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Field ID and name: Interview 1

Interviewee: Dusty Elkinton

Interviewer/Recordist: Samuel Kendrick, Ellen Kendrick

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Location: Nevada, Missouri

Others Present: Jackson Kendrick

Equipment used: Zoom H6 Handy Recorder

Microphone: Saramonic Wireless Lavalier Microphone

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Corresponding Materials: Photographs

Context: Interview conducted in the Hanger that Dusty flies out of in Nevada, MO

Technical Considerations:

Transcription prepared by: Samuel Kendrick

Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of dash - indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations " " indicates reported speech.

Use of *italics* indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

[00:00:00]

Ellen Kendrick: Don't we... do we want to sit down?

Samuel Kendrick: And we can do if...

Dusty Elkinton: Yeah, if you want to pause, I can grab a couple chairs.

SK: Go

EK: Introduce us Samuel. [crosstalk]

00:00:17

SK: So, this is Sam Kendrick alongside Ellen Kendrick. Um, we're sitting down with Dusty Elkington to talk about the role of Ag pilots in modern agricultural practices. It is currently, um, let me check the time. Currently a quarter till two in the afternoon, March 8, two thou - 2021. And we're sitting down in front of his tractor at the hangar where he flies out of, so if you'd like to go ahead and start

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EK: Sure, I will start. How close does this have to be? I've not done it 200 times like you upside down. Doesn't matter.

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EK: Talk to the boob, microphone. I'm muted, its okay. [laughter] Where does it go? God! I am not a folklorist. Alright. Am I good? Yes. Okay. So like the first time that I saw you, you were flying over my house [laughter] at some ungodly hour in the morning, which I thought was pretty fun. But you, like, you started out, like when I first knew about you? You were a rough stock rider. And just and no, maybe that was, maybe you were working on pole barns with your buddy Colby stock.

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DE: Yes, that was, that would have been about the first time, that was a long time ago.

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EK: And that was when I first time became aware of you and, and heard stories. And then the next thing that I knew from was the toughest cowboy, is that the name of the show, (**DE:** Yup) and being on that, and watched you a few times. And then the next thing, you have a fencing company. And then the next thing you're flying over my house. And so, I was, it's a pretty interesting path. You know, just, and I just wondered like, how, how you got started on the on the rodeo like did you come from a rodeo family? And then how did you end up flying?

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DE: So yeah, I haven't. I've been told that before. Interesting past. But no, uh, I didn't come from a rodeo family, at all. I just grew up on a small ranch in Kansas. Of course, rode horses, gathered cattle, that kind of stuff. And always just liked bull riding. I thought that was really neat. And make my dad hold calves for me, in the barn, you know, and he'd let me ride them a couple of times a night, and that was, that was about it because he didn't want to me to run the weight off of them. Yeah, I was little when I did that. But no, I I've done everything completely on my own. My parents - we, my wife jokes, We were - grew up Amish, more or less. All he did was work, you know, come home, work more. And that was life, and uh, continued on doing that for, you know, all through

high school. I had a job since I was 14 years old. And played around with rodeo a little bit, here and there, and...

EK: What job was working...

DE: Working on another farm. I mean, that's, that's basically the only thing I ever did. I did very short little stint at a grocery store bagging groceries. You know...

EK: How'd that work out?

DE: Uh, it was okay, it was money. I got my own money. You know, everything I did at home I didn't really get paid for, so...

EK: Did you have to wear an apron and a nametag?

DE: No, no, it was a little small town. There's like 1000 people in our town. We have a blinking light. We're the biggest town in our county, we're the county seat. I mean so I grew up in a very small rural area in Kansas but...

EK: What's the name of the town?

DE: Oskaloosa, Kansas and, uh, so it was an hour to Kansas City, 45 minutes to Topeka. Probably 30 minutes anywhere in Lawrence you know if you go to do anything. And so we just grew up out in the middle of nowhere and I worked and had a little taste to rodeo and some of my friends ran off to college and they were rodeoin' and, and I, and they'd come home on the weekends there the first few weeks before they had rodeos and stuff for college and tell me about how fun it was and school, really it was easier than high school be honest, you know, and I thought man, I'm done with this. I ain't...

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DE: I can work my whole life. I kind of like to go rodeo a little bit. And I don't have any brothers or sisters. And so I just packed up and came to Fort Scott. The next, the next year, you know, I went ahead and finished out working that winter full time, averaged like 80 hours a week on a dairy slash cattle operation slash farm. I mean, it was all in one deal.

