RE: We're supposed some sunshine, or see some sunshine, before the day's out.

CL: Oh good. I think we're in need of that. When do you usually plant in the spring. What day do you start planting or does it all depend on the weather?

RE: Well, it depends on the weather but I would say by the last of March to the middle of May- usually the middle of April you're thinking about getting some moles in or getting some of your spring seeding done. And then toward the end of April clear through the middle of May to the latter part of May, depending on the weather, is when we plant the corn, corn crop. And towards the latter part of May, around the 20th through the 30th, usually you start to consider cutting hay. So, I would say in that April/May time is usually when things really start buzzing.

CL: Do you think that people have always started planting that early or is that a newer technology?

RE: I would say it's just the time of the seasons. I would think it would go back 30, 40, 50 years

and all and I would think it's just a normal thing that starts happening down on the farm at that time of year.

CL: When do you harvest, then?

RE: Well, harvesting starts, of course, through the summer for hay, so in effect you're harvesting, the potential to harvest is from the last of May clear through til well sometimes if the weather permits you harvest hay right up into September and if you're fortunate enough you may get something out of the first part of October. The corn silage will come off in September usually and then you harvest the grain and the ear corn and all like that. Usually you think of October as being a good start for the harvest and then usually by Thanksgiving why things are usually wrapped up. So, that October/November period is for corn and then you know you start backing up a month for corn silage and then, of course, that about the general harvest times or span.

CL: Do you ever grow anything in the winter time? (Pause) Or do you just let your fields rest?

RE: Yeah, let 'em rest and take care of what has to be taken care of as far as the animals are concerned.

CL: Do you think that some seasons are more profitable than others or is it just kind of a cycle where everything is profitable?

RE: Well, you need to look at profit as being... Profit comes from management decisions, I believe as well as... well I would say it's an all managements decision. And with time limits I would say that that would be something that would be spread out throughout the year. The only thing being that if you have different systems and you know for us we're looking at grazing so therefore we think that that's where we can cut some costs and the cows are grazing we rotate them through the paddox and all. I would say that that's a little better than feeding them in the winter time and then you have to clean up after them. Of course, not so much providing water but you don't have to haul water to 'em, it's there. But then you gotta keep 'em clean and also... It's all a balance, it all kind of washes out so to speak. I would say that it's just a year to year from beginning to end. You know, it's all the profits from beginning to end.

CL: How do you prepare for extreme weather, like an early frost or a drought?

RE: You don't. At least in my mind I can't think of how. There's... I guess, in an extreme like that, you think of something you can do to rescue a crop or utitize it to the point that it's still usable. And um, there's some things occationally that you can do that will help you on that. I know one year when we, I can recall when the weather was really turning dry on us and we had some oats that looked nice and I chopped them, you know normally I would have taken 'em off the green, but I chopped them and put them in the silo. So, like a decision like that you can... yeah, we lost the straw but then at the same time why if the corn is going to be short why then you can cut them off, chop them and put 'em in the silo. You know, things like that. Those are just management decisions that you have to call the shot and then say this is what we're gonna do and hope for the best. So, in an extreme you can adjust.

CL: So, you kind of save them before they go under?

RE: You know, when they're only so tall, you figure that the oats are only that tall (shows with hand how tall they are) and they ought to be about like this (moves his hand farther from the floor) why you just make a call and say this is what we're gonna do and just go do it. So, yeah, there's sometimes when you can adjust.

CL: How do you deal with really wet weather?

RE: If I had a choice, I would prefer a drier year over a wet year any day. That's my preference and I'm sure there's others out here who are totally opposite of that. But, I've seen in times past where around here we could usually cultivate the corn and keep the corn a coming and keep things coming that... I by far would rather handle a dry year than I would a wet year because it's just harder to manage the rain. Yeah, we've been through some droughts. There was one year, it was the drought of was it '88, I mean we had a month or better solid no rain. And we got started making the hay early and it was short. But what we did put up was good stuff. And then again, like I said I sometimes believe things will balance out, and then it was right around the middle to the latter part of July and then we started getting rains and that brought on another cutting of hay and it saved the corn crop. We didn't have any big... busting yields or anything like that but we did end up with a crop- I think we ended up with an 80 bushel crop. Yeah, it was hurt but we ended up with a crop. So, that's the way I recall '88.

CL: What kind of technology do you use? How advanced would you consider yourself to be?

