

**March 13, 2013**

**Workshop of Blake Gendebien, Lisbon, NY**

**Project: Archie Green Fellowship: Dairy Farm Workers in Northern NY**

**Interviewer: Hannah Harvester (HH)**

**Interviewee: Blake Gendebien (BG)**

**Transcribed by: Mimi Rooney**

0:00:00

HH: It's March 13, 2013; this is Hannah Harvester with TAUNY, and I'm here with Blake Gendebien and we're here in Lisbon, and we'll be speaking about Blake's family farm. Could you start out by giving a little bit of personal history about yourself and this farm?

BG: Sure, I grew up here in Lisbon on a small dairy farm; 350 acres, 56 milking cows, and just for your information it's right above your shoulder [*referring to a framed photograph*]; that is where I grew up. Then I left and studied agriculture at Penn State University and got a job with a large farm equipment manufacturer and worked overseas and in the United States for about 5 years and then met my wife in Atlanta. My father called and said, "Would you like to buy that farm," which is actually that one; when I bought it it looked like that [*referring to another framed photograph*].

HH: We are looking at photos on the wall.

BG: We're looking at photos on the wall, that's right. When I bought it it looked like that one. The land is contiguous to my father's, so it was a good opportunity. I asked my wife, "Would you like to do this?" She's from Washington Heights in New York City, and she said, "Yes, let's do it," because then at least I would be sleeping in the same bed every night rather than travelling so much. That seems to be a rite of passage in the corporate world; you have to do your travelling time, which I wasn't enjoying. So it's a wonderful place to start a family, on a farm, so we bought it and we have really worked hard to improve it and clean it up, and we formed an LLC with my father, merged cattle and equipment, kept the land out of the LLC and private and have begun an equity transfer that started 10 years ago. Now we are milking a 160-cow herd and we farm about 8 to 9 hundred acres. We also sell a lot of grain, 20 to 30 thousand bushels of corn grain we sell. The sad news is that that subsidizes the dairy.

0:03:00

HH: I just want to make sure I have this clear; you and your father milk together and it's just the crop land that you have?

BG: It's owned separately, it's outside of the LLC for liability, and that way if someone gets hurt, if a tractor hits a school bus or something like that, they can only come after cattle and equipment, not land, which is pretty common now on the farms, they are set up as LLCs. Also, it's a good way to transfer equity, so a younger generation on a farm, especially the larger the farm is, can't possibly buy in, it's too much money, so the LLC will allow for sweat equity, or work, your physical labor, so you may only get paid a very small amount, but the LLC will compensate you with ownership. That also gets the elder generation out and the younger generation in. As far as land goes, typically the elder generation will use that as a tool to, if you have brothers and sisters or something like that, to make an inheritance equitable. I don't know how every family will do it, it's different, but it's one of the largest concerns in the dairy industry today is equity transfer and legacy transfer; not placing a burden on the future farm generation, but also most farm children don't stay on the farm, they leave, so the parents or the senior generation has an obligation to make that other generation feel whole or happy. So a lot of time is spent in the industry now on equity and estate planning so that the farm is not hurt economically, yet all children feel their chores as teenagers is rewarded equitably. That's a real common thing right now.

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HH: That's become an issue because so many farms are not being passed on to the next generation?

BG: Maybe one or two of the next generation, but it is rare that all children stay, very unusual.

0:05:35

HH: What year did you buy this farm?

BG: 2003.

HH: Now, you were working for the farm equipment manufacturer, did you have in your mind that you would one day want to end up back on the farm?

BG: I always wanted to. A lot of my job was visiting farms in the U.S. and in Europe and it was every time I visited a farm I felt like, "Geez, I would love to come home." But honestly between you and me, it's not an easy thing to find a woman, a spouse, who is committed to that lifestyle. Luckily my wife's father was a superintendent of an apartment building, and a first generation Cuban immigrant, so he worked really hard. So in her mind what a father is, is a guy that works 7 days a week anyway, so her expectations are on track with what my lifestyle is,

which is fine. That is very difficult; I can think of 2 owners that tried to farm here and I believe that 2 of them, 1 ended in a divorce because the woman's expectations were not being met for her time with her husband and the second was ownership was transferred to avoid a divorce. It's very common.

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HH: Everyone I have spoken to so far, the spouse has come from a farm background, so I can see how that could be difficult if that weren't the case.

BG: Yeah, it is hard. It is; it is hard. Many subtle things are different.

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HH: When you came here, did you increase that herd with your father?

BG: Yeah, mostly internal herd growth.

0:08:00

HH: So farming has been in your family for a long time?

BG: Not really, we are still considered new. This would be interesting. So my father bought his farm. He left South America with Mom; they were in the Peace Corps and the AID. They were kicked out of Bolivia when it turned Communist; it was right around Ché Guevara. They were there when the Ché was captured. When Bolivia turned Communist, all Americans were kicked out. So they were heartbroken because they were really doing everything for the right intentions. So they decided to go to the middle of nowhere and buy this farm, which is how we ended up here. They never really fit in for a long time because in a small community like this, everyone is related. So for example, the Akins, they have been here forever. The Putneys they have been here forever. The Nelsons, they have been here forever. The Cruikshanks and the O'Brien's, all surrounding farms have been here forever. Mom and Dad's farm is still called the LaRue farm, so they have been here since 1970 and their farm is still called the LaRue farm. My farm is called the Thompson farm and will be for a long time, so that is an interesting dynamic, that you really have to be here for 2 or 3 generations before you are really going to stay.

