

**January 17, 2013**

**Five Mile Line Farm—home of Mark Akins**

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

**Interviewer: Hannah Harvester (HH)**

**Interviewees: Mark Akins (MA), partner in farm with parents Dean and Betty Akins.**

**Transcribed by: Mimi Rooney**

*[Note: Mark's daughter, Allie, a freshman in college home for winter break, enters the house at two points during the interview along with friend Eric. We have chosen not to transcribe these conversations. Allie and Eric had been helping set up new calf hutches and move calves.]*

**Track One**

(0:00:00)

HH: My name is Hannah Harvester and I am with TAUNY, Traditional Arts in Upstate New York and today is January 17, 2013 and I am here with Mark Akins in his home in Lisbon. Mark could you start out by really briefly talking a little bit about your personal history: where you grew up, your education- just sort of really briefly if you had other jobs or things like that.

MA: I grew up right here in Lisbon, just down the road from my mom and dad's. You know you met them like a month ago. Then after high school I went to a private school, a private post graduate school in Worcester, MA and attended there for a year before going on to Cornell for 4 years in the Animal Science department. And from there I came back here and went into a partnership with my parents and my brother. And that...my brother decided he wanted to work for National Grid and Mom and Dad stayed working with the partnership.

(0:01:20)

HH: When was that that you came back to work on the farm?

MA: 1988.

HH: Okay. And what year were you born?

MA: 1965.

HH: Okay. Umm, so, you're the fifth generation on the farm- is that right? I think you said.

MA: I don't remember.

HH: Fifth or sixth.

MA: Fifth or sixth.

HH: Yeah, something like that.

MA: Yeah, they know much more genealogy.

HH: Okay, I will talk more with Dean and Betty about that. So you went to Cornell for Animal Science.

MA: Yes.

HH: Had you decided at that time that you did want to go into dairy farming?

MA: No, I had no idea.

(0:01:52)

HH: Oh, okay. So can you tell me, you know, how you came to that decision, and the decision to come back and work on the farm?

MA: Okay, I was intrigued by the endless amounts of avenues that the dairy took: the cropping and the labor and the actual production, the animal production side of it. So I was very intrigued how all those facets worked together and I am still intrigued by that, and how it changed with commodity prices and the opportunities that goes forward with that. And you know, that is where we've changed over the years.

HH: Did you enjoy growing up on the farm?

MA: It's the normal [laughter]. I don't know if you ever realize it until you look back.

HH: Mmhm.

MA: It's a great place to have fun. You know you run around the farm with skidoos and four wheelers and rip and tear and get on equipment, and what kid doesn't like to run equipment around?

(0:02:29)

HH: Yeah. Did you have plenty of chores growing up? Farm chores?

MA: Um, yeah. I mean it was normal. Chores are normal. That was what we thought was normal: working at the farm, every day, it never stopped. So that's what we were used to.

(0:03:08)

HH: I want to talk more about what you were saying about the different facets, but let me get just, just so I have it in my head, sort of what your farm looks like in terms of size, what systems you use, and I think you said you were in a conglomerate with your cousins, how does that ...?

MA: We're what's considered a medium CAFO.

HH: Okay.

MA: Which is, runs from like 200 animals to 700 animals. And we're right about in the middle of that with 400 animals.

HH: Okay

MA: So that's where I would consider ourselves just a medium size farm.

HH: Mmhm.

MA: And my cousins, I think you met Aunt Fran. Her son operates about the same size farm right down the road.

HH: Okay.

MA: So we worked back and forth a lot, but, I mean our financials are separate.

HH: Okay.

MA: Everything's separate until we need something. But once cropping starts, or we need a truck or we need a piece of equipment, that's where we work back and forth.

HH: Okay, so you share equipment and a little bit of labor.

MA: Yup, share labor and equipment.

(0:04:21)

HH: Okay, and can you describe like your milking systems, your stalls?

MA: How it's changed? Or what we're doing today?

HH: Well, just what you are doing today and then I want to ask you how it's changed since you started here.

MA: Our milking system right now is a double, what they consider a double 12. We milk 24 cows at a time.

HH: Okay

MA: It has automatic detachers so the employees put the, attach the units to each cow, but by milk flow they take them off automatically, to keep the consistency. They, the cows are housed in a free stall. And it's a 360-stall free stall barn. And that was built in '88 when I first came home and it's been renovated 2 or 3 times since then. The heifer barns have been... we're currently building them. We're on a 5 year

plan to build the heifer barns and we should complete those this year. And that will give us the capacity to house about 350 heifers in them. And it'll house about 150 beef cows.

(0:05:33)

HH: Okay. Now are you a 24/7 operation?

MA: We're shut down sometime around 1:30 in the morning to about 5:30 in the morning. So those 4 hours we're stopped.

HH: So the last milking ends or they clean up?

MA: Right, they are cleaned up and they're finished by 1:30.

HH: Okay. And then they begin again.

MA: Right, the next crew comes in at 5:30.

(0:05:59)

HH: Okay. And you milk 3 times a day?

MA: Yup.

HH: And where does your milk go?