RE: We're not too advanced. As far as feeding cows for production and things like that, you know, right now they're talking TMRs and splitting your herd. Usually farms that have TMRs or have stayed on top of the feeding programs that split the herds, they'll have a high production group and a low production group and then they'll probably, once the cows are dried off and they're given their two month resting period and all why ideally you should separate them from any feed that the milking cow has been in. I would say that I am not there yet. I would say I'm in an early stage of trying to adapt some newer things to this in order to, hopefully drive our production per cow. Over the years I can see how our production... I remember the days when we only had a ten-twelve thousand pound herd average and then we made a move and I saw it go to fourteen. Then we made another adjustment and basically it was just feeding. That's basically been it. I would say feeding and probably genetics has worked. Over a period of time, using AI (artificial insemination) has probably brought our herd average on a steady incline. We're now at a 17 thousand pound herd average. They say to pay the bare bones and exist, takes about a 15/15.5 herd average. And so I'm a little above that but I guess a goal that I have is to hit eventually to a 20 thousand pound herd average which is 3 thousand pounds probably. The only way I think I could get there now is through feeding and management. Genetically, I think the cows... I have cows who are potentially gonna do that because I already got some 20 thousand pound cows. Some of those that are down below that pulls the average down. Did I answer that question or do you feel that I've done it justice?

CL: Yup. What kind of technology do you employ in your fields?

RE: As far as cropping?

CL: Yeah. Do you use no-till or do you use anything that is kind of a newer development?

RE: I would say that no-till is probably the most recent one to look at. I haven't been a real great lover of no-till in that you take some of the tillage practices out and then you have to rely more on chemicals. I am somewhat reluctant about that. Needless to say, we'll probably end up going with it anyway.

CL: Why do have to use more chemicals?

RE: In order to burn down the crop residue or what's there. So, if you put cost against cost, cost comparison against... no-till versus minimum tillage or conventional or anything like that you usually... say no-till saves money on fuel well yeah but I'm still being expensed by dollars or by dollars in order to purchase a product to burn down something. So, there's a... I would say it's a wash out because I'm sure in some point in time that you know there's one that will be financially... How do I want to say that? Dollar for dollar you'll probably end up, I would say just about even. You know what I'm talking about? You're just exchanging fuel and man hours and stuff like that getting the soul prepared whereas with the other one you're just going in there and spraying it, burning it down and then going passed and planting.

CL: So, you think financially they kind of even out?

RE: Yeah, even though I think that if you talk to most no-till farmers they'd say that they've saved money. I don't want to say they don't know but I think, like anything now in farming, if you keep an eye on your expenses and all before and after like that you might not be saving near as much as you think you are.

CL: I don't know if you have an idea of other farmers in Knox County but do you consider Knox County to be pretty conventional, stick to older methods or is it pretty advanced?

RE: I would say that most of the farmers are grasping and really taking a look at more technologies. No, I don't think we're living in a stone age or anything like that. Some just grab it and run faster than others, you know. I think it's just like a matter of time before it's an accepted practice. However, I do think that I would say that we've gone maybe from conventional and went maybe clear to the extreme of let's no-till everything. But I still kind of think right there in the middle of the road, which we call minimum tillage and all like that, that's probably where we'll all fall in that category, I would say farmers overall. Because, yeah, we still embrace no-till but then they still will probably come back to using some kind of tillage. Over the next 5-10 years I can't see that there'd be a whole lot of us that are just strictly no-till. They'll still be a fellow that pulls his plows out every once in a while. Like I said, most of us make manage decisions, or this is what I'm gonna do, and they just read the soul and decide this is what I'm gonna do and do it.

CL: Well, to shift gears a little bit, I just wanted to ask some kind of general questions. And the first one has to do with stereotypes and myths of the family farm. I know that a lot of people in

my class, before taking this class, had some preconcieved notions of the farm like it was a really, not relaxing way of life, but a simple and kind of calm, pastoral way of life. And a lot of us have noticed that it's not at all and it's extraordinary amounts of work and you're up at 5:30 or 6 every morning. Are you aware of any stereotypes or myths that other people hold of the family farm? And is there any truth to these myths, do you think?

RE: You talking about like myths that you like our counterparts, such as people from the city and all think...

CL: Yeah.

RE: I don't know. From what I've read in the past I've kinda... Of all the people that, the people in the city and all. They look over all the people that do, have businesses or services or whatever like that. I've understood in the past that they hold some people higher, are viewed as, I don't want to say an ideal, and then there are some that are kind of at the bottom. Most salesmen usually hit the bottom- car salesmen and people that... I kind of feel that, over all, that a farmers kinda... that they're up there, viewed as an important part and the function that they perform is important in the economy and the country. Like I say, it's probably more important than the fella out making a living selling cars. I don't regard myself as any more important than him. I'm just doing this because that's what I feel is my call. So, I don't know if I can answer that adaqetly for you or not.

CL: This may be a hard question for you to answer but how would you define family farming? If someone from another planet came down and asked you, or someone from the city, asked you what family farming was how would you define it?

RE: I was say a functioning enterprise that involves fathers, sons, daughters probably for the sake of work, for accomplishing a task or whatever. It involves a family for the purpose of existing and carrying on a business. I would say that that would be the way I would define family farming. I think it has probably changed a lot in the last years, the last few years, in that you know like not only on the farm but also in counterparts in the city where the wife is usually has to pick up a job too and work and so that's come down to us now on the farm too. It's not too much different in that respect for us versus those who are the city. It's just harder to make a living that we once did back in the 70s and the 60s.

