

April 5, 2013

Home of Dan Finney

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

Interviewer: Hannah Harvester (HH)

Interviewees: Dan Finney (DF)

Transcribed by: MP Filippi

(0:00:00)

HH: This is Hannah Harvester with Traditional Arts in Upstate New York. It's April 5th, 2013 and I'm here with Dan Finney, and we're in Adams, right?

DF: That's right.

HH: We're in Adams at his family home, at their farm. Dan, can you start just by giving a little bit of history of this farm?

DF: Okay. Well, my father purchased this in 1970. It was already an operating farm at that time but originally he was from lower New York. And even at that time, land down that way by New York City was getting more expensive. So he was looking for a bigger farm, so he bought this one. It's now on the second generation here; my brother and I actually run the farm now. My father is 72 I believe, maybe 73, but he doesn't have much to do with the day-to-day operation of it anymore.

HH: So he was already farming down in lower New York.

DF: That's right.

HH: Was dairy farming in the family or was he the first farmer?

DF: Oh yeah. We've been farmers way back.

HH: Dairy or—

DF: Well, of course my grandfather, he was quite old even when my father was born so he's almost like another generation even past him. He had a mix of everything. Actually sheep was his main thing, but he always had cows, always had a dairy and stuff like that.

(0:01:45)

HH: And now when did you start operating the farm? Did you work on the farm—?

DF: I always worked on the farm my whole life, even through high school, then after high school I started taking more responsibilities on the farm, of course. Then probably when I was 20—, I don't know, I'm

fuzzy on dates, but probably when I was about 20 or 21, we entered a formal partnership, my brother and I with my father. Then started taking over management of it from there.

HH: Okay, so your brother and you started at the same time.

DF: Yes.

HH: And how old is your brother?

DF: He's a bit older than I am. He's four years older than I am.

(0:2:31)

HH: Okay. And what year were you born?

DF: I was born in '68.

HH: Okay, so you've been on the farm your whole life?

DF: Yes.

HH: Okay. Can you tell me, just give a picture of the farm today. How many animals you are milking, other animals...

DF: 'Course we're strictly dairy. We do have a few hogs and a few chickens and things like that. But they're strictly for our own use. Our main business is pretty much strictly dairy. And we have about 200 milkers, just shy of that; and then young stock to match. Which is also about 200, various age of young stock. And we crop about probably 600 acres, not quite. And that's strictly to take care of the milk cows. Dairy is our main business. And we do sell some crops. We do sell some other things here and there, but it all revolves around dairy cows.

(0:03:40)

HH: And what crops do you grow?

DF: Corn and alfalfa.

HH: Are you purchasing any feed for your cows or are you growing all that you need?

DF: We are this year because we had such a dry year last year. We came up way short. So we're purchasing some this year. But generally not. Generally we have an excess and we actually sell some. And we purchase grain and things like that. The small ingredients, the high value ingredients that we either can buy cheaper than we can grow or don't have the expertise in growing.

HH: And do you pasture your cows at all?

DF: No, we don't.

HH: So what style of barn do you have?

DF: We have free stall style. Loose housing.

HH: When did you put that in?

DF: That would have been '74. Or no actually, even the original— we had a barn fire, or my father did, I was too young then in '74. And even before then it was free stall.

HH: Oh! Okay.

DF: That's the original barn. Of course we've added on since then. Different buildings.

(0:04:56)

HH: Okay. Did you always know you would be working on the farm?

DF: No, probably not. When I got out of high school, even then a lot of farm boys didn't farm because there wasn't either room on the farm or didn't have interest in it or something like that. I guess I always thought I would try something else at first, but it never worked out. I just stayed on the farm and got so I appreciated it and stayed with it.

HH: What kinds of— Can you talk about when you were growing up, how you learned farming. What kind of chores you started out with. (*Dan laughs*)

DF: Well, same way my children learn now. You start out with the easy work; feeding baby calves, and then you went into the dirty manual work that nobody else wanted to do. As far as how you learn it, I suppose just by watching others mostly. I mean you don't read a book or anything like that. Some people do go to college and learn some of the fine points. Mainly either you learn by doing or learn by watching.

HH: So your children are also working on the farm.

DF: Yeah, I have six children. We have four daughters and two sons. The girls are older, the oldest. The oldest one is 19, going to be 20. And they all help on the farm. The older girls all have different jobs off the farm, babysitting, cleaning house, but they all help on the farm as they can. The boys are a bit younger but they of course enjoy working on the farm. Did the same way I did, just doing the jobs they can handle. They get up early and go to the barn before school—

HH: And then after school.

DF: Then after school they're back out there and help some more. You know they don't work a lot of hours, they really have quite a bit of responsibility for their age probably.

HH: So are they— I'm interested that you said they have quite a bit of responsibility. What are their main tasks that their doing?

DF: Their main tasks right now is caring for the newborn calves, which is a lot of responsibility. They're very fragile animals and they have to be taken care of correctly in the same way every morning and night. They do a good job of that. They know how to observe sick calves. They know how to observe calves that need special attention or making sure they get the vaccinations and things like that. It's not difficult work, but it's work that has to be done right. And even at the young age they learn that.