MA: AgriMark.

HH: Okay

MA: So, a purchasing cooperative.

(0:06:13)

HH: So what is the division of labor on the farm? Who does what?

MA: As far as the milking crew verses the crop crew? Or between Mom and Dad and myself?

HH: Everything. *[Laughter]* Unless that is going to take hours to describe. You know, I know there is so many different types of work that have to get done so, is there, I mean, is it, do you oversee everything? Do you share that responsibility with your dad and, um yeah, in terms of cropping and milking and all of that?

MA: Okay. There's 4 basic operations of the farm. Okay, the milk cows, milking them every day. The heifers and beef cattle. Crop production. And then the financials. Okay. The financials, the actual financials, that's the easiest thing: I do 100% of the financials, and then we have a few reports that I used to show to Mom and Dad, but then they got bored with them so they just said, "Okay, I don't want to deal with them." So little by little we don't do that anymore.

HH: Mmhm.

MA: But I still look at them every month. So I do 100% of the financials and I explain to Mom and Dad what our budgets look like. You know we talk openly every week about how, what are forecasts are, what goes forward with that. Umm, I don't speak openly with our employees about our financials. The milk cows, as far as milking: we have 3 full time milkers, and then we have our 3 other employees are all trained in the parlor and they can relief [milk], but they are not there on a regular basis.

(0:08:09)

HH: Okay. Now are they local people in the area?

MA: We have 3 immigrant labors that are from Guatemala.

HH: And they are they full time?

MA: They are full time, yes. And then we have 3 from the area right here, English.

HH: Okay. And they are relief milkers?

MA: They're not relief milkers, but they're full time employees at the farm.

HH: Oh, okay.

MA: They're also cross trained in milking.

(0:08:37)

HH: Oh, okay. So they can relieve. So what sorts of things do they do then?

MA: Okay, so then we have one full-time feeder.

HH: Okay

MA: That feeds every morning. He starts feeding at 6 o'clock, and he's done by 10 o'clock. And we have one relief feeder that feeds on his days off or his sick days. And then we have one person that looks after just the equipment. The maintenance and you know, planning for equipment, what we're doing with equipment. And then we have one person that just is good at all the chores. Just kind of odds and end all over the place.

(0:09:20)

HH: Okay. And how long have all these people been with you?

MA: Okay. Umm, do you want an actual people?

HH: Well, no.

MA: Hollis and Bill have been with me for 20 years.

HH: Oh wow, okay.

MA: Zachary is 21 years old and he's been with us, he graduated from high school 2 years ago and he's been with us since then. Umm, our immigrant labor—Pascual's been with us for 6 years. And Marco and Manual have been with us for 2 and a half years.

(0:10:03)

HH: Okay. Then when it comes to the crops, who does what there?

MA: The immigrants milk. They don't get outside the barn. They do chores in the barn. Milk in the barn; that is all that they do. And our 3 English, when the feeder gets done feeding at 10 o'clock, he may work another 12 hours on field crew. And our mechanic, Zachary, he supposedly will be working full 'til 12, 14 hours a day on field crops. And then the other person that is good at chores right now, odds and ends, picks stones on a skid steer for 12 hours a day, every day.

(0:10:46)

HH: Okay, what does skid steer mean?

MA: Okay, like uh, a little bobcat. A little skid steer where you sit in them where the tires are really close. Those are skid steers.

HH: So he is going around picking stones?

MA: All day long.

HH: Wow. There's a never ending supply of stones?

MA: Correct. *[Laughter]* Yeah, he'll pick, depending on the field, like, ten 10-wheelers a day.

HH: Wow.

MA: He just goes. And he's great with it.

HH: Huh. That's really interesting. So are you always turning up new stones?

MA: Yeah, the frost pulls them up.

HH: Oh. Are you in a particularly stony spot here?

MA: Some of our fields are. We have a lot of gravel through our land. So it's really good on wet years, but most of our land is just really wet. It's not really wet, but it's just really stony, so the water's irrelevant.

HH: Okay.

MA: But years like last year when it is droughty, we have some issues.

(0:11:44)

HH: Uh huh. So umm, so how many acres of crop land do you have? And do you own and rent? Or do you own all of your crop land?

MA: We own and rent. I believe we rent about 400 acres. And we own about 600 acres of crop land. Then we'll own about 400 more acres of pasture and swamp and woodland on top of that. So I think we own somewhere around a thousand acres.

(0:12:25)

HH: Okay. And just your English workers, are they all here in Lisbon?

MA: Yup.

HH: Okay. And would you say they are people who grew up on farm. Did they come to you knowing farm work?

MA: Actually, none of them grew up on farms. Umm, but they all worked on farms their whole life.

HH: Okay.

MA: Most of them worked for me their whole life, or practically their adult lives. Hollis has been with us for 20 some years and he's 45. So he has worked with us for a long time.

(0:13:06)

HH: Okay. Umm. I know you mentioned you have beef cattle. I know you mentioned maple sugaring. Umm, you have some other products and projects going on besides the dairy, right? Besides milk production.

MA: Correct.