CL: Do you think the family relationships between father and son and grandson and grandfather are different on the family farm then from a family in the city? Do you think your interactions are different?

RE: I think relationships are what you make them to be. If a family really likes and really loves their relationships between sons and daughters and all like that why you'll find a stronger quality tendency to you know want to just stay here because the atmosphere's good. So, I would say that, in my opinion, that exists as well in the city as well here. It's just that maybe it involves a business is more to a degree than in the city. That creates a problem too when we like everybody and sons don't come back why then what do we do with the business- you got only one direction to go and that's expand or do whatever like that. That creates a call for management.

CL: I know you grew up on the farm and it's been in your family for a long time so I just wanted to ask you some questions about growing up on the farm. What are some of your memories from growing up on the farm. I'm sure there are plenty because this is where you spent all of your growing years but what sorts of jobs did you have while you were growing up and kind of chores and what kind of activities did you do around here with your free time?

RE: Well, a lot of it was calf feeding- that was a must and an essential part of chores. I would say that next to that was before I turned to be a teenager, before the years that I was very helpful at all on the field, why mowing grass. I don't know if I can say weather that was fun or not. Seem like now that you can ride the tractor or something while you mow grass, back then we pushed it. I'm grateful that we've got lawn tractors now. I think that all developed a good work ethic, however, I do think that I wish that somehow we would have had taken the chance or the opportunity to maybe play sports or gotten involved in that because not much fun and it was all work and no play. I didn't sense that... of course I grew up right in the 50s and the 60s and I just sense that it was a strong work, driving work force or whatever. It was get the work done and all like that. I feel like if I can say it I was cheated a little bit because of that. I suppose, if you're trying to read into it, maybe I have a grudge that my parents didn't let me do things and I suppose, in a way, it's the opportunity was there but I just didn't say I want to do this. I just felt like that the work and the chores gotten ingrained in me so long that I thought it was probably best to just not even mention it and just go ahead with the usual and not even pursue it. I do say that since then why you know... my sons have been in sports and they've gotten to do a whole lot more things than I ever done when I was a boy. I hope they appreciate it when they grow up.

CL: What made you stay on the farm? While you were growing up, did you always think that you were going to be a farmer? Did you ever think about anything else?

RE: Yeah, I probably by I would say my senior year and all I decided that that's what I was gonna do. I think if you were talking to my dad that he'd probably would reply by saying "No, I'm not sure what he's gonna do." But I think by my senior year I'd pretty well decided that was when I knew what I was gonna do with my life. I would say back in when I was 15 or 16 years old I could have probably changed my interest, I don't know, change the direction. I think that I could have looked at becoming a pastor or looked at being a minister or something like that. Like I said, I passed up on that.

CL: Do you think that your life as a child growing up on the farm was a lot different from your friends who, or people in town, who lived off the farms?

RE: The only thing that would be any different would be the demands of time and doing chores. That would be the only thing that I thought might be different. That's the only thing that I could see that would be the most different.

CL: Do you feel that you spent more time, and do you feel more now, that you spend more time interacting with your family because you're working with them then someone not living on a farm? Would you consider your relationship with your family unique?

RE: I wouldn't say our relationship is that much unique. I think, like I said, relationships are what you make it out to be and you want it to be. I wouldn't say that it's any more unique than our counterparts in the city. I do think that we have the opportunity to work together- that's probably the unique factor of the whole thing versus being in town. When I think of somebody in town I think the only thing they really have to do is maybe mow the grass and trim the hedge and things like that. But out here why we got a little more to do than just mow grass and trim hedge. We gotta think about harvesting and the crops. That factor makes the bond a little bit tighter, I would say. They're working together. That doesn't necessarily make everything relationally good and strong but I think that we just have a job to do and we do it.

CL: Do you think that your growing up on the farm was different than your children's growing up on the farm with advancement in technology?

RE: I can't say technology had too much to do with it. The only thing I think the kids have gotten would be the freedom to participate in sports and those extracurricular activities related to school and those functions. When I grew up, we had 4-H and I was in 4-H and they're in 4-H. That opportunity is there. As far as vacations, I can say that we have probably are taking as many vacations as we did when I was... It was about every year we could count on when I was a freshman through my senior year we used to spend a week. We'd go to a church camp and that was... we done that religiously for a short time. I don't think right now what you'd say a good vacation for at least 2 or 3 years. We've only had a few days here and there but just get up and go somewhere different, no. I would say that's one part of my childhood I remember real well was those summers down in West Virginia and then the last few years just before I was married Marilyn I went to Georgia, down to Eaton. We had camp meetings down there. So, I would say those are memorable