(0:08:00)

HH: Can you talk more about the division of labor on the farm? It's you and your brother. Are there other workers? Is your wife—

DF: We have a couple— yeah my wife helps some too. She helps some out in the barn. Then we have a couple Hispanic helpers. They do most of the milking. So my brother and I— course we do a lot of the manual work too, but we do all the management of it. Then we have three employees, two Hispanics and one American young fella. They take responsibility too as far as some management but mainly just labor.

HH: Between you and your brother is it pretty much, are you both sort of sharing equally in the decision makings or is one of you specializing more in crops and one in animals and stuff like that.

DF: No, a lot of places, do do it that way, we just never have. We've always just kind of worked at everything together. Our farm isn't that big, if we were much bigger, yeah one of us would have to maybe specialize on the crops and one of us on the cows. But no, we try to split things pretty much evenly down through. You know small decisions we each make on our own but if it's a bigger decision we definitely talk it over and come together on a decision between us.

HH: So I'm just curious, does your brother also have a family, children?

DF: He just got married. He's a little older, but he just got married this last year. So he doesn't have any children yet. And his wife doesn't work on the farm. She's actually a Filipino lady he met, so she's still adjusting to our climate. (*laughs*) So that's about the size of that. Like I say, he's been a bachelor for a lot of years.

HH: If they were to have children, do you think, financially would you need to be ramping up production to then be supporting two families with the farm? Or do you think—

DF: No, I think we could pretty much handle two families right now, pretty much. We take an even draw for us right now so as far as if you were to get a family of children, I have no idea if his wife would want to work. I assume she'll probably want to get a job off the farm. My wife doesn't. We had children when we first got married and she just never has worked off the farm.

(0:10:45)

HH: So how much farm work does your wife do? Is she mainly doing a lot of the housework I imagine?

DF: Yup, her and the daughter of course. She probably works on the farm three hours a day.

HH: And what kinds of jobs does she do?

DF: She helps feed the cows. It's more of a supporting role, really. Doing what she can and feeding the cows and stuff.

(0:11:13)

HH: Now has your farm grown much since you started or has it been this size?

DF: It has some; we've added some acreage. We buy a little land here and there. Land is hard to come by; it's a pretty tight market for it. But we have picked up some here and there. We've increased our herd size. Not a lot, but some, probably 30%.

HH: When you were growing up, what would your herd size have been then?

DF: Probably like 120 milking cows, mature cows.

HH: Okay.

DF: Like I say, we haven't really increased a lot, but some. Yeah, probably even 50% growth.

HH: Sounds like it has just been gradual.

DF: Yeah, gradual, incremental.

(0:12:10)

HH: Can you tell me a little bit more about your Hispanic workers? When you hired them and how that arrangement worked?

DF: We started with Hispanic workers probably about, more than 10 years ago, probably about 12 years ago. When they first started coming into the area. And mainly because we couldn't find local help, not reliable. So they're excellent workers, they're usually here for two three years. They want to earn money. Almost always, we've had a number of them over the years, we've probably has easily a dozen or maybe 15 different workers over the years. And almost all of them have some goal in mind that they're working for; either it's planting an orchard back home or buying some farmland or building a home. Generally they can work two, three years, sent all their money home and then go home. Sometimes they get home and find out they still can't make it, and have to come back again. But as a whole, just super people, very nice people.

HH: Do any of you speak any Spanish? What is communication like?

DF: Communication is usually not a problem. No, I don't— I won't say I speak Spanish; I do know enough terms, especially farm-related terms and stuff like that, where we can communicate. I would know more Spanish than they would know English, for sure. And that's been a gradual thing too, you know, as you get a new one, you learn more. It's a fairly easy language to pick up.

HH: For some! (*laughs*)

DF: Yeah, definitely. Communication is generally not a problem. We find, if you've got somebody who's willing to work, wants to work, you can usually—one way or another you're going to get your point across to show him what he needs to do.

HH: 'Cause they're doing pretty straightforward tasks, would you say?

DF: Very repetitive. Very scheduled, very repetitive. If they're here— usually after even a week of showing them hands-on what they need to do, how they need to do it, from there on its— it's very repetitive, that's one reason why a lot of American help don't want to do it. It's kind of monotonous. It's hard work, it's a lot of work, it's a lot of hours.

HH: Mhm. What is your milking schedule? Is it twice a day, three times a day?

DF: Twice a day: 2:30 in the morning, two in the afternoon.

HH: And how long does a shift take?

DF: It varies in different situations. But generally it's a four hour milking.

HH: So the three guys you have, the two Hispanic and the one local guy, they're all milkers?

DF: The one local guy helps with field work, tractor driving, probably a little bit more, I wouldn't say management area but a little more in the technical stuff than the Hispanic fellas.

HH: Are your Hispanic workers living here on the land?

DF: Yeah, we have on-site housing for them.

(0:15:30)

HH: Now in this area, do you have some of the problems we've heard about in other—up where we are, border patrol cruising around.

DF: That has been an issue.

HH: So are they pretty much staying on the farm?