HH: Can you talk about that and how it all fits into the overall economy of the farm? And are you selling your sugar, your maple, and, I know I'm asking things...

MA: No that's fine. It's mom and dad's project. It's cheaper to buy your maple syrup than to actually produce it. *[Laughter]* But I think dad makes 120, 150 gallons a year.

HH: Okay.

MA: And by the time the family gets done getting the family discount they are not really good payers. So the sugar bush is actually a hobby. Dad loves to get up in the woods, walk around, cut wood, but as far as a money maker, I don't know if there is a lot of money in it. It used to be a lot of fun when the kids were growing up. When they would get out of school, they would head out there with a 4-wheeler or snowmobile and they'd just rip and tear for 3 or 4 weeks out in the woods. So that was fun. But now that the kids have all grown up and moved away, it's much more difficult to do it.

HH: Right.

MA: That's one side. The sugar bush is one side and we have seed corn dealership from DeKalb Seed.

HH: Okay.

MA: Umm, that's questionable whether it's worthwhile. That's more of a hobby. I'm not sure how financially stable it is.

(0:14:46)

HH: You said Seed Corp?

MA: Seed corn.

HH: Oh, seed corn. Okay.

MA: From Monsanto. It's a DeKalb variety. And then umm, both dad and I are, we are thinking a lot of volunteering, like becoming a county legislator. Dad's volunteered for a lot of organizations over the years. So that is kind of like one of those things that we try to give back. And that takes a lot of time sometimes.

(0:15:20)

HH: Can you talk about changes in your time on the farm. Can you maybe talk through the major changes that you know, have occurred on the farm since you came back in '88?

MA: Since we started there were maybe a 100 cows.

HH: You know what, I am going to stop this and put in new batteries and start again with that same question.

## **Track Two**

(0:00:00)

HH: I was asking you about the major changes on the farm since you came on in 1988.

MA: When we first started there was about 100 cows in a stanchion barn and they milked in a double 3 parlor and it would take about 2 hours to milk, 2 times a day, so the labor did everything at that point. They could milk cows, they would go out of the barn to do chores and they would go to do cropping. The same people would be responsible for everything on the farm.

(00:00:42)

HH: How much labor was there at that time?

MA: I think Mom and Dad employed 4 or 5 people at that point with 100 cows.



HH: That's interesting because now you are employing 6 full time with 4 times that many cows.

MA: So the first thing we had to do to make it feasible was to add on a lot of animals to justify where we are at with being here. So we decided to build a free stall-- 350/365 free stall barn in 1988 and change the parlor around to a double 8 to milk them to make it feasible.

(0:01:30)

HH: Was there an economic change that happened at that time that made it that you had to take that step then? Or was it just a growing realization that you had to expand?

MA: It was a realization if I wanted to be involved with it we had to have more cash flow. So it was simple that we needed more than 100 animals to justify me and my brother being here. It was kind of a mushroom from there because once you add on more cows you add on more land, you add on more equipment and you have more debts and you have to have more cows. So that is the circle we were in at that point. So the first thing was we added on animals and worked on crop production. The crop production has been an evolution since then. Then there was some huge steps clearing land and tiling land that took place and that is currently taking place. Now we basically double our yields per acre. We are farming about the same amount of land now with 350 milk cows as we did then with about 100 milk cows.

(0:02:55)

HH: You are saying that the tiling has a lot to do with that.

MA: Between tiling, clearing land, and better production techniques. We have a few more acres, but not substantially. It's more using what they had. They used to pasture a lot and now we just tile pastures and put in crop production and put the animals in the barns.

(0:03:24)

HH: So the cows don't pasture now?

MA: No.

HH: Is it you and your parents that are making those decisions about crops together?

MA: It's Mom and Dad and myself. They are involved with it a little bit, but they haven't really made day to day operations in a while.

(0:03:56)

HH: How much did your education in animal science affect the things that you started to do on the farm right away when you got back? Were you bringing new knowledge that your dad didn't have about nutrition and crops and things like that to the operation?

MA: I don't know. I'm sure he had it, but he probably—the biggest thing I can say with education is with the people skills. Dealing with people and being able to reach out to experts in their fields. The fun thing about farming is that I am probably not an expert at anything, but I'm a very good communicator so that I can employ great people on everything. And that comes back to like, Farm Credit does a great job with their consulting, with their farm blending techniques; grain companies with their nutritionists do a great job; CAFO planners with the crop consultants; veterinarians—everyone has their own little area. We've come to the realization that one person can't possibly know any of it to the degree that those experts do. So let those guys do the real heavy lifting.

(0:05:17)

HH: So you are doing a lot of consulting with experts in these different areas?

MA: Correct.

HH: So when you came to the farm in 1988, it sounds like that moment was when these big changes really started. I'm not sure if this question applies to you or not, but would you say that the nature of your work has changed over the time as a farmer? In terms of what type of work you're doing and how much physical work you're doing as opposed to planning work.