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HH: Would you consider your parents back-to-the-landers?

BG: No, no they were not. They joined the Peace Corps because they were in love with JFK, not because it was granola and San Francisco, although Mom did go to Berkley. They joined for the right reasons, not that those were the wrong reasons; for the real social conscience, not

because it was hip. Mom really loved JFK, she thought he was wonderful, so they were kind of pre-, I'm not sure what the word is that is appropriate to use, and then they came here, not because they were back-to-the-landers, just because they wanted to be alone I think, and Dad liked to work. Mom was a Spanish teacher and taught Spanish at a public school. But no, they were not back-to-the-landers.

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HH: Can you briefly tell me what systems you have on the farm; milking, transport, manure?

BG: For the cows we use a pipeline or tie-stall system and we have 8 milking units. Cows stay in one spot and the milking units get moved through the barn and it goes to a large 3000 gallon tank that is picked up every other day. It then, 9 times out of 10 goes to Chateaugay, New York to the McCadum Cheese Plant, which is owned by Agri-Mark. Agri-Mark has 2 brands: McCadum and Cabot. From there it goes mainly as cheddar cheese to the dinner table or the snack tray, if that is what you meant, I don't know?

HH: I just wanted to get a picture.

BG: Also, regarding sustainability, a dairy farm is probably...the word "sustainable" originated on a dairy. *[Cell phone ringing]* Just a second. *[Recording paused and resumed]* So the word "sustainable" I think originated on a farm. I know it is hip now, but there is no other way to farm. The only things that leave the farm are water that the cows drink, and the milk. Everything else stays here and has to, or else you deplete the land that you are farming. So it is a constant cycle and if you are not responsible with your manure management, you are going to go out of business because you are going to have to buy too much fertilizer, your crops are going to be poor and you are not going to have the milk production that you need, or the animal health that you are going to need. So it is really important to keep everything on the farm and spread out perfectly. You maximize your resources, and it's not as much environmental, reducing the carbon footprint or any of that stuff, it's really about profitability. It is the only way to do it, or else you won't be profitable, if you are not environmentally responsible.

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HH: You are using liquid manure?

BG: Yeah, and you have to be very careful. You have to start with your neighbors, call them ahead of time, find out if they are going to have a pool party, okay, if they are not going to have a pool party all right, it is going to be fine. Then you have to spread so many feet away from waterways and wells, but around here...I would say in a more urbanized area like south eastern

Pennsylvania, you have to be much more careful of personal well casings and things like that, but around here there are not many homes. It's not a real concern for us; we don't check peoples' wells because we are far enough way. But I think you need to have green buffer zone from wells and waterways. Waterways are a different concern and we are close to waterways, so we just stay away from them.

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HH: Do you have a CAFO plan? [*See additional notes for explanation*]

BG: I am not a CAFO farm, which doesn't really matter because I kind of operate like one anyways. CAFO regulations are okay, they are not bad. I would say that most farmers do them already anyway, what bothers farmers are that capital cost; some of these projects are not funded. So we don't sell our milk for enough money to pay for these CAFO capital purchases like concrete to capture rainwater runoff and things like that. These are things that are expensive to do and the milk really doesn't pay for it.

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HH: Are you growing all of your own feed?

BG: We're growing all of our own feed and that model seems to be working right now because the cost of inputs of grain energy like corn and protein like soybean are extremely expensive due to international export demand and probably the ethanol mandate. So the ethanol mandate has created a real demand for corn which has driven up the price. So western dairies, Utah, western Texas, Arizona, California, they have a purchase feed model and they are losing a lot of milk pretty rapidly because they just can't afford to purchase that feed.

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HH: What do you grow?

BG: We grow corn, and alfalfa, and we are planning on growing, when I say corn I mean corn silage and grain corn, and then we have alfalfa, we have just like grass hay and we're going to start doing some soybean this year as a rotation with the corn.

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HH: Are your cows pastured?

BG: I would call it a small pasture. In the summertime they go out every day, they have access to pasture yes.

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HH: Who works on your farm and what is the division of labor?

BG: Can you pause it for a second? [*Recording paused and resumed.*] So we have my father and I. He is 69, I am 36. We have Tony, he is 45, Carlos is 22, and Chris is 20 or 21. That is basically the full-time help. Then we have Matthew Farris, a college student at Jefferson Community College will work this summer and we have Evan Robinson, a unique 16 year old boy who lives up the street and he is fantastic, he's wonderful. It is very unusual to find kinds that want to work and he is great summer help, too. Like I mentioned before, we will have a Japanese intern this summer, which we are all looking forward to.

HH: That should be very interesting.

BG: Very fun.

0:18:06

HH: This Evan, does he only work in the summer?

BG: Evan only works in the summer, but he has been working with us since he was 14 and he will do anything without complaining and shows up on time, he is very responsible, he is just a nice kid.

HH: Does he want to go into farming?