DF: They pretty much do. We take them out shopping; they do have some social events they go to. Our church has a really good Hispanic program and they're welcome to go to that. The two we have now choose not to, but they're certainly welcome to if they would like to. But for the most part we like to have them stay pretty close to home.

HH: Is the program at your church geared towards these farm workers or is it—

DF: And Hispanic.

HH: So there are other Hispanic people, like in Fort Drum—

DF: Yeah.

HH: Do you have people coming—

DF: The vast majority of them are farm workers but there is a few other non-farm working Hispanics that attend the services.

HH: So who, do you have someone who—

DF: Yeah. We have a fella in our church who served in, was it Costa Rica— I better get this straight, I believe it was Costa Rica for a number of years.

HH: Hmm. That's really interesting.

DF: Actually we have two. The one definitely served in Costa Rica, they other I think served in Costa Rica also. Volunteer service for quite a number of years. They're both very fluent in Spanish and they really work hard at it. They get probably... it varies, but up to twenty, mostly young fellas.

HH: Oh, we should say, so your church is the, Naumburg— What is the name of the church that you—

DF: The actual title is Naumburg Conservative Mennonite Church.

HH: And so have you been attending that church your whole life?

DF: Not my whole life. But most of my adult life for sure. Even my teen years, probably. We used to attend another Mennonite Church, now we attend that one.

(0:17:41)

HH: And the local worker that you have, you said he was a young guy. Is he interested in farming as a career?

DF: Yeah, I think so. He definitely takes an interest in it, but I'd be surprised if he farms when he gets older. Right now he's single. Guess it depends on what he finds for a wife probably. His father has a farm, but it's a smaller farm, there isn't room for him at home. It'd be very difficult for him to purchase a farm on his own. He's very capable and gifted at doing most anything. I don't think he would mind farming, but mostly likely he probably will not as he gets older.

HH: So how old is he?

DF: He's 20.

HH: So he's out of high school.

DF: Actually he's a Mennonite fellow, so he didn't go to high school, but he's been helping since he was 16.

(0:18:50)

HH: Have there been any sort of big changes on the farm in your lifetime?

DF: Big changes?

HH: Or significant changes?

DF: As far as how we do things?

HH: Any kind of change. It could be technology or how you do things.

DF: It's hard for me to say they're big changes because they probably didn't come upon us in a big way, but I guess over the years if you look back, where we are now from where we were before, yeah there's probably some big changes. Definitely equipment, machinery is a lot more advanced, a lot larger, a lot more expensive. That's a big change. We know a lot more about nutrition, cow nutrition and cow management that's entirely different from even when I was a young fella. Was it big at the time? No, it was incremental. But if you were to look at the difference between now and twenty years ago, yeah there are definitely some big changes there. Technology would probably be the big thing, of course.

HH: Have you brought on new technology to your farm that has made a difference in the nature of the work? The kind of work you're doing?

DF: Probably not so much the kind, but the size, the scope of the work. One man can do a lot more now than he could twenty years ago. You know when you get on a tractor and work a day in field, you've got a lot more work done. You don't need near as many people to get the work done. One person can get a lot more done than he could twenty years ago and that's the same whether in the barn or on a tractor or anything.

(0:20:42)

HH: How do you make decision to buy a new, bigger piece of equipment that's going to save you labor? How do you come to that decision, because it must be a really big investment?

DF: Oh yeah, huge investment. Huge investment. Just this spring we bought a manure spreader. You don't think of a manure spreader being a big piece of equipment, but even that is 70 some thousand dollars. That's a lot of money. We can't buy everything we want, that's for sure. So first you have to prioritize, what do we need? Sometimes there isn't even enough to buy what you need. So you take care of that first. And then from there, after you've determined that, we really could need something, then can we afford it, that would be the next thing. That's the two big decisions to cross from there.

HH: Do you have to work a lot with bankers and loan officers and that kind of thing?

DF: Oh definitely. Without that— we don't even have much debt. We keep our debt very conservative compared to most farms, and even still— Take the spreader for instance. We don't have that kind of cash to buy that. We obviously have to borrow some money. We definitely keep some cash on hand just

for purchases and we have trade-ins and things like that. It's not different than anyone buying a car, really. You have to determine what you can afford and how you're going to pay for it. (*door squeaking open*) This is my wife Brenda, she just got home. (*to Brenda*) Hello.

HH: Hello.

BF: Hi, I'm Brenda.

HH: Hi. Hannah. Nice to meet you.

DF: So, of course then we work with the banker. We meet with the banker at least once a year to go over year-end statements and things like that. We keep most of our financial records. That's one job Brenda does do, keeps the books, things like that.

BF: I try.

DF: She tries to.

BF: I don't know all the farm lingo yet. (*laughs*) I just started in the last year.

HH: Doing the finances?

DF: Yeah. So we don't have to consult with our banker on every purchase, but all the big ticket items, yeah definitely.

(0:23:15)

HH: Would you say the kind of knowledge that you're using today on the farm has changed from maybe what your father was using when he was—

DF: You know really I don't know. I don't think so so much. Even my father has been off the farm for quite a number of years.

BF: Youse have changed quite a bit though, since he's been farming.