EK: Dairy is intense.

DE: Yeah. And so that's how I ended up here in Fort Scott. Didn't get a rodeo scholarship. Coach didn't know who I was. I probably hadn't been on 40 Bulls in my life anyway. And...

EK: Who was the coach at the time?

DE: Chad cross is the rodeo coach Ford Scott. And he said you're more than welcome to come be a part of the team. I don't know you. So I can't give you any money. I mean, I, you know, you don't have any high school rodeo experience or nothing. Well, I, everything I do, I do 110%. So I just buckled down and went to every practice and wanted to be better and, and progressed. And by the end of the my first year, I was riding bareback horses too, and figured I was going to the rodeo might as well ride something else while I'm there. By the end of my third year I was on... by the end of my second year, I was on the points team for the rodeo team and was winning pretty consistently. Won some all-around deals my third year in college and bought my pro card and started...

EK: I remember hearing about you

DE:...venturing out a little bit and got along pretty decent, got hurt some, you know, and just get banged around. And in the meantime of that we built fence for Andy Eck. Me and Colby did we did that for gosh off and on for four years, you know, and...

EK: Where did Aubry show up?

DE: Aubry showed up kinda right there in the middle of that. I don't remember in the fencing deal as far as that goes. But, my end of my third year, graduated from college. And we went... Her brother invited me on a canoe trip. And she didn't have anybody to go with, there was... They needed two people per canoe and somebody backed out... Anyway, yeah I'll go. Sounds like a fun getaway and take a weekend off from rodeos and horse round for once. She was there and I met her and that was kind of, that was kind of it. But uh, yeah, then after you know, work for Andy for a couple more years, and then we got married and I had a chance to work for her grandpa. And that seemed like that was going to be a good deal. Just farm work and give me an open schedule to rodeo and...

EK: Something that you knew

DE: Uh-huh. And then that, uh, that kind of, kind of fell apart. Just hard working for family. You know, nothing wrong with it if you can do it, but didn't work out too good for us. So then from then I went to several odd jobs, and then trying to look for something good. Ended up at the trailer shop at Twister trailer building, building trailers.

EK: [crosstalk] I didn't know you worked there. Everyone works there at some point.

DE: Yeah, I worked there for.... Yeah. Built trailers for four years. And in the middle of that, that's when Toughest Cowboy came around. I'd kind of quit. I'd kind of quit riding, bareback and saddle bronc horses, and focused on bull riding because that was my kind of strong suit. And I always rode good at the others but in pro rodeo, It's so competitive. And I was... It was costing me so much, if had a bad weekend, you know, and didn't win anything and was entered three events at three different rodeos. My fees were through the roof, you know, until I focused on bull riding. And then, and we were going to bulls and broncs the world's toughest rodeos. And that deal sold...

EK: Is that like a circuit?

DE: It's a series yeah.

EK: There are several of those series.

DE: Yeah.

SK: You're muted.

EK: The whole time?

SK: Yeah.

EK: Oh, that's okay.

SK: You still came through.

DE: Yeah, yeah, you'll get some of it. But yeah, that deal had sold and they had the big idea they were going to do this all-around. Everybody that rode bareback, saddle broncs, and bulls in rodeo. Everybody that did that can go to this one deal. And they would have tryouts for it. Because there's not that many people in rodeo that can do all three rough stock events. (**EK:** Yeah.) And so the first year I missed, I didn't know about it. I mean, it was building and they're trying to grow it and wasn't advertised. The second by the second year I got wind of it. And went to try out and got on the TV show. And of course that was what it was. But it was a... (**EK:** We saw you!) Yeah, a couple years of that and that... it was really fun. We got paid to be there. You know, paid good when you won, you got to be on TV.

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DE: You know, all the cool stuff they're trying to make more rodeo more publicized. (**EK:** Right.) And, of course, that deal changed into something else. And over time it went away. But it was a good experience and fun. But in the, in the meantime of rodeoing, I would see spray planes, you know, when you drive up across Nebraska in the middle of summer, you know, and you're seeing spray planes. And always thought, Man, that would be... That's a cool job. I always was fascinated with planes as a little kid. You know, rode in one when I was probably out 10 at the local farm show, thing. They were giving rides. (**EK:** Oh, that's neat.) And then... But that was it. I mean, I always... same perspectives everybody has is, they it's an airplane, those are expensive, takes years to get a pilot's license. Oh, it's 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of dollars and airplanes are so expensive and blah, blah, blah. It's a, you know, which is... some of is true, but it's blown out of proportion. I think.