BG: No, no, no, no, but that is what is unusual. His dad's a lawyer, his mom is a professional at Hepburn Hospital, but he enjoys the farm, but I don't think he will go into farming; he is too smart.

0:18:50

HH: How do you divide the labor on your farm?

BG: My dad is extremely mechanically inclined so he works in the shop. He spends a lot of time repairing equipment and driving the tractor, too. Carlos, Chris and Tony spend a lot of time with cows, which is what I used to do, but it got to be too much for me, so it was just not physically possible anymore and I do more of a management role with those guys. I do not milk anymore, but could end up milking at any point in time, I always feel like that. I feel like it's a constant, well, I am resting up until I don't have help anymore. So, that is how I feel, but it is still a lot of work. I am picking stones, its constant help with those guys basically every day. Then field work comes and I am picking stones and planting crops and cutting hay. Summer times are really really busy. The paperwork is phenomenal, even just for a 150 cow dairy.

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HH: So you are the paperwork person and do the financial stuff?

BG: Yep. I delivered a calf yesterday, it is just the daily grind is not there for me, the daily milking is not there for me. I have much more flexibility, like this. If it weren't for this manual labor, I wouldn't be doing this.

0:20:53

HH: How many milkings a day do you do?

BG: Just 2. Our number of employees per cow is extremely high because of the tie stall pipe line milking arrangement. It is really labor intensive and takes 2 guys to milk. Two guys and 4 hours to milk 150 cows, so that is 8 hours a day spent milking cows, and then you also have chores on top of that. So each guy works about 12 hours a day, 6 ½ days a week, which is their choice. So imagine I would have to find, there is 3 Hispanic employees, they would need to be replaced by probably 6 local people, and it's hard to find one local person that doesn't have domestic abuse problems, alcohol problems, wage garnishments. So when you hire these local guys, all of a sudden you are bombarded with social program stuff, like what do you call it? I am not in that world so I do not know. So court will call you, "Is Brian showing up to work, what is Brian making?" He has a child with this girl; he has a child with this girl. He has a court date he needs to appear on this date. So you have all these plans and these guys have to leave for court all the time because they are in custody battles and child support battles and they want me to lie and tell that they don't make this much. It is just awful and they show up late, they drank too much; there is just not a labor force out there.

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HH: It's not the first time I heard that.

BG: Yeah, it's a miracle that there is milk on the shelves, it really is, I feel. When I see cheese it is even more of a miracle because it left a farm and went through a crazy process to become cheese.

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HH: When you came on the farm in 2003, was the farm operational?

BG: It was.

HH: Did you do any major changes?

BG: The family that we bought it from, they bought it when it looked like that [*referring to photograph on wall*]. He was a retired sheriff and retired Vietnam vet and he became depressed. I think he thought when he bought it like that; he thought that it was going to be a wonderful lifestyle. It slowly disintegrated and he slowly self-destructed. He pulled his children from school, they became home-schooled; they weren't getting any education at all, they were working. He would have days when he couldn't leave the house because he was so depressed, so eventually he lived off the depreciation of the farm which meant once nothing worked anymore he sold it and they left the area. He came, destroyed the farm—a fairly nice farm—in about 8 years, but that being said, it gave me the opportunity to buy it. Maybe if it was functioning and really prospering, I maybe couldn't have afforded it. We put a lot of money into it, we rebuilt the whole thing, and now it looks like that [*referring to photo*], so it is much nicer.

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HH: Do you and your dad do the building work or do you hire?

BG: We hire a corrections officer who, you probably know, they don't have much self-worth in their jobs as correction officers, so they will work extra time and get maybe 3 or 4 weeks' vacation, and in that vacation they will do things, plumbing, electrician work, just so they feel some self-worth. We have a gentleman who works a lot with us for hunting rights, too. So we gave him all hunting rights, he can hunt all 800 acres and he does the work for basically materials, but he also gets some self-worth, he gets the hunting rights, and we get a guy we trust to do a lot of work and a good deal. He did my house, he did the barn; he did a lot of things.

HH: Interesting.

BG: Yeah.

0:26:05

HH: I heard a couple people working with Amish to help with their building and doing bartering arrangements.

BG: Yeah, that is true, too. Now the bigger projects, like that half barn in the back that is a much larger project that 1 or 2 guys can't do, so we hired a builder called Burns Construction to do that. You can see the manure pit, it is clay-lined, and so nothing can be. I guess you should see this stuff, so stay there and I will bring it to you. [*Brings a large paper map from office showing current farm buildings and plans for farm expansion.*] So this is a company out of Pennsylvania, Ephrata, in southeastern Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. Here is the manure pit, so it is an engineered manure pit and this is the new barn in red. So this is the as-built drawing over top of



the engineer drawing. So a lot of thought went into just that right there; so it looks like a barn and some dirt, but there is a lot of thought that has gone into it with future expansion, future feed storage, waste water runoff, like a leach field from the feed storage, a methane digester, and everything is built so that myself or a future owner has the ability to expand barns from here to here to here. Then my existing facility is here, but it ties into this manure pit, also. Then the manure pit is certified, so I have a stamp from an engineer. So if anybody came and said . . .