DF: Even still though, he could probably go out there and still milk a cow. He still could get on a tractor—well he couldn't get on a tractor because of his health, but if he could, he still could drive it. So the actual knowledge really hasn't changed much. Some of the technical stuff like—

BF: The computerized version of the tractor, I don't know if he would.

DF: Probably not, but he could. It's no different than your home computer. They make them easier and easier to use all the while. Probably the biggest change would be feeding the cows. That used to be very simple. I can't even—I can't do the ration for a cow anymore. That's something you have to hire done, it's too technical.

HH: So you are feeding different mixtures to different groups—

DF: Different mixtures to different groups and there's different ingredients, you have to make sure you get the right ingredient in the right amount. So you have a nutritionist, he tells us what to mix and how to mix it. All we have to do is follow his directions. I couldn't even begin to put a ration together. That would be above and beyond what I am capable of doing.

HH: Okay. Do you need me to pause it? Do you need to talk?

BF: No, I'm fine.

HH: I didn't know if you were waiting to get a word in.

BF: Nope. I was gone all day; he wondered where I was. (*laughs*) I get to gallivant all day.

(0:25:14)

HH: That'd be nice. Could you talk through the main tasks of the farm season by season? Or if it makes more sense—

DF: Probably season by season. In the spring, actually it starts in the winter or even the fall before. Planning ahead for what we need for next year: what goals we have, buying seed, and all our inputs for the following year; that all has to be done in the winter, lining up all the logistics of what seed is going to go on what field and what order, what fertilizer to go with that seed, what equipment we're going to need with that. Then in the spring, you're just more organized. That's the work, the spring is when you actually do it, sit down and do it. Then the summer is hay harvesting, usually summer is a little bit easier for us on the farm, for here anyways. It's a little more of our relaxed seasons.

BF: Ehhhh.

DF: For the moment it doesn't actually seem that way, but it probably is. Because then fall is definitely harvest, that's all you're consumed with is harvest in the fall.

HH: Why do you think summer is a little bit more relaxed?

DF: Spring is very hectic. You know, you're just seeding new crop and harvesting your first cutting of hay. Everything just kind of runs together. Then all the sudden about June 1st it's done and you're caught up for a while. Then through the summer, you still do hay, but the hay goes fast. That's one big difference, I guess. I didn't think of that. Through the course of the years. Used to be farmers hayed all year. You started your hay and you just worked at it and worked at it. Now, we go out, do hay in two, three days and we're done 'til the next cutting. Then two, three days you're done again. I would say—we have a big garden. I mean our family is busy—I mean we try to go away, go for a few days in the summer, we have a big garden—I mean our family is busier but I would say on the farm it's our easier season for sure.

(0:27:42)

HH: Okay, so then you're harvesting all through the fall.

DF: Yeah. And hunt deer.

BF: Yeah. They hunt deer, I chore.

(they laugh)

(0:28:00)

HH: How would you describe your relationship to your animals? I know that sometimes sounds funny to people.

(Brenda laughs)

DF: I don't know.

HH: I've gotten lots of different answers.

BF: We don't get too attached, or I don't get attached.

DF: Yeah, we don't get attached to one—

BF: The children get way more attached than I personally do.

DF: And yet we know them well enough, our cows don't have names, we're too big for that, they all have a number. But even still, we have nicknames for them. I would safely say we know most every cow in the barn individually.

BF: You would, I wouldn't. But 'cause he does the breeding.

DF: They have a personality. It's hard to imagine a cow having a personality. They don't have a lot, but they do have some. Some that distinguish them from the others. The main thing is you have respect in their care in your mind. Because it's the cows that pay the bills. You've got to take care of your cows. I get a little frustrated when—I assume the general public assumes that the farmers abuse the cows—because they don't. If your cows are making your money, you're not going to be abusing them. You're going to want to take care of them.

BF: They get rubber mats, they get sawdust.

DF: Yeah, we give them—their care is your top interest. You want to keep them as happy and as comfortable as possible. That's the key. Years ago there was farmers that probably didn't treat their cows very well. But they didn't last, those farmers are gone. They didn't make money.

[multiple clocks sounding]

BF: You might want to wait for his clocks.

DF: I guess I don't even notice them. I collect clocks.

HH: Oh, okay.

BF: It started out with my grandma's clock and now we have like five or six or more around the house.

(0:30:08)

HH: Do you have Holsteins?

DF: Holsteins, yes.

HH: And are you working from the herd that you have, that your father had? Or are you buying—

DF: No, we generally have excess animals that we sell. So yes it's the same herd that we had. Back in '80—I'm not good on dates—but I believe it was '84 or '85, we had tuberculosis so we had to sell all our cows and start over. But since then it's all been one herd. Just generation after generation—

BF: They're gradually culled—

DF: Oh sure, but there's some from that same generation. We're always improving them, better genetics.