MA: I have 2 favorite jobs. One is to take care of new born calves and two is to get on a tractor to plant corn. If I could do those things all year long I would love it, but I spend too much time in front of a computer, in front of a financial program, and too much time sending out emails and receiving emails. *[laughter]* I'm sure that is the same case if you had a job sitting in the middle of a city. You have your specifics that you love doing, but I look at my job more now as enabling others to do a great job. That is what my job is, an enabler.

(06:47:7)

HH: How much—do you think you could break it down in terms of percentage, how much time you are spending doing the financial and management work and how much time you are out physically in the fields and with animals?

MA: This time of year, I'll give you a breakdown of today. My day started at 5:30. I answered emails from 5:30 to 6:00. At 6:00, I got to the farm and had one employee call in sick and then rearranged 2 other employees to do their job. One employee started milking, one employee started doing barn work, and one employee started feeding. That is the management side. Then I went back and fed calves for about 45 minutes, came back here and said goodbye to my wife before she went to work, I gave my daughter a hard time about sleeping in, and then went back up to touch base with dad to see what he had planned for the day to make sure everything was going okay. And then you were here at 10:00. And then we'll probably meet from 10 to 12:30 I'm assuming today. I'll go back up; milking will start again at 1:00. I'll check to make sure everything is going okay. I've got another financial meeting with a different bank today that wants to do business with us at 2:00, and that'll go to about 4:00. And then I'll go back up at 4:00 to make sure everything's fine and going forward. And then I'll be home by 5:30/6:00 tonight.

(0:08:25)

HH: Your work day will end then?

MA: No, that's just the day with other employees. And then I'll probably spend another 2 hours tonight doing planning for crop work and whatnot going forward. That's when I do my mental, my planning work going forward, at night. So this is our planning stages. In the summer time I'll start probably at 4:30 and then we'll go until probably 7:30/8:00, but we won't be planning so much in the barn, we'll be having those 3 people running equipment outside. We'll have breakdowns every day, we'll be changing fields every day, we'll have something go wrong, who knows what it'll be, but something will go every day.

(0:09:21)

HH: So are you the main calf caretaker?

MA: No. One of our milkers feeds calves in the afternoon. My daughter does an excellent job feeding calves when she's home. And then I'm there to oversee and feed on days when someone else isn't there. But that's my favorite job.

(0:09:50)

HH: You have your cows that are going to freshen in a specific area and do you monitor it? Do you need to be present?

MA: No. We have 4 different dry cow pens for cows that aren't giving milk or are ready to have calves. One group of cows that are just dried off for milk production, and then one group of cows that are dried off but are not ready to freshen yet, one group of cows that are ready to freshen within the next week, and then they get put from there into individual pens as they are freshening—a day before they freshen or an hour before they freshen. So just the mother and the calf are solely by themselves when they freshen.

(0:10:42)

HH: Did you do 4-H or things like that growing up?

MA: No. I don't think they had as strong of a 4-H program here. We had the FFA in high school, but even then it wasn't a real prominent area. We did a lot of judging with FFA through our county fairs and state fairs.

(0:11:03)

*[Enter Allie and Eric; they discuss the work they've been doing putting up new calf hutches and moving calves into them.]*

(0:13:17)

HH: So that's your daughter? So she helps out when she is home—is that correct? Was that one of your employees?

MA: That's Eric, a high school friend, who just runs around the barn.

(0:13:31)

HH: Despite the time you spend writing emails and things like that, it sounds like you like your job.

MA: I love my job; I've got the best job in the world. I really do, I enjoy it. Becky has the flexibility and stability of the teaching and I have the flexibility of the farm where we have both never worked a good honest day's job in our lives. *[laughter]* That's the way we look at it.

(0:14:05)

HH: Do you like the fact that day to day you are not sure what challenges are going to arise? You were saying something is going to go wrong but you don't know what that is, do you think that is something that keeps you on your toes in a way that you enjoy?

MA: Well, you are still trying to...I'll use this as an example. Yesterday the discussion with our nutritionist, we meet every Wednesday at 1:00 with our nutritionist, and for one hour we went over yesterday what an ideal farm would look like 10 years into the future. So what his thoughts and what my thoughts on where farms were moving and where we can fit into that and what we can do better, so those are fun things for me. Not that I'm worried about day-to-day operations, but it's like okay, does a farm at \$8 corn produce cornmeal or does it produce corn silage and what's the economic repercussions of doing all those choices? Because five years ago cornmeal was \$125, and last fall cornmeal was \$365. And milk prices were basically the same. So those type of economic drivers are very important.

(0:15:30)

HH: Do you think you could list the different kinds of knowledge and skills you need? It sounds like you need this financial and economic ability, the knowledge about crops, the knowledge about animals. Do you think you could make a list?

MA: The biggest thing is people skills. That is the number one because you have to deal with employees, and you have to deal with salesmen, you have to deal with consultants, and you have to have an open discussion where everyone is at ease. You may not agree with all of them, but everyone has to be at ease to say, "Hey, this is what I think. And this is why I think it." It doesn't matter whether it's an employee or whatnot. So if you don't have that type of skill you are really in trouble. So that would be the number one thing.

HH: That would be a big change from when your dad was in charge?