EK: Because people don't know?

DE: People don't know, it's nobody knows. It's so scary. It's an airplane. Oh, that's...(EK: Right.) Oh you own an airplane, you must be rich.

EK: So, it's more accessible than...

DE: It's way more accessible.

EK: The romance has, like, overshadowed the (DE: Yeah.) the reality of it, then?

DE: Yes, for sure. And so, you know, I just always thought that, well, in the, you know, that the trailer shop wasn't gonna go anywhere. You know, it was only gonna make so much money. Nine-to-five job on a concrete floor every day. Wasn't really for me, had to do it, had kids, trying to make money. But uh, me and my best friend, Luke West, we both worked together there, rodeo-ed together for years and college rodeo-ed. We came up with, start a fencing company. We worked Randy for years, we know how to build fence, he's, he's quitting, we can... Shoot, we can do that, you know. So, we just quit, started a fencing company. And it turned out it worked really well. And between my contacts, and together, being able to put things together financially, you know, not have to solely provede on one... you know. One person didn't have to make all the decisions, we got to talk about it. And it made things go a lot better, I think. They always said, only ship that don't float is a partnership, but...

EK: Not true?

DE: Eh, it is to an extent, but you better know your partner if you want it to float, you know? (EK:Yeah.) And, of course, we're best friends. I mean, he's like my brother, so it worked out good for us. And anyway, he moved away. We split the fencing company, he carried on with it, and I carried on with it two different locations. And got along great. No, no, no, we split everything right down the middle flip coins for what we didn't know what it was worth, you know. Just, said our goodbyes and went on our way. Well, a couple of years by myself and I was getting awful sick of building fence.

EK: Doesn't change much, does it?

DE: [crosstalk] Same, same deal. Yeah, you're looking at the same thing over and over again, talking to same customers over and over again year after year, you know, and you're just, gosh, I want to do more, I want to do something else. I want to make more able to make more money, I want to be able to enjoy you know, a little more time at home, I want to be able to, you know, I want to do something that I enjoy, you know? But I don't want to go broke because I'm trying to do something I enjoy, too. I was always taught to just keep your nose to the grindstone and work. So, had the idea of being an ag pilot for a couple of years before I actually did anything about it.

EK: Just, so it had just kind of been stewing in the back of your mind?

DE: Oh, yeah. Yeah, for sure. You think about it, I'd watch YouTube videos ,you know, as YouTube's pretty hot, just coming in to (**EK:** Yeah.) be really hot then. Watch YouTube videos. Well, YouTube's probably out long before that, but it was when I first really discovered it. Watch videos of it and... god, and look things up. Try it, you know, find information like what you're you're getting here. I would have never known where to go get it other than Google or go talk to the local spray pilot or...

EK: Did you? Did you (**DE:** [Cross talk]I would say) go talk to Eddy Hammersly?

DE: Yeah, I'd see the airplanes here at Nevada. Like when they were spraying out of here. And as soon as I'd see it, I'd make time. I, of course, I own my own fencing company. So if I had to take afternoon off to go do that I was going to, I'd run in here and I just hang out and watch him come and go and load and talk to the load people and talk to the pilots when they got out and quiz him about stuff and just, it just grew, you know. The want and desire and... you know, so it wasn't ...I didn't go into it blindly.

EK: So, obviously Aubrey was supportive.

DE: Oh, yeah, she was always supportive. Anything that I wanted to do, you know, as long as the bills were paid. Yeah, I mean, first and foremost, we got to have a roof over our head and food to eat. I mean, that's the goal. (**EK:** Yeah.) So as long as it didn't take away from that, yeah, go for it. And so, building fence one day, I thought about it long enough. And I'd even called people and about just going to like a one stop shop.

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DE: You know, I can get my pilot's license, I can get an ag rating, I can get from no time to commercial with an ag rating. But it was like \$50,000 you know, for a (**EK:** Wow.) couple month-

EK: Where? Like, where would you...