HH: So are you making those—when it comes to breeding—are you making those decisions about—are you keeping all the genetics in your mind or—

DF: Oh definitely. That's one huge difference with farming. Back when farmers were a little bit smaller, twenty years ago the farmer was responsible for all that. But these days, you take the—like we talked about the nutrition, hiring the nutritionist. Actually we don't pay the nutritionist; the feed companies pay them. These companies want your business, so in exchange they offer these services for free. And it's the same with the genetics. There's so many companies that are out there selling genetics, they offer a lot of services to help you match the right matings and things like that. To give you the kind of cow you want. And that's generally free. And yeah you pay for it when you buy their products and stuff but the service is free. There's a lot too it, to mating the cows. There really is.

HH: What kind of plans to do have for the farm—I guess we kind of already talked about that. Are you planning to expand?

DF: Yeah, growth is always in our plan. Land is always the big limiting factor right now. We're in a pretty agricultural area. And pretty much any land available is taken. Hopefully eventually more is available. We can't do a lot more without more land.

HH: You said you had 600— you're cropping 600 acres.

DF: Not quite, but close to it, yes.

HH: And is that all contiguous or—

DF: Pretty much contiguous.

(0:32:50)

HH: And how are you getting your milk to market? Are you with a co-op?

DF: No, we used to be. We're with a private handler now. The co-op, we were with a co-op for quite a number of years—my father never would be with a co-op, he always wanted to be with a private handler. And my brother and I switched to a co-op because the money was a little bit better. But now we've switched the last few years to a private handler because again, the money is better. They actually pay us better than a co-op. The co-ops have gotten in my opinion, very big and I don't think the farmer is in their best interest. Most of the co-ops now are very closely allied to the processors and things like that. The processor, that end of the contract is their primary concern, at the cost of the farmer.

HH: So how does the—what do you mean by a private handler? Because I think everyone else I've talked with has been with a co-op.

DF: Yeah, probably. Co-op is by far the most common. The private handler, company—actually it's a family owned milk plant in Canastota, very large milk plant. And they buy our milk directly.

HH: Okay. So they are making cheese or butter?

DF: They make cheese, they make cottage cheese, they make butter, ice cream, they make pretty much any dairy product, some fluid milk.

HH: So they send their truck to you?

DF: They hire a hauler, yes. Actually we do. We have to pay the hauling.

HH: And where did you say there were?

DF: That's in Canastota, NY.

(0:34:38)

HH: Okay. What are—and you could answer this too if you had an opinion. What is the most challenging, or if there is, what are some of the more challenging aspects of dairy farming for you?

DF: Definitely the time. Definitely the time. It's a lot of work. It's—we have days that are easier than others and things like that. It's not like all we do is work. But it's very hard to get away for any length of time, more than a day or two. The stuff that needs to be done every day.

BF: Like for us because Dan and I do most of the feeding. We have only one guy that can do the feeding and if he's not here, we don't go nowheres. Like he was gone for three months. We don't go; you can't take a night off.

DF: It's the time.

BF: You have to have someone trained to do it well. If you don't do it well, you lose money because they don't feed the cows well.

HH: How does the feeding work? You're mixing these rations that have been prescribed by the nutritionist in some kind of machine?

DF: Yeah, a big machine that mixes it all up and runs it out the the cows. It's not hard work, but it has to be done every morning and night and it has to be done correctly. It can't be done mistakenly. You can't be sloppy about it. It's not difficult really.

HH: What time do you start in the morning? I mean I know the milking starts at—

DF: —at 2am. It varies on the season right now things are a little more relaxed. It's more, a little after 5, a quarter after five.

BF: Almost six!

DF: Yeah, right. For you maybe. *(they laugh)*

BF: When I first married him he'd be out here at 4 o' clock.

DF: Then again if we're really busy I am still. But we have some really good help right now so they get started in the morning. It's usually 5am.

HH: What time are the chores or the work finished for the day?

DF: *(laughs)* Depends.

HH: Depends on the season.

DF: Depends. Right now we've be mainly getting done by—

BF: On a good night I'm done by 6.

DF: And I am too.

BF: Or 5 if things go well.

DF: Or 6.

BF: But he goes out again.

DF: I got out again at 8:30 or 9 o' clock and just check the cows over, run a little more feed out. I'm out for maybe half an hour but still, it should be done. You don't really do anything, but make sure things are okay.

(0:37:25)

HH: What is the most enjoyable or satisfying aspect of dairy farming or farming for you?

DF: Probably mainly just being able to work with your family every day. That'd be the main thing.

BF: And owning your own business.

DF: Yeah, business ownership.

BF: Because you can somewhat set your own hours, somewhat set your own schedule.

DF: A little more control of your own occupation, I guess, being self-employed. But probably the big thing would be the interaction with the family. You know I talk to friends that have jobs off the farm and that's the big thing they would struggle with is not having enough time for their family. We see too much of each other.

BF: We see too much of each other. *(All laugh)* We used to live down there and I didn't see near as much of him then we moved up here and he would finally go out the the barn and I'd pick up the phone to call my friend, "what are you doing on the phone, you were just on the—," I barely ever call anybody and he's telling me, "what are you doing on the phone again?!"

(0:38:25)

HH: Is this the original farmhouse?

DF: Yes.

And this is the house you grew up in?

DF: Yes.

HH: And where does your brother live?

DF: We bought another house.

BF: It's on the same side of the road but farther up.