HH: Can I take a picture of that?

BG: There is a lot that goes into it, behind the scenes. If I was a CAFO dairy, a lot of this would be forced, but this is just what you do if you want to have a future in the dairy industry, a viable future. Now that may never happen, those additional stages, that additional manure pit, but the plan is there and then I haven't ruined anything for future generations by just guessing where buildings should go. I think it is set up pretty nicely that if one of my children or the next person that farms here wants to expand, and then the plan is laid out.

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HH: How far in the future are you thinking in terms of plans for the farm?

BG: It is really hard because we did this when milk was really profitable. Right now milk is not profitable so it makes much more sense to plant corn and not run the corn through a cow to sell the milk. It makes much more sense to plant the corn and just sell it out of the field, and it's just a lot of work to run through the cow, so we are not doing that. That kind of messed with the plans. So if this is the kind of environment we are in; the farm is going to stay like this because financially, if I think like a business person and not with my heart it makes no sense to add cows right now, it doesn't for me. Maybe for another person it makes a lot of sense, but for me it doesn't. It would make sense to reduce my herd size a little bit, but that is too hard to do because it took ten years to get it to here. So that is a difficult thing to back away from.

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HH: Are you actually losing money on the milk?

BG: Two out of three years we lost money on the milk. 2009, pretty much every dairy in the United States lost \$750 to \$1000 a cow. So we had 150 cows, so we lost \$150,000. We had to borrow \$150,000 for nothing. It's not like we have something to show for it, for making food.

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HH: So why are you sticking with dairy?

BG: Because in the long term, what I really enjoy is, I put the soccer field here, so there are two small nets, I don't know if you can see that, so I can play soccer with my 3 boys here. They run and they play, they have go carts, they can do whatever they want and I don't have to really worry about them. My sisters come from Las Vegas and New York City and have a blast. My wife's family comes from New York City and they have fun. My parents are right there, it is just a nice way to live, and it's not really about the money. You are building wealth though, that's different. There is not a lot of cash, but there is wealth, and if you are smart that could be a positive in later years.

0:32:38

HH: When did you start selling the corn?

BG: We've been selling a little bit of corn since I have been back on the farm for 10 years, but small amounts. In the last 2 years we have really started to sell a lot more. That is based off of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and futures prices and that is responding to the drought and the ethanol mandate and the global demand for U.S. crops. The United States, we are awesome at making food, nobody can do it like us; that is one thing that we can do. I don't know why that is, but we are good, we are really good at it. Other countries struggle, they just can't get the commitment from their people, they can't get the infrastructure, the government can't provide a secure environment to ship and we just seem to be able to do it.

0:33:38

HH: Does your wife work at all on the farm?

BG: No, no, she has the business in Canton. [*Business referred to is a salon in Canton, opened in 2010*]

HH: How important is that to the overall economic picture for you?

BG: For our family? Long term it is important. Right now we are trying to pay the whole thing off in about 5 years, so she is paying herself a little bit, but we decided as a team, a husband and wife team, let's just try to have the farm provide us with quality of life and money for living and let's pay down your business in Canton and then once it is paid down we'll decide, do we want to expand it to the upstairs and borrow again, or are we going to start seeing some cash. That is in response also to in 4 or 5 years my one son will be going to college soon, so maybe Carmen's cash will be transferred from debt payment to college payment. So that is what her business is doing there. We are just hammering down on that as quickly as possible. Every extra penny goes to debt.

0:35:08

HH: How would you describe your relationship to your animals?

BG: It's close. This morning I was curry combing cows, so that is what I was doing, I had an extra few minutes. This morning I pushed up feed, and cleaned feed and was curry combing cows. Yesterday I was delivering a calf whose head was back, so you have to push it back in and bring the head forward. So there is a lot of care for the animals because healthy animals make more milk. So it is a combination of labor of love and profitability. Healthy animals are more profitable.

(0:36:02)

HH: Do you have all Holsteins?

BG: Yeah, Holsteins. We had our first red and white which was born after Sabbath on the day of the Red Heifer. It was incredible. Sunday morning, was the Jewish holy week of the red heifer, our first red heifer calf was born. Is that cool?

HH: That's so cool.

BG: I know; we couldn't believe it. I didn't know. So I walked in Sunday morning and finally a red heifer was born which I have been breeding for for maybe 5 years, and I called a good friend of mine who is a rabbi in Boston, in Milton, and he said, "Are you kidding?" And I said, "No. Why?" He said, "It's the holy week of the red heifer." So he thinks we have a direct connection now, which is great. That is the type of thing is exciting and that is what we feel. The grind, early on when we were at 75 cows, it was really just me and one helper. The grind was too much. It was milking every day and you also are tired. It's like being a new mother, where you are exhausted all the time because there is this baby up every night that doesn't let you sleep. So you have this giant baby in the barn and something is always crying and something is always going wrong. The grind just kind of wears you out and then you make these errors. That is too much. I had a heifer freshening. They are tied up in the barn and this calf was huge. It had a giant head and her body was just too small so I had to use a chain and a tool that cranks to get this calf out. Well, I didn't notice that I was pulling the mother back and I strangled her. That is going to be with me for the rest of my life. So, I had a dead calf and a dead heifer. When you are tired, you are tired and alone and you make mistakes. That was one of the moments when I said, we have got to add cows and I have to get some help, so that is what we did. We doubled the herd size and got some help.