MA: Right, because they did everything themselves and they weren't so reliant on other people. But they also were tied to the farm 7 days a week, and they didn't look for time off or family vacations or basketball games or whatnot.

(0:16:41)

HH: So you are able to take a vacation?

MA: Yes. We go to Florida for a couple times a year for a week each time. Then I try to go sometimes the Caribbean. Then I went to California last spring for a week. So, we like to travel.

HH: Very different from the small farmers I have talked to who because they are the workers, so they cannot leave.

MA: Plus we really enjoy fishing on the river. I like being done and going fishing. Plus, it's not who we are; that's the biggest difference. Mom and Dad always felt that they were the farm. If the farm did really well then they were really happy with themselves, and if the farm really struggled they were really emotionally tied to their struggles. Where I have that disconnect, where, you know what, it's not my fault that the milk price took at \$5 dollar drop. Just like it doesn't make me great because the milk price went up \$5. So I don't have that emotional tie to it. But is that going to be good or bad in 50 years? I don't know.

(0:17:59)

HH: I hope this doesn't sound like a strange question, but how would you describe your relationship to your animals.

MA: My relationship to my animals? That is a good question. I don't view them as pets. I don't have an emotional tie to them as far as if we have a cow that is not producing milk I don't get sad to sell them. But I really take a lot of personal satisfaction out of cow comfort. Like rising a group average—like we are almost averaging 80 pounds per cow right now per day. Two years ago we were at about 65 pounds. I look at it as the more comfortable I can make those cows the better they are going to produce for me. My whole job and all of our employee's jobs are to make those cows comfortable.

(0:19:00)

HH: So you think that the leap from 65 to 80 came mostly from comfort?

MA: Comfort and Feeding. We have a better feeding facility and we are much more comfortable in the free stall. We renovated some stalls and some free stalls for all the milk cow animals. So as far as liking the animals, I absolutely love them. They are the center of what we do. We are here to make those cows comfortable and if the cows are comfortable they will make great livings for us. But as far as individual pets, they are not.

(0:19:43)

HH: I want to ask you a little bit more about your milkers, your immigrant workers. That is sort of a piece of the puzzle that we are interested in. You said one of them has been with you 6 years; did the other 2 come together?

MA: Pascual was here and then Manny came from Maine and Manny's cousin came shortly after that-Marco.

HH: How did you come to hire immigrant workers?

MA: Frustration over the reliability of local workers. Local people are very good at doing specific jobs like driving tractors or feeding or driving a skid steer or driving a dump truck. They are very good at that for a short period of time, but they do not want to be in a parlor for 8 or 9 hours a day. They want to be outside, they want to be communicating with other people, they want to have different priorities than just milking cows.

(0:21:17)

HH: It's important to you to have those people who are dedicated just to milking?

MA: Correct

HH: What goes into the job of milking that makes that so important?

MA: The consistency. Making that cow the same procedure day after day after day. Three times a day the exact same procedure, 7 days a week and that is why we do not have employee turnover. Employee turnover gets very costly just for the training process and for the reliability process. Those are also our best paid employees. Our immigrants make more money than any of our English and they put in the most hours. They are here to do that job. They live here on the farm.

(0:22:25)

HH: How did you find your different workers?

MA: It's all word of mouth. We go from farm to farm. If you have an employee, we can ask any one of them "Who do you want to add on?" and it would be their choice who they want to work with. They train each other and they follow each other's expectations.

HH: You mean it's word of mouth through your workers?

MA: Yes. If we had one employee, just says for instance Manual, he was starting to not do a good job. And we started to lose our incentives for milk quality, Marco or Pascual could come to me and say, "This isn't working for me, Manny is not doing his job the way we want him to do it. We need to do something different." And I would say, "Why isn't he doing the job. Is he not enjoying the job, or is he not understanding what we want?" We will go through that investigative problem of why he used to do a good job and now he is not. Then try to correct that and go forward. If there is no correction you

have to terminate that job and Marco would say, "This person here would do a really good job for us. He is not happy working at this farm or he is not happy here and he wants to do this."

(0:23:52)

HH: The quality of your milkers really does affect the quality of the milk such that you have incentives in place.

MA: Yes. We have 2 different incentives. Somatic cell counts show the overall health of the cows, the lower the somatic cell count; the higher their incentive is for the month. And the number of wing calves which shows the job that they are doing with maternity cows and the job that they are doing with calf care. So those 2 areas have a great deal of reflection of how the free stall beds are maintained and scrapped, how the milking procedure is taken, and how the maternity cows and how the freshening pens are cleaned. So that is how they get direct incentives and direct rewards of how well they are doing.

(0:24:43)

HH: I think you mentioned that couple of your workers speak English. Has the language barrier ever been an issue?

MA: Its huge. My Spanish is horrible, but Pascual's English is horrible. I know a few key Spanish phrases and he knows a few key English phrases so we kind of muddle through it. Then Marco and Manuel are very good with English. And of course our English employees are very good with English.

(0:23:00)

HH: How would you describe your relationship to your immigrant workers?

MA: Their situation with their living conditions?