DF: Up farther. And this very next house is the house that always went with this house. We lived there when we were first married, for quite a number of years, now last few years we switched. My parents moved to that house, the smaller house, the family and I moved to this house.

HH: So you said you dad is not very involved anymore with the farm?

DF: Very little. I mean he still keeps track, he asks how things are going and he's around some. But no work on the the farm, really. He's very crippled, so he can't do a lot anyways.

BF: His mom was doing the book work and stuff until last year. And running the errands and stuff. But then when we moved up here then I—

DF: Just as they got older, they did less and less and we did more and more.

BF: Kind of a weaning process, I guess. It wasn't an overnight transition.

DF: No.

BF: Just more and more.

DF: Gradual.

(0:39:33)

HH: (*to Brenda*) Is that the same for you, the family aspect or are there other things that you appreciate about—I mean did you grow up on a farm?

BF: I grew up on a farm. Yeah, I don't know. I guess I didn't have a choice, I'm here.

DF: Yeah, you had a choice. You could have married a non-farmer.

BF: I guess I could have. I guess I don't mind it, I don't mind it. Some nights it bothers me when you can't go everywhere you want to go.

DF: Farming is great for a family, it really is. It's super. Like we mentioned earlier, our children probably take far more responsibility than the average children their age.

BF: 'Cause like I had my brother's children here for ten days. And they don't live on a farm. They have no idea what chores are. They got up in the morning with my boys and went out to the barn—

DF: And it's not that they're lazy either—

BF: They just don't have anything to occupy themselves. They have a few chores, but they don't know the daily regulation of doing something every day. They have no clue. And you see that in a lot of places. They don't know how to work anymore.

HH: A farmer I talked to, I think he might have a slightly larger farm than yours. He was saying it was hard for him to create chores for his kids because of the way the machinery was changing and everything. A lot of the jobs—

DF: Definitely, sure.

HH:—that were his chores when he was a kid, don't exist anymore. It sounds like you do have—

DF: I would agree with that.

BF: Yeah, I would definitely.

DF: There's things that I did growing up that either the job no longer exists or—

BF: Like you would have drove tractor—

DF: But we're at a place now where you wouldn't dare let a child do what I did when I was younger. Simply because the equipment is larger, obviously more expensive, more technical, things like that. It's

not that my parents ever put us in an unsafe position, just people's attitudes have changed a little bit on that. And uh—but there's always something for them to do. Like in the summer we have a big garden.

BF: Well, we sell produce by the roadside.

DF: There's plenty of work there. Our children aren't as busy as I was growing up, that's for sure. There was a lot more to do on the farm for me growing up. I would agree with him 100% on that.

HH: Do either of you have a favorite job? Or maybe a favorite season?

BF: I like doing the books. I enjoy doing the books. I never used to as a kid like working outside, but now I love working in the garden.

DF: Summer would be my favorite, I don't know if I have a favorite job, but summer would be my favorite season for sure. Just because it is a little more relaxed.

BF: And I don't mind feeding the cows if everything goes alright. The nights when things are broken and I'm told it's my fault it broke. (*laughs*) He says I just have to touch it and it breaks. I don't like choring those nights.

(0:42:44)

HH: Who works on the machinery? If the machinery breaks is one of you the mechanic or—

Df: Yeah. I'm the mechanic. I'm the mechanic.

HH: And you learned that growing up on the farm? Just from trial and error and hands on.

BF: I told him if we never ever farm, he can be a plumber, which he just loves. Electrician, carpenter. He can do it. There's some things we hire in just because—like now I'll take the cars to a garage.

DF: Used to do my own car work, but I don't have time for that anymore.

BF: Different thing you just have to—

(0:43:30)

HH: What do you think are the most important things it takes to be a successful dairy farmer?

DF: Hm. I don't know; that's a tough one. You've got to know cows, that's for sure. You can't just decide someday you're going to be a dairy farmer, that's for sure. You can be the most intelligent person in the world, but if you don't know anything about cows, you're not going to succeed, obviously. A lot of it is just, I don't believe in luck, but probably just fate or whatever. There are some really good farmers out there that don't make it, just because circumstances just don't favor them. It's not an easy profession to be in, money wise. It's very very difficult to get into. It's very difficult to stay in.

BF: It's almost like gambling, farming. I say it's almost like gambling.

DF: Well, I wouldn't say that really.

BF: Not really, but you take a cow out there, two thousand dollar cow, she can be dead the next day.

DF: She sure can be, yeah. Definitely. It's a very high-investment, low-return business. Not to say you can't make money at it, because you can. We do okay. We're not getting rich or anything like that, but we do okay. We have everything we need and money left over to do some extra things with. I think our lifestyle is on par with many non-farm workers. But it's still a very high investment, low return. So as far as one quality to really make you successful, I don't know really. You've just got to be good at everything. And I know that sounds a little bragging I guess, I don't know.

HH: Well, you did just mention a whole bunch of skills that you need.