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HH: So you doubled the herd size to be able to afford help?

BG: Yeah, yeah, it was too much. I wasn't a good husband, I wasn't a good father. Carmen was having babies, we decided to do 3 babies in a row to just get it over with, and it was just a tough time. Increasing the herd size was a response to that. I would like to be active. I like to go to things, and wasn't able to do that. It sounds like I am complaining about dairying, but those are just the realities. Some people can, but I think most guys if they are alone, they are at that 50, 60 cow herd size, or have children that are there with them.

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HH: Do your boys do chores on the farm?

BG: My son Miles, every night, he's 9, he goes to the barn, he feeds his goats and he's hooked on the goats. He sold a few and got it figured out. So the money thing is driving him. He scrapes the manure from behind the cows. It's just an extra thing to do. Then he comes in the house and puts a black sharpie dot on the calendar and each dot equals 50 cents. Then I count up the dots at the end of the month and pay him his \$15 or whatever.

HH: Pretty good.

BG: Yeah, not bad for a 9 year old. Then he gets the profit from the goats, too, when he sells them. So he made \$600 on 7 goats last fall.

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HH: So he's the oldest and the only one doing chores right now?

BG: Yeah, there is a point, every kid is different, but there is a point in time when you can just kind of tell that they are ready to do it. If you force them into it, I think they are going to lose interest and maybe the other 2 will have zero interest and I will have to find something for them to do, but as farms grow—when I was a kid we fed the cows with wheelbarrows and scoops. So I really had chores to do as a teenager, but now its skid steers, tractors, large feeder mixers that have much more dangerous things that 9-year-olds shouldn't be doing. So the goats have worked out pretty good. They are small and it is kind of an old-fashioned thing for them to do. So that has been all right. Picking stones he will be able to do, but as far as yearlong chores, that is going to be hard to figure out.

HH: That is interesting.

BG: For me to figure out because I can't have them do thingthings that I was doing.

HH: Right, because they are just not happening the same way.

BG: Just not happening the same way, it's too dangerous and they need to be older. I worry that I would be able to attract their interest at an older age because by the time they are 16 and old enough to run a skid steer, they are just going to have no interest in the farm at all, but we will see. So the goats are working out as something to keep their interest.

0:42:15

HH: So the other boys are interested in the goats, too?

BG: Oh, yeah, in the summertime they chase goats, they are all over the place. But the winter time it is a little bit different. It's too cold, they are too small. The 7-year-old is really a small little guy, so he is just not ready yet. I don't know on a windy day if he can even make it to the barn.

0:42:40

HH: That is something that I would have never thought about, that the chores that you used to do don't exist in the same way. What is for you the most challenging aspect of dairy farming?

BG: The most challenging aspect is, it would be, that's a good question because you like everything, or else you would be crazy to do it. So the most challenging, last summer was my most challenging summer, the weather. You have no control over the weather and it didn't rain from May to August. I couldn't sleep. You would look out the window and it would be raining literally over there, but not here. Crops weren't growing, we didn't have enough feed for the winter, it was a very difficult time. It's extremely hard. You're watching boats go by, correction officers with their week off, teachers with their summers off, and their boats guy by right when you are in the field raking hay or something like that. That's frustrating. Not that I want that, but then they complain that cheese is too expensive or milk is too expensive. I am on the school board and they complain about stuff that is just really nothing to complain about it, from the perspective of a self-employed farmer. So you do lose a little bit of apathy (sic) for other people. It's hard to have apathy (sic) because admittedly—so we are in our own bubbles and it's a real difficult bubble: you have animals dying, you have crops failing, it's not wet, it's raining, and raining too much, all these things you don't have control over. You don't even have control over the price you sell your product for, so it's hard. It's really hard, but it's awesome too, that is what makes it awesome because nobody else wants to do it.

HH: You mean that you are filling this need?

BG: It's a very honorable thing, you are making food, there is not much better than that.

0:45:33

HH: What do you do when it doesn't rain?

BG: You just suffer. What has happened is, this year I will buy crop insurance, which costs you a lot of money up front, thousands of dollars up front, but if it doesn't rain, at least I will be covered, where last year, I borrowed \$100,000 to put the crops in and I wasn't getting my \$100,000 back because it wasn't raining, so it was very stressful. The financial stress as well as just a care for the land and for the crops; this year the bank told me, "If we're going to lend you \$100,000 again to put crops in the ground, you are going to need crop insurance. You have to reduce your risk." So risk, probably risk, there is a lot of risk: animal health, weather, insects, these are just things you don't have control over.

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HH: Did you end up having to buy feed?

BG: No, we barely got by, in the end we got by. It started to rain in August and we got by, but that summer was so stressful; it was really stressful. I am not going to do that again, I will buy crop insurance. It is challenging when I am spreading manure and people give me the finger, right? People don't understand and they go home and buy dinner or their wives feed them ice cream for dessert, right? That is very challenging. Even in the country here, the disconnect between what we are doing to make food. I get the finger a lot.

HH: Really?