HH: Their overall situation. The fact that they are living here on the farm.

MA: Pascual has 2 girls that live with him. I think Maria is in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and Ida is in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. His whole world is trying to improve the education system for his 2 daughters. I cannot imagine anyone being more dedicated to his family that he is. The sacrificed that he has made as far as his family, trying to improve his daughters education verses people in his homeland. My hats off to him, I have a great deal of respect for him. Not knowing the English language, not really knowing anyone else when he first started, but he knew what he wanted to get his daughters. So that has worked out really well. We are in the process of trying to get his immigration worked out with his citizenship. We were required to go to Buffalo every 6 months to check on his citizenship applications. We have hired an attorney and a consultant to help him along in that process. Is that what you mean?

HH: Yes, exactly. That kind of thing. So his girls go to public school here.

MA: Public school in Lisbon.

(0:27:27)

HH: He was your first immigrant worker who came here and he is the one with the biggest language problem?

MA: He was here with his wife Francesca and his son and law Triveal. We employees those 3. We were shopping one day in Wal-Mart and an off duty border patrol arrested all three of them. They shipped Francesca back to Guatemala and they shipped Triveal back and left Pascual here with his 2 daughters.

HH: Was that because their legal status was different?

MA: That was just because the way the border patrol chose to deal with it that day.

(0:28:12)

HH: So Pascual is working on getting his citizenship. Do you have to continue to worry about border patrol issues for all of your workers?

MA: Yes. For not only our workers, but for every farm employee up and down the road. The border patrol just take whatever they want to do whenever they want to do it. If they see anyone that looks anything like an immigrant driving a tractor or driving a pickup truck they will stop them immediately. That is the scariest part of these guys, whether they are legal or not legal, they are under incredible interrogation.

(0:29:04)

HH: Do you end up driving these workers around? How do they get their groceries?

MA: Every other Saturday they go shopping. Marco has family in a neighboring farm in Heuvelton. They get together maybe once a month for a long weekend. Manny has a girlfriend that is a U.S. citizen and he spends time with her, kind of comes and goes with her. We are not completely responsible, but we certainly help.

(0:29:46)

[Enter Allie and Eric again]

(0:31:55)

HH: Do you have a computerized system for keeping track?

MA: No.

HH: Where do you see the farm going in the future?



MA: The diversification and the separation of different enterprises are probably the options that we are looking at right now. Commodity prices have really spiked in the last 2 to 3 years with ethanol and with these droughty conditions in the mid-west have driven corn prices and soy prices to almost breaking points. That has forced us basically to change our mindset to only producing forages to grains as well as foraged. Then trying to be more flexible. That is where the beef cattle are probably going to play a bigger role with us going forward on their ability to put animals in here and take animals out of here on a more timely basis. Then production of crops.

HH: Do you have any plans to increase the number of animals you have.

MA: Yes. We will probably increase consistently with the dairy side, but our drastic increase is going to be with the beef cattle. That is just a matter of how fast we can procure land and how fast we can increase forage production and grain production. Years past we would have only been worried about forages and now we are kind of saying we have to produce all of our forages and all of our grains.

(0:33:00)

HH: When you say forages you mean grasses?

MA: Like haylages, dry hay, and corn silage. Those are the 3 roughages we feed through silages. Then our grains that we will produce will be cornmeal or soybean meal.

(0:34:14)

HH: What is your storage system for your haylages and silages?

MA: Bunker Silos.

HH: You said your son Ryan has plans to work on the farm, right?

MA: He certainly seems to be interested in agriculture right now. He has talked about a milk processing center. He owns about 45 beef animals, so we really don't know what direction he is headed in, but he certainly is interested in production agriculture right now.

HH: He is at Cornell? A junior?

MA: Yes.

(0:34:05)

HH: What is your outlook on the future of the dairy industry in the North Country? Where do you see it heading?

MA: I see it getting a smaller number of producers and each producer getting a larger quantity of volume of milk. I think that is the overall trend. I worry that the average age of producers—Agrimark just did a study on the age of producers and that has me somewhat concerned, but I don't know if there is

anything we can do about it. I think Lisbon, 25 or 30 years ago had 60 or 70 farms and I think it is down to 6 farms right now. They are also probably producing twice as much milk as then.

HH: Do you know how many former farms your farm now encompasses?

MA: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. Probably what we own use to be 12 different farms. And then we rent probably 5 or 6 different farm which each incorporates any number of farms by themselves. So if you look at our rent land and our owned land we probably would easily incorporate 20 to 25 different farms.

(0:37:09)

HH: Do you have any interaction with any Amish farmers in the area?