BF: And some people can't do that. We're very fortunate that he can. Because there's a lot of people that have to hire that stuff out. Like they do most of their vetting. If you hire a vet to come in, you can soon spend like a thousand dollars on one cow and then it can die. They've just learned to do things like that themselves. You save money. And some people can't—

DF: Probably one thing that would set a successful person is just being able to work with other people. The days of just going out in your barn and working by yourself all day, day after day, are over. There's just too many people involved. Either people that you work for, work with, family members or hired help. Or the technical people you work with or your banker. If you're the kind of person that doesn't get along well with other people, you're probably not going to succeed.

HH: You mentioned that it was a high risk, low return proposition. What keeps you in it? It is your chosen profession, right?

DF: Yeah.

HH: Why do you stick with it?

DF: These questions are getting harder! (*all laugh*) I'll have to leave or quit or sell the place! I don't know. Because it is enjoyable, it's fun, it's rewarding. I'm not really trained— while I can do a lot of stuff—I'm not officially trained. I couldn't just decide tomorrow I want to be an electrician or plumber. I couldn't do that. I could probably learn, I suppose. I just enjoy it; it's what I've always done. Does that mean I should always do it? I could see myself maybe in the future maybe if my sons get older and want to run the farm; I could see myself doing something else. I'm not married to the farm, really. So who knows what the future will hold. I could see myself farming 'til I retire or—

BF: Going antiquing.

DF: Yeah, I enjoy antiques. I could start an antique store.

HH: Do you have any, would you want to see one of your sons take over?

DF: Yeah, that'd be great. I wish they would, but I'm not going to force it on 'em. I'll leave it entirely up to them. Don't you think?

BF: Oh yeah.

DF: I think it'd be nice to see them grow up and take over and make their own decisions. That'd be quite a reward in itself, really. But I'm not gonna force it on 'em.

(0:48:30)

HH: What role do you see your farm playing in the broader community?

DF: Not much, I don't think. I think it's just a drop in the bucket.

BF: We don't get out that much.

DF: We don't get out much. We don't interact. We don't do a lot in the community. We do a lot with our church some of that, but other farms or other community— we don't send our children to public school; our children go to a Christian school. So we don't do a lot with the school.

BF: There's once a year we go to a neighborhood picnic.

DF: We communicate with our neighbors, we try to be a good neighbor. People know us just by our farm. If we go to town or something like that and we meet somebody, they may not know our name, but we tell them where we live, "Oh yeah, I know that place." Because they drive by and see it and things like that. So as far as what role it plays, I don't know. You'd have to ask the community I guess.

BF: Yeah. (*they laugh*)

(0:49:33)

HH: Does your faith play a role in your choice to farm or your outlook on farming?

DF: Yeah, probably. Definitely. I think it takes a lot of faith to farm, it really does. There's—there's so many things that can go wrong. When you think about simply even just planting a seed and expecting a stalk of corn. Really the odds are stacked. If you think about all the things that could possibly go wrong with the seed, really the odds are stacked against it. And yet they grow. So it really takes a fair amount of faith even just to farm. If you're a negative person, you're not going to get too far. Yeah, the two complement each other really quite well. For me anyways, definitely.

(0:50:34)

HH: Is there anything else you would like to say? I think I've asked my specific questions I have.

DF: No, I think— I'm not the one to ask the questions really.

HH: Well, you know sometimes um—

DF: I guess I wonder what the public's perception of farms, I don't know. I think people misunderstand farmers and farming, definitely. Well, the media does anyway. I don't know about the general public. They have a misunderstanding about their food; they have a misunderstanding about farming. So I just wonder in the future there's a lot of new rules and regulations in farming as far as environmental rules and stuff like that. I don't think people fully understand that the environment is really of more importance to a farmer than it is to a non-farmer. So a farmer really has more at stake and has more interest in protecting the environment than anyone. I really don't think— I get the impression that many people see the farmer as the bad guy. They don't trust their food, they don't trust their meat in the store, they don't trust their milk, they don't trust their vegetables because they're convinced that farmers are just out to make money at the sacrifice of the environment and people's health. And it's not that way.

BF: Like people complain about, like for instance the price of milk. People complain about the price of milk in the store. But if you tell them how much you would get for that gallon of milk for what they pay for that gallon of milk, there's a big difference. And people don't usually see that. They think we're getting all that. They think we're getting \$4 a gallon.

HH: And I don't think it's even expensive to begin with, but yeah.

DF: So there's definitely a disconnect. And even more so than ever. There's a huge disconnect between the farming population and the non-farming population. And of course the farming population is getting smaller and smaller all the while. There's a greater and greater divide between them. Actually we probably don't understand the non-farming lifestyle. We talk to friends that don't farm and we wonder why in the world they do what they do. To us it doesn't make sense. There's just two different worlds.

HH: Do you think, does it not make sense because, the things that your non-farming friends would do, do they sound unfulfilling to you? What doesn't make sense about—

DF: Oh, I don't know. Like how they would even handle their money.

HH: Oh.

DF: Money management, time management. When we get time off, we make the most of it. We don't get much of it. And we see non-farmers, in our mind they squander their time. Whether they do or not, they probably don't think so, but to us they do. I guess we value different things. We would value time a lot more than our average non-farming friends.