BG: Yeah, a lot, and I am responsible. I am careful, I pull over to the side, and it has nothing to do with me personally, these are people I don't know, and that is frustrating. One time somebody was in a rush. I have a wide piece of equipment and they were in a rush to get to the Seaway Festival in Ogdensburg, and I know that's what it was, and they were late. I was hogging up the road because this machine is so wide and they pulled over at the stop sign up here, got out and yelled at me. But we just keep quiet. That leads me into a discussion with Border Patrol. So Border Patrol is up and down this road. I was talking to Chris. As far as I know, these guys are legal and I am not obligated to check, I am not obligated to e-verify. So I get the same paperwork from them as I get from anyone else and we move along. But Border Patrol will profile by skin color crossing the road and they will stop and then they will interrogate and scream at the person, and I know this, at the end of my parent's driveway. I keep looking at that driveway because that is where it has happened, I know this because the pastor of our church lives across the driveway and he called me and said, "A Border Patrol agent is screaming at your father." He thought it was my dad because they wear the same coveralls--saying, "You're a liar, you're liar, you're a liar," over and over again. As it turns out, this particular employee got taken away. So I called the soccer coach at Lisbon Central School, and I am the President at the Board at the school, the soccer coach is our employee and he is a 30 year Border Patrol agent. I said,

“Can you come to the farm? We need to talk about what is happening here. Do you understand it?” He told me, “I do. I have been here for 30 years and I don’t pick up farm workers, but we get young men and women from Arizona that are gung-ho, and all they want to do is pick people up.” And he said, “When they bring someone in, we have to support them, we can’t say no, because then they want our senior jobs. They will quickly say you are not supporting me with this illegal person.” Anyway, it was Christmas Eve, 2 days before Christmas, my wife was leaving for New York City to see her family and it was our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, so I needed help or else I was going to be stuck on the farm away from my family over the holidays. So I bailed Carlos out for \$10,000 to get some help over the weekend, but it was a very complicated process. And in the end the boss of the Border Patrol, of all 42 Border Patrol agents from Ogdensburg to Massena, said—he did not apologize directly but I would call it an apology. And he hinted to me that the State Police have asked him to be more lenient on the Mexican help because the farms are switching to Puerto Rican labor and the Puerto Ricans are scaring—it’s a race issue—are scaring the local community because they are free to roam around. The state police are getting frequent calls that there is a Hispanic and he rode his bicycle by my house, and so the state police have to respond to these calls and the state police actually asked Border Patrol to lay off the Mexican labor because the Mexicans stay on the farm and don’t leave the farm, so there is less wasted house calls for Puerto Rican labor. It is just this incredible labor issue, which is one little story. And its Puerto Ricans are free to move around and they are fine, there is nothing wrong with them, they are not doing anything wrong, but they are cruising around on bicycles and your local Lisbon person is freaked out. Calling, “They are at the gas station buying soda.” I’m sorry for that, but there is not much we can do.

0:52:31

HH: So you speak Spanish?

BG: Yeah.

HH: Were you already a Spanish speaker?

BG: Not really. I took 5 years of Spanish in school, in high school and college. My mother was a Spanish teacher, my dad speaks Spanish and of course my wife is Cuban so she speaks Spanish, and I have gotten better since we have hired Hispanic labor.

0:52:59

HH: So you can actually communicate with your Hispanic workers?

BG: Yeah. We have a totally different relationship with our Hispanic workers, too. We go swimming together in this pond. We have a really nice pond, we go swimming together, they

are allowed to go hang out there after work, they can do whatever they want. Carlos meditates, he is into metaphysics and he goes down and has a little towel and he meditates. Yeah, they are more like friends in a way. I think they appreciate that we speak Spanish.

HH: I can imagine that is a lot better . . .

BG: . . . than some of the other farms. We get much more out of them, too, because to these other dairies that don't speak Spanish, they're taskers. Like milking is a repetitive task, but here I speak Spanish, Carmen speaks Spanish, Mom speaks Spanish, Dad speaks Spanish, so we can explain things to do and they are very capable, incredibly practical, knowledgeable and capable. A thing that the local kids around here don't have; they don't have a practical independence and an ability to think and the knowledge like these guys do. Which is too bad, these other farms aren't getting that out of them, mainly because of the language barrier.

0:54:48

HH: Do you know about their backgrounds, did they come from farm backgrounds?

BG; No, none of them did. Chris came from Chicago. He worked at a restaurant; he is like a gourmet chef. He is only 20 and he is an incredible chef. Carlos was a college student in Pueblo in Mexico and he is building a beautiful home, he shows me pictures, he has a Facebook account. Tony is more of a classic story. He is in his mid-40s, he's been here much longer and he was paying for his daughter to go to nursing school, he has a home also they are slowly chipping away at. So all of the money goes back, there is no intention to stay here long-term.

HH: But they live here on the farm? Do they live together?