DE: There's one down in Georgia, Bainbridge, Georgia. There's, there was at the time another one in Louisiana. It's... it went bankrupt or something. There's a couple of them around. There's one in South or North Dakota. But there's a few around that you can go to. And gosh dang \$50,000 you know, that didn't seem feasible. I haven't even taken a flight lesson yet. You know, so how am I going to cough up 50 grand to go and what if I don't like it? Or what if, you know, it's not gonna work out? So, I just thought about it for a few more days and I... sitting in the skid loader one day, I was like, I need to get this started. First and foremost, I need a pilot's license. So called, uh, googled it and Joplin popped up closest place, you know, to me my location and it was just Mizzou aviation in Joplin, flight lessons, blah, blah, get your, you know, big oil spill there, get your....Let the sky set you free, whatever, you know, crap and just hit call and say Im interested in taking flight lessons and interested, you know, want to get my private pilot's license. I said, Yeah, when you want to start? I'd like to come down and they got an introductory course, allow you 30... 30 minute flight introductory deal. It's cheap, it's 50 bucks, and you go fly for 30 minutes and see if you like it. Get

you hooked, kind of a deal. I said, Well, yeah. When's your next available spot? They said how's tomorrow at one sound? Oh, crap. Yeah, that I assumed it would be a week or two. (**EK:** [in amusement] enough time to think about it and back out?) Yeah! I said, tomorrow at one sounds fine to me. I went and shoot, I got done with that. And it was awesome. Just kind of what I had imagined and talked to them. And they had a way we could do tailwheel if I, because I knew I needed to be a tailwheel pilot.

EK: What's that?

DE: The difference is that it's a conventional airplane with the wheel in the back. So you get two wheels out front. [gestures towards his Air Tractor] This is, this is conventional main gears in the front, and your tail wheel in the back. Now that's tri-gear. That's the nose wheel. And those are... that's your standard airplane, you know what normal private pilots learn to fly in and something like that when they're at 172. You know, that's a Beechcraft V-Tail, Bonanza. Something like that, or a Cessna 172 with a nose wheel. I mean, that's the typical pilot. You know, we call it a training wheel. Now, because they're easier to land, they're easier to steer. That's just, that's why they made them.

EK: Because it's like weight forward or something?

DE: [in affirmation] Mhm. The tail wheel, if you... once you get your tail wheel past the centerline, if you get out, you know, if you get to swaying, momentum takes over and the tail can pass you, basically, ground loop. And so it's it's harder to do to fly did well, it flies the same, but it lands different. (**EK:** right) That's the main difference. Anyway, they had one there. And if I did a light sport pilot, quote, unquote, I could start in the Rans, which was tailwheel. And we thought, well, we'll get my tailwheel endorsement, and then we'll just switch it to private pilot, and then I'll finish my private pilot in their, now, what did they have down there? Warriors? I think. And, uh...

EK: Yes?

Jackson Kendrick: Yes.

DE: Yes. And so that's what I did. I started going every day, not every day, every... At least twice a week, weather permitting. If I had the money, some weeks, the wind would blow or maybe a week, I didn't have any money.

EK: So, is there like an hour, an hour, like an hour requirement?

DE: You have to have 40 hours minimum to get your private pilot's license.

EK: That's not really very many is it?

DE: It's not, but it's, it's... A private license is no more than a license to learn. I mean, it just gets you gets you comfortable enough that they can set you free, in - with certain restrictions, you know, whatever plane you're signed off in,

EK: So after 40 hours, then you can take a plane up by yourself?

DE: After you have... Well, so you start your training with no time. And then a solo, they'll solo you, usually takes anywhere from eight to 10 up to some people take longer, you know, but 15 hours, say. And in fact, mine was like, I think I had 17 hours when we actually soloed because you know we get there in the weather was a little skuddy and, and of course I was in tailwheel too. So I started in tailwheel. So I was getting a tailwheel endorsement and soloing all at the same time. So it took a little bit longer for me, which just because they're harder to land, but once you do that, then you're soloed then you can go and under your, you know,

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DE: ...your instructors, he'll sign you off basically. And then you can go fly, to build hours by yourself, then you have to have... There, of course, are several different requirements, you have to have cross country. You have to have a long cross country, a cross country at night, you know, solo cross country, you have to do all these things. Some of them with instructors, some of its without, you know, you have to do all the requirements. And then once you get all your requirements done, and you have at least 40 hours logged, then you're eligible to get your license. So then you have, you have to take a test, which you do a little ahead of time at that. And you have to pass your test with 70% or better.

EK: So it's a written test and a...

DE: It's a written test, and then you have a practical exam. So you go to an designated examiner, and basically you have an oral exam first for minimum of an hour. And then you go fly for minimum of an hour. Some examiners are stricter, some of them take a lot more time. Some of them are, you know, and it depends on how much you know, if you, if you're screwing up, they'll just stop it.

EK: But that's not who you are. If you're gonna do it, you're gonna do it.