MA: A lot. The Amish farms are probably very similar to where my grandparents farmed. Very similar techniques, very similar philosophy where they try to do everything themselves, no hired labor, no input costs, just bare subsistence. So they are constantly trying to subsidize their farm income by their own labor working outside of the farm. So that is where we get involved. They do a lot of our building work, they do all of our roof work, they do all of our handyman carpentry work. We have 2 right now working on where our Guatemalans are living—their farm house. They built Mom and Dad's house. They do a lot of work for us, but it is very inconsistent work. It is when they show up and it is at their time. When they are here they do a great job, but you just never know when they are coming. But as long as we can work around their schedule, they are happy doing that. It works out really well for the 2 of us as long as we don't have immediate needs, we are okay, and as long as we are very flexible, they are happy. I think the world of 90% of the Amish, but again, we have a very different working relationship with them. They have some sawmills in the area and we go get our sawdust from them. We bought a pile of sawdust from 3 different sawmills to use for bedding in our barn. While you are there with your tractor moving sawdust you might use something with the tractor that they can't move otherwise. So it's a give and take all the way around.

(0:39:00)

HH: Is the farm house that the Guatemalans live in something you provide for them?

MA: Yes, that was my grandparent's farm house.

HH: You already talked about the most enjoyable aspects of your work. Do you have a favorite season on the farm?

MA: A favorite season? Each season has its high points and low points. I love the winter side, but I don't like the cold. The spring time, I love planting, but there is never ending work. You could work 25 hours a day, it just never ends. But it is also the most gratifying when you get planting and harvesting. But

harvesting, probably my favorite would be in the fall. You are chopping corn, you still have nice weather, the animals are still outside, and there is not as many stresses.

(0:40:48)

HH: So you do bring the animals outside?

MA: Dry cows go outside. The beef cows still have calves on them outside. So you see them around. Right now you drive around and the beef cows are in the woods. You don't see people running around the yards, you don't see the activity going on when its 10 degrees outside compared to 70 degrees.

HH: What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

MA: The financial, hands down. Trying to make your budgets match up when you don't have any control over 90 percent of your inputs or your expenses or your income. For the most part we are a price taker. WE can fluctuate with a little bit of quality incentives, but for the most part our trends are way out of our control. That is very scary because a dollar per hundred weight fluctuates our income around \$6000 per month. So we have had about a 5 dollar swing per hundred weight in the last 6 months. So that is what changed on a monthly basis. Our expenses don't change on a month to month basis. So they change more by season. So that kind of gives you a perspective. It takes a lot more long range planning with the volatility of milk prices at \$20 at a 25 % change is much higher than it was at \$10.

(0:42:15)

HH: When did the issue of milk pricing start to become such a difficult challenge?

MA: Well it all depends on who you talk to. The volatility is always a challenge, but there is a lot more public awareness about it because of this whole financial system with the farm bill not being passed last year, the fiscal cliff, the redirick over milk prices being at \$8 dollars and doubling more than that. Here's an example of it: I think the difference between the \$38 hundred weight that was forecast and the \$22 per hundred weights that we are getting paid currently is about a \$1.39 per gallon increase. I don't think you would have many complaints from consumers if you said your milk price is going to go up a \$1.39 and all that money is going to go towards farmers. But the pricing of it, every time someone handles it, the price is doubled. Well not doubled, but close to it. If a processor handles it, that \$1.39 goes to \$2.50. Then when the retailer handles it, that \$2.50 soon goes to \$4.00. So just because that milk price doubles, means that all the margins have to double, too. Which isn't completely what was portrayed in the media. That is a fair rough numbers of what happened.

(0:44:02)

HH: Looking at other farmers in the area that you know, are their certain approaches that you have that set you apart from other farmers in anyway?

MA: You might have a better prospective of that.

HH: Not yet.

MA: It's kind of hard to see because we are so close to it. That is one of the things that I think I've done a better job with is seed corn sales. Because that allows us to get on other farms to see what they do and what works for them and what doesn't work for them. We have changed some of our habits since we have done that and I think we have increased quite a bit of our yields because of that. That is where it might not be quite as economical to sell seed corn, but it certainly helped us out on the production side. So that is one of the advantages of that. As far as what is unique about us versus someone else. Our milk, the product that we ship, it's comingled, so there's not anything unique on the product. How we deal with our employees, we don't have employee turnover. So I know we are unique in that system. I'm sure we have different personalities that others in the area do. In a year from now you'll be able to say, "This guy is this way and this guy is that way." You will be your own consultant.

(0:45:42)

HH: Do you think you do not have turnover because of your personality and what you pay?

MA: It has nothing to do with pay. I know other farmers pay more than we do. We have very high expectations out of our employees and we have a great deal of leeway how they do that. They have the responsibility and they know they have the ability, and they know they have the tools to do it. But how they go about doing it is mostly their choice as long as it's a very good job when they are all said and done.

HH: How much interaction and cooperation is there? Or is there a lot of solitary work on the farm?

MA: The milkers work with pairs, but they are not working together. One maybe checking on the other one and doing partly jobs and going to help in times of need. The feeder is there by himself unless something goes wrong. The free stall barn gets cleaned out by himself, but we have meetings and groups to say "this is what's going on." We are in constant communication. One of the things that really help is that we all have farm cell phones. Everyone is in constant communication when they need each other. When you are in a tractor, when you are planting, you may not see another person for 10 hours, so there is a lot of solitary.

(0:47:32)

HH: What do you like about corn planting?