BG: Yes, in an apartment. The 3 of them live together, which they prefer. Hispanics are a little more social, I am not even going to say Americans, than white people. My wife talks about it a lot, family is family, and neighbors that you grew up with are cousins even though there is no blood relationship. Carmen will say, "She's my sister," and I will say, "Really?" and she will say, "Yeah, she grew up right around the block and we know each other so well." It's a Hispanic, *la familia*, it's totally different. It also gets them in binds. Carmen has this guilt to lend money and things like that, but anyway, and they lend money. They ask me, "Can you lend me money? *Prestarme?*" I always say, "No, I don't do that." They are like, "Well, we always do." I say, "But yeah, you are never going to get your money back." When are you ever going to figure that out? But their culture is much different.

0:57:05

HH: Are there other things besides the lifestyle of farming that keep you doing the job?



BG: Absolutely. I enjoy being outside. The summers outside are beautiful, they are just beautiful. If I wasn't farming I would probably have a big train set. I really enjoy that control. I like being able to say, "Today I think maybe I will do this." That comes from being self-employed I guess. Where I worked for that large company you were in it and you were told to execute when you were supposed to execute and you had very little leeway or very little personal risk. I do enjoy the personal risk as much as I say I don't like it, I can try something knowing that it might not work and not get punished for it not working. It also might result in something really great. This year we are going to try to plant soybeans. Well, it might not work out, but it might, and I like that. I like the smell of hay, I like the smell of corn, I like the smell of manure, I really do, and it's nice. It just feels alive and like something is happening. It means things are working, things are moving and that is good. I like providing food. I like that it is a beat down, I do.

HH: You mean that you are physically tired?

BG: Yeah, I do, I like that. I don't know why I like that. It's okay. It's almost like it's a religion, and you have a different outlook on life; you have a different thought process. Things are important to you that aren't important to somebody else. Its part of my personal development, personal growth, and I can see it in the kids already.

0:59:49

HH: Do you have a favorite season on the farm?

BG: Definitely summer, well, it's a combination of summer and then corn harvest is great. Corn harvest is clean. So much about farming is dirty and filthy, corn harvest is really clean. It's just this golden corn. Usually the conditions are nice and dry in the field and it's just this golden corn coming out, going through your fingers that is really nice, it's a really nice feeling, and it's all the work that led up to that point.

1:00:23

HH: I wanted to ask you this before when the red and white Holstein was born, why were you breeding for a red?

BG: Just for fun, no other reason, just for fun.

1:00:33

HH: Are you doing all the breeding, are you doing artificial insemination?

BG: I was doing all the artificial breeding myself, and I backed off that, too. I hired \$600 a month and somebody else comes and does it. That is well worth the money because I want to be there

for my kids. I take them to karate; I take them to play basketball. I am smart enough to know that these small schools are really unusual and these 60 student classes K-12 where if you want to play basketball, soccer or baseball, be in band, be in chorus, that's not the norm. You can participate in everything and I want my kids to do that. I want them to really enjoy these small schools, so I am going to fight for their viability because they are so special, they are like a little treasure of their own. When you go to a big university or something like that you find out that it is much harder to participate. So I am pushing my kids to participate in those activities and I want to be in their lives in that way, but if I have these things that I have to do every day at a certain time, I can't. So what I have done is I reduced that things that I have to do every day, those monotonous chores like milking and breeding on my farm has become a routine. It is a synchronized program with Canadatropin and Prostaglandin, so I give shots and I induce heats, so it's a combination of synchronization through shots and natural heats so they can be managed and recorded.

1:02:32

HH: So how long have you been doing that for?

BG: Oooo, a long time, maybe 8 years. I used to give all the shots and would have to be in the barn at a certain time because the shot has to be given at a certain time. It is just like when a woman wants to synchronize herself for maybe if she is having trouble getting pregnant and maybe has to give herself shots. It's the same thing and we do it for every cow, obviously much cheaper.

HH: Interesting.

BG: Yeah, it is interesting because the name of the game, especially in a farm this size there is no room for error. Just like in a car dealership they are getting bigger because the margin per sale is smaller. So the margin per cow is getting smaller. So the smaller you are the less room for error there is. The cow needs to have a baby. She peaks in milk at about 100 days. You want to have her pregnant at 70 days as her milk peak goes down she is dried off, then she is pregnant, dried off and they you quickly get her to have another baby, and the peak comes up again because it's not a zoo, the thing is still a business so you want to try to kind of have a zoo environment, but your money is not made through admissions, it is made through production of the animal, so there is a balance there. But we know that a healthy animal makes more milk, but there is only so much you can do. If milk was \$10 a gallon gosh, cows could be really treated lavishly, but there is a balance, there really is a balance.

1:04:27

HH: Have you ever felt forced to make a change due to the price of milk?

BG: I know some guys do feel like that, they get really mad that they are backed into a corner. I guess I am forced to react. I just have to react to the price fluctuations. It is what it is.

HH: If you had the power to change the whole system, what is the solution to that?