DE: Yeah, you're gonna do it. Get it right the first time. So anyway, got my private license. In the meantime, we had bought an Aeronca Champ, little tailwheel airplane, because that's what the old men around that knew anything about crop duster and said you need to fly it stick and rudder and you know, it's you need a lot hours.

EK: So you had you bought the plane before you were...

DE: I bought the plane before I had a private pilot license. They signed me off in it. And then I had... I couldn't go outside of 50 miles, nautical miles from my home airport. And I had a wind

limitation. I couldn't fly if the wind was over 12 or a crosswind. Crosswind component was over 12 any wind over 14, you know, they had all these...

EK: Safety regulations, right?

DE: Yeah. And so I can go fly legally and do that and build hours. So that's what I did. I flew the Champ for, gosh, we had a lot of hours in it. I got my private pilot license all finished up, got a bunch of hours in that. And then me and a friend who was doing the same thing as I was doing. He, he found a Pawnee. 150 horse Pawnee in western Kansas, had the wings off of it sitting in a barn. And we talked to the guy and he said he would sell it to us. So we drove to western Kansas, and bought this airplane out of a shed at his house and hauled it back on a trailer. We're both just private pilot's just got our private license, bought this airplane together. We just split it and brought it back and had took it to a mechanic local here. And he let us help work on it. And he overseen everything we did it was you know, it was good for us because we got you know, we got to know the ins and outs of the airplane while we put it together. He, everything we... he was working right in the next hangar. So we'd work on stuff, I'll do this or this or this. And we'd come over there and we'd do it. And then we'd have questions we'd run over there. Hey, come over here and tell us this is right or what do we need to do here?

EK: So is that typical? Or (**DE:** Not really.) do most people just know how to fly it, but they don't know the insides of it.

DE: A lot of people don't know the insides of it, no. They just fly. And we wanted to know what we had, you know. And so he got it, he got it going for us. And we just did the physical work, and then he he got it all signed off and tested. ([crosstalk] **EK:** So what'd he do? Sit in a chair and point to things [laughter]) Oh no he was right in there with us. Yeah. You know, it was like a, you know, and a lot of mechanics won't do that, because they want the money.

EK: Is that here in Nevada?

DE: It was local here. So, it wasn't here in Nevada, it was in El Dorado. But uh, he helped us out a lot. And, of course, that was good for us, because we got we didn't know we had. And we had a good guy that knew what he was working on help us, so we knew it was right. You know, I mean, it was a win-win for both of us.

EK: Do you still like call on Him when you have mechanical issues?

DE: Occasionally. Yeah, he doesn't work on any turbine stuff, so these new airplanes... he don't mess with those. Yeah, but on my other stuff. Yeah. If I have any questions or good work done, he, he does it for me.

EK: Is that - is that like, what most ag pilots do? They have somebody that they like are connected with as a mechanic or...

DE: Oh, yeah, you have to. You have to. There's so many... There's airworthiness directives on these things, you got to, you know, comply with all the time. We have to do 100 hour inspections, 300 hour inspections, 300 hour service, annuals. I mean, we're, we change out brakes a couple of times a year. I mean, there's a lot of maintenance. And you can't do that stuff all yourself, right, you know. So, at least if you have a mechanic on hand that that you know, they may be too busy...

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DE: But put the brakes on, I'll come over and inspect it. Then they'll inspect it there. But they expect you to give them work later too, I mean, we can't do all your own work, gotta have a mechanic.

EK: Because you're flying!

DE: Yeah! And the turbine engines, I don't touch the nose of this thing. I mean, I, I got a mechanic just special just to work on the engine for me.

EK: So that's a whole 'nother business, isn't it? Yeah. That is like, that's a shadow business that most people don't see at all.

DE: No, there's a lot of stuff to this that nobody knows. But yeah, we I mean, I, in my main, my mechanic on the Air Tractors is in Louisiana. And I the only reason I know him is because he bought an airplane here one time, right after I bought my first turbine. And I was trying to figure out who I was going to get to work on this thing. And there's nobody really close, you know, that doesn't get to go down into Arkansas or out in Kansas or up in Iowa. And anyway, got to know the guy, and he bought this airplane, and he ended up doing an annual for me on mine here. And, uh, man, the guy's good. I mean, that's all he works on. So, I make the two and a half hour flight down there and back when I have a 300 hour inspection do and he has to change the fuel nozzles out and all that stuff. I just go to him. And he takes care of it. I get my annuals done down there. It's nice having somebody and I've grown a relationship with him now over the years, and I trust him and he keeps very good records. And he is an excellent mechanic.