MA: You are accomplishing something every day and you can see it. 10 days later you can see corn popping up. You get that instant gratification. You plant it, and when you look back you can see all the rows you have planted. I call it the McDonald mentality. You drive through McDonalds, you order it, and you get your food immediately.

HH: Except you're doing the work. *[laughter]*

(0:48:07)

HH: What does it take to be successful dairy farmer?

MA: You have to be very fortunate. The situation that I came into with my mom and dad, we were very fortunate to have a base of operation that was stable enough to take on some risk. Some of those risks pay off, some of them don't. If you don't have that base that is stable enough, you probably can't take that risk to begin. Then you have to have lots and lots of persistence. Whether it be milking cows, labor management, financial management, all these different hats every week, you have to be very good at them or you have to know your challenges and then hire people that are very good at them. I am not sure which comes first—do you get good at them or do you get good at them because you have other good people around you, but I think it's probably moving together. I think our employees are very very good at what they do. I don't know what makes them really good, they have done a good job for a very long time, but they also have really good tools to do a really good job and they know that is what is expected.

(0:49:58)

HH: That is all I have for questions. Is there anything important that you want to mention?

MA: You can't under estimate what your 5 and 10 year goals are. You even have to back up more and think what is important for you and how you fit into your community. We all don't work just solely for a paycheck. How do you see your family developing? How do you see your relationship with your community developing? Those things are very important to me. I think they need to be important. I will get on a soapbox, how on a legislative side, people kind of turn their back on that type of issue. Then they want to complain about taxes and complain about services, but they don't want to raise their hand to help. They don't want to get involved. At some point that has to turn. Usually people need to get frustrated enough to get involved or they are going to get frustrated enough to not get involved. I hope they get frustrated enough to get involved before that breaking point. That is what I see as the challenge. How do you work day in and day out at your work place or facility and still have enough energy after that to still go do community service? That is the \$6 question, I think. That is the challenge that all of us have. I think you find it yourself. At the end of the day, I worked as hard as I can, I know I am exhausted, I know I had a great day, but I still have to go do more. How do I raise my hand and how do I have that time and energy available. That to me is a challenge.

(0:51:55)

HH: How do you see your farm in relation to the community?

MA: That is exactly the question that Ryan and I talk about all the time. Does Ryan picture a market based farm bottling milk, selling it locally, producing Angus beef, selling it locally, or you take the other step and say I am going to go into production agriculture. I am going to produce beef by the tractor trailer, I'm going to ship it to Taylors in Pennsylvania, and I'm going to take my check and work on a margin. Or do you see yourself as a person knowing the consumer, know this is a product I'm going to provide you with, and take a great deal of satisfaction either way. I think we are at a fork in the road to

say, I don't know if you can do it both way. You might be able to do it a little bit, but I don't know if you can make a living doing it knowing your consumer in this area. I think that is the challenge.

(0:53:03)

HH: What is the market for your beef cattle now?

MA: Do you know in Hopkington, where they have Pineland Farms? Do you know the facility in Hopkington at all? With all the hoops? Pineland Farm is a company in Maine. We have been dealing with them for 5 or 6 years. I think their motto is, "Where community meets agriculture." I was very intrigued when the kids started buying beef cattle when they were 12 or 13. Our project was to produce a product that you were very proud of, sell it to someone that was able to market it, and have their name all the way through it. Last year, all of our animals got marketed to the Boston School System through Pineland Farms and 5 Mile Farms label. We have been working with them for 5 years. I think the year before we had been going to Whole Foods in New York City. They are marketed under our name and Pineland Farms. That was the project when we started getting into the deep and we carried that through. Now Pineland has expanded into this area and with that facility. So we have been just delivering to that facility at this point. We have changed ours from 500 pounds taking them up to 800 pounds. So that is how those last 2 barns were built. We put more weight on those animals before we take them.

(0:54:50)

HH: So you are thinking about the possibility of locally bottling milk?

MA: Ryan bought a bottler about a year ago. He was very interested in wanting to do that. Since that time he has run into a lot of hurdles with the USDA inspections, the ability for electricity rate, we don't have 3 phase electricity at the farm; we have a lot of issues whether that project will move forward or not. It still remains to be seen. That certainly has been a great experience, a great marketing plan for him, a great educational project, whether it will overcome the fruition that is up to him.

That is the question: How Ryan sees himself fitting? Is he going to go in production agriculture or more marketing to what we are producing right now to the consumer? We produce about enough milk for about 35,000 people. So when we get the number of people that we would require to buy our product, that is about a third of the county. So I don't know the probability of doing that successfully. There is a challenge.

HH: So he likes the ethos behind it?

MA: We love the idea that we are very proud of what we are producing. WE want the consumer to be on our farm, we want to consumer to say, "Hey, if I have questions, can I have a tour." We love bringing school groups through the farm to say this is what production agriculture looks like. We are very proud of animal freshening right here, here is a new born calf, here is how it is taken care of all through its life and this is what happens. But where do you make money from that? That really is the challenge. You can be proud of it all you want, you can bring all these school age kids through here, but they are not willing to pay for it.

HH: Or a very small group of people would be.