BG: I decided that I am not going to sit on the farm and cry about it, so I got on the Agri-Mark Board, which we make Cabot Cheese and McCadum Cheese. There are 14 of us and we can set policy; you do have a say. I am kind of for a supply management portion in the new farm bill so that—because it is strange; five percent too much milk kills the price, where if Nike had 5% too many sneakers, they would ditch them cheap in India and maintain the price here, not put all their sneakers on sale for half price. But because of World Trade Organization agreements, we cannot take that small amount of over-production and ditch it cheap in another country because that would be unfair, that might kill some type of global price. So what we could do is dump it down the drain and it would maintain our price. Dump it down the drain for 14 days collectively or something like that, and I am all for that, but a lot of guys are against that. That would be the government telling us what to do, and I think government does have a place, I am not a Tea Party guy, I am not a right wing guy, I am more of a moderate person. You asked me what bothers me a lot about dairy and I guess it is we are dictated by what the consumer wants. Unfortunately, the consumer has no idea what we do so the things like asking us not to give the cows BST shots or hormone shots, that is really silly. That is so silly to ask us not to do that. Basically it allowed the processor to charge 50 cents more by putting a sticker on. So ultimately the consumer is now paying more for BST free milk to compete with organic milk. So maybe the processor did it to, the processor was losing market share to organic milk, what can we do? We will call it BST free, so we can charge 50 cents to a dollar more and it is BST free, but it is really the same thing because BST is a natural hormone. When a cow has a baby, here is 0-100 days in milk. [*Demonstrating milk levels with hands—it goes from high to low*] It goes like this and she has a ton of bovine somatotropin in her. At maybe 70 days it starts to disappear naturally, so then her production goes down, but instead we could be giving the shot at 70 days of natural bovine somatotropin, which you can't even test for in the milk because it is in the milk anyway. This cow is a more efficient milking unit, so her carbon footprint is smaller; it is like taking 20 people on a bus rather than 1 person on the bus is the exact example, by a shot. There are no health problems, but the conception of the consumer is really frustrating because they don't understand what we are doing. We do a bad job of explaining this. If you look, in the 1950s, in 1942, there was I believe 40 million dairy cows, now in 2012, there is 9, so we are doing more with less. We can do even more with even less if we are allowed to use these tools. If you go in the woods, none of this is virgin trees, it was all pasture. If you go into the woods here, there is stone walls everywhere because it was fenced off, there was cows just roaming around. The perception in New York City of an Amish farmer with a stream behind with the cows drinking water out of the stream, that is not good, because where are the cows going to

the bathroom? In the stream and we go through all this great care of collecting the manure, reusing it on the fields. A certain buffer zone so many yards away from streams that is sustainable, that is the thing we are supposed to be doing, not letting our cows walk to a natural stream because it is convenient and just dropping manure and urine into the stream. It makes no sense, but in the consumer's mind, they want to see. So in the end, Agri-Mark, our dairy, the part that I am a member of the board, we have 1200 farms that make Cabot cheese, and of those 1200 farms, I think 100 make about half the milk, I believe. Don't quote me on that, but that is the gist. There are 200 Amish farmers that make probably 1% of the milk, yet this is the image that we sell and those are our farms [*referring to image on a Cabot cheese wrapper*]; that is my dad and I at the top, that is my farm in the middle, and that is my farm at the bottom. That is from Publics in Florida. Our farm is used on the wrapper for Publics Grocery Stores. Maybe it is our fault too because we sell an image that is not necessarily the real one. So I don't know what the balance is, I am not an expert, but in the end I guess it is a business, but for the farmer, himself or herself it is a lifestyle for sure; definitely a lifestyle. There is so much to say.

1:12:00

HH: Could you talk about sharing knowledge with other farmers?

GB: That brings me into more things that I enjoy. So we play basketball Wednesday nights and it is almost all farmers. A veterinarian from Heuvelton and we all played high school basketball, none of us were any good, it's just about laughing and having fun and it is almost made out of all farmers.

HH: Where is that?

GB: It's at Lisbon.

HH: At the high school?

GB: Yeah, Wednesday nights. We laugh and we joke and talk and ask each other what each other is doing and that is really a common thing. We meet at the diner, we talk about stuff, we visit, yet there is an elephant always in the room because we compete for the same land, for expansion, there is that elephant in the room kind of. When it all shakes out, there is no hard feelings, rarely. Maybe there is a couple farmer personalities that don't get along, but if you need help, somebody is always there, so that is a positive.

(1:13:36)

HH: What about the role of you farm in the larger community?

GB: We take a lot of pride in a very clean, clean, clean, clean place. The lawn is always mowed. There is no blade of grass longer around the fence post. We spend a lot of time on that. Everything is painted, everything is nice, and everything is neat, even the tires on the tarp. Right now things are gross because it is wet and muddy, so as far as that goes, I try to promote a very healthy clean environment for the community. I think it is my obligation to do that for the community. We've hosted open houses. We've hosted 3 open houses for the community to come take a look at what is going on.

1:14:43

HH: Is there anything else you would like to say right now?

GB: No, I think that is good. I feel like maybe it was a little negative and I am sorry for that, but it is not a negative thing, but it is not an easy thing. To be dictated by consumers that have never starved—and I guarantee you someone in Haiti doesn't care if the tail was docked from the cow that their beef is coming from; that is not an issue. That is another one, tail docking. Animals are so much cleaner when their tails are docked, the barn is cleaner, they're not slapping the ceiling of a dirty barn with flies coming in. People just don't know and I don't know what the answer is to that, but as far as the farm and the farming lifestyle, it is hard, but it's wonderful, it really is so nice.

HH: Thank you.

GB: You're welcome.