BF: Time away from the farm. Like some people talk about—

DF: Free time. Vacation or

B: Like we get very little vacation and stuff.

DF: Yeah. I had to go to the dentist here the other day. And the whole time I was at the dentist I was thinking about how I had to get home and get back to work. I was talking to a person yesterday and they

were saying how when they go to the dentist, they take a day off. And they think it's great. They went to the dentist in the morning and they got the rest of the day to do whatever they want. Well, I— that's not an option for me. Just little things like that.

HH: Are you proud of your work?

DF: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. I'm not— generally we don't think of pride as being a good thing.

BF: No, his children put him down on that one. I still laugh. Out here this field of corn was really doing well one year. So he says, "Man, I got the best corn, the tallest corn around." And then that night the windstorm came through and knocked it all down.

DF: *(Dan laughing)* And flattened it.

BF: The children said, "See Dad? Pride goeth before a fall!" *(they laugh)*

DF: But yeah, I enjoy keeping the place looking nice and things like that and trying to do a good job.

HH: Okay. Anything else you'd like to say, Brenda?

BF: I'm fine.

HH: Great, well thank you that was really interesting.

Track two

[The conversation turned back to farming so Hannah turned the recorder back on]:

(0:00:00)

DF: But uh, what we do works. So we stick with that and just take the changes a little bit slower than a lot of farms. There's definitely some farms that have definitely experimented with robotic milking and other technology, GPS with the tractor. We haven't gotten there yet, not to say we won't ever but we haven't. It's just been a little bit slower. We're definitely probably a little more conservative than a lot of the other farmers. As far as things like that.

HH: Do you use the, what are they called, the tower silos? Is that what they're called?

DF: Yes, yes.

BF: Which they— they have issues.

DF: They have some downsides, but they have some good sides too. They work for us, so we stick with them.

BF: And it's what we have. To go into the whole new thing you'd be putting— you could easily put thousands of dollars into—

DF: Not thousands, millions.

BF: —hundreds of thousands of dollars just to build a new feeding system. So you've got to make it so—

DF: It's a never-ending cycle. You spend money, you need more cows to pay for that. When you've got more cows, then you need more infrastructures to support those cows. When you get more infrastructures, more cows, you need more land. More land, more money spent. It's a very vicious cycle that some farmers get caught up in.

HH: Do you spend a lot of time with other farmers?

DF: Oh yeah.

HH: Do you have meetings and things like that?

DF: Well, I don't know, more casual than that. You see them at different things and talk to them. We're always talking about what we're doing and how we're doing it. Yeah.

HH: Is— sorry, I know I said I was done asking questions but— I'm just curious in your church, are there other Mennonite farmers?

DF: Not near as many as it used to be. It used to be the predominant occupation, of course. Now it's not.

BF: It's less than half.

DF: It's less than half. There's still at least twenty farmers, maybe more.

BF: Yeah, I'm not sure. It's not that big of a farming thing anymore.

HH: But it's still a higher percentage than the general population.

DF: Yes, definitely. Without a doubt. And quite wide spectrum of different styles and practices of farming too.

HH: You wouldn't say that there's a Mennonite way of farming.

DF: No. Definitely not. It's across the board. And it's not just either. Your previous question about contacting us; it's not just the other farmers, there's the people in the other ag-related businesses. And you're always talking about them: what works and what doesn't work. If there's new ways of doing something or costs of things. That's pretty much— it's not like other businesses. Yeah, it's very competitive, it's very low-income proposition or low-return income proposition. But everybody still likes to see everyone succeed. You don't want—

HH: Mhm. And it's competitive in terms of land.

DF: It's very competitive as far as that. And it's very competitive too about who has the newest equipment or the nicest looking places. But still we all like to see each other succeed, do well. It's not

like some businesses where you want to see him go out of business and there's more market for you. It's not that way at all.

BF: The smaller farmer would actually have a harder time getting into this area. 'Cause the larger farmers— we're like, little compared to most of the farms around here. Any land that comes up for sale, they get it.

DF: That's probably the biggest concern I would have with dairy farming, young fellas being able to come in. It's almost impossible. Unless either your family has the farm or you can work closely with someone else who has the farm that's willing to take you in. You can't just decide some day that you're gonna be a farmer and you're gonna buy a farm. It's too capital intensive. It's impossible. No matter where you are in the nation. That's just the way dairy farming is. My wife's Canadian, she's from Canada. They have a different dairy system entirely than the US system. And even there it's very difficult.

BF: It's probably in a way even more difficult. They have to have quota.

DF: Quota.

BF: There's so much quota on a cow. And then they can only send so much milk. If you reach your quota and you have more milk, that milk gets dumped. You don't get paid for that. It's very expensive. It's like a hundred.

DF: It's ten thousand per cow roughly.

BF: It's very expensive.

DF: That's only buying you the right to sell the milk from that cow. There's no equity or anything. That's how they do it. It's a little different; keeps the farms a little bit smaller, but it doesn't make it any easier to farm. So in the future, especially as farms get bigger, there will be fewer and fewer farmers. We're already a very small minority of the general population. That's only going to get worse. Or it seems that way.

HH: All right. Well, thanks again.

DF: Yup.