EK: So, So you went through all the training. So then after you got your private license, you got your plane put together, then you said okay, now I'm going to be an ag pilot.

DE: Yeah, well, we knew we were going to be an Ag Pilot, by then I already knew. I knew that I was going to do this. So that's why we bought the Pawnee. And we got to have a spray plane if we're going to be an ag pilot.

EK: What's the timeline? Like how long did it take from you sitting on that skidsteer saying, tomorrow's the day at one o'clock. And to like, okay, now, I've gotten, I've gotten to this point where I can fly, I now own this plane. Like how long did that take to that?

DE: So, from the day sitting in the skidsteer, 'till a private license was about one year and a month, maybe a month and a half.

EK: And meanwhile, you're still fencing.

DE: And meanwhile, we're still fencing.

EK: And still working at Twisters.

DE: No, we'd quit Twister to build fence.

EK: Oh yeah, you walked out on that, He said out of here.

DE: Yep. And then. So yeah, but a year, a year and a couple of months, max, there to get the private license. And in the meantime, in that year, I'd bought the Champ too, the little airplane and built a lot of time in it. Then we bought the Pawnee right after that. Just after both me and my buddy got to have our private license. Yeah, put it together. And so then we just started flying it and building our own ag time, instead of going to a school, you know, and we had a runway ([crosstalk] **EK:** Did you have to be supervised for that?) [laughter] runway at the house. We had a runway at the house and we would just put 20 gallons on it and play with the spray system and build hours in a spray plane. We had we just had it for business and pleasure. But we would put we'd put water in it right and go spray. You know, we were trying to learn. We just set... I always set my limits that were very realistic. Like I never tried to overdo anything. I didn't care if the plane... if the book said the plane would haul at 80 gallons, and I knew it would. And I'd even talked to a bunch of old guys that flew him and said they could. I didn't put 80 gallons in the airplane. I put 20 and I went and flew it got used to the way it flew with 20 gallons in it. Then I put 30 in it I flew and got used to the way it flew with 30 in it. Then I put 40 in it flying get used to it, several loads each, you know, over and over every day. Maybe we would go flat a little bit and then every couple days we'd add a little bit to it, you know, because it's totally different. Just because this plane hauls 500 gallons doesn't mean somebody that just learned how to fly an air tractor can – yesterday – can throw 500 gallons in this thing and just go fly it around. It's not going to feel right in the airplane that way.

EK: So it's a lot more sluggish and slow to respond?

DE: Oh yeah, it takes a lot more runway, you know, you can't turn around as fast. It's heavy. It's just a big heavy airplane. So, you got to get used to what its limitations are.

EK: So, do you remember your first formal job where somebody said 'Here Dusty, I want to pay you to spray my field'?

DE: Yes, I do remember it. [laughter] Yeah, it is a little bit for the neighbor...

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DE: We were playing around, and he said, why don't you spray my wheat? It's right there, its just bug spray. I said shoot, yeah! So I think we were up to about 40 gallons in that little Pawnee, was all we'd hold. So I was doing 20 acre loads, you know, I think he had about 300 acres and I'd run two or three loads in the morning, they get a little windy, and I'd stop. Probably wasn't too windy, but it was for me, because I'm still learning. But my friend, he went, and I won't mention a lot of names in all this. But a friend, he did end up going to a school, he went to school, paid \$15,000 and got some time in Pawnee and some time in a Luscum, chasing the light bar round or whatever. And he would come home and tell me what he learned. And I would just go try it in our plane, you know, not to take advantage of him. But I was just, he was, we were talking about it, where he would learn this, well, this won't do this, or this, you can do this, or this is the way to run the light bar or whatever. And like, oh, cool and play well, so I kind of learned through him.

EK: That's an apprenticeship. I mean, I when I was doing research for this, I read about a mentor program like that a lot of Ag pilot schools have were just that very thing. So that's a legitimate way to learn.

DE: Yeah, well, I'm.. So, we did things. I did things, totally different than the typical ag pilot. Typical ag pilot goes and gets their commercial pilot's license, then they go to work for some ag operation, someplace that's already spraying and most typically, they're going to end up being a load... they're going to load airplanes. And on a nice day, they might get to fly something, you know, that ag operation may have a Cessna or something. And they'll let them guys spray some water for a little bit, get used to their plane. And then they might let them have a load here and there. But they work every day as a load crew for the air planes. They'll do that for years, and slowly build their way up. And... and get to do and more and more spraying until eventually they get put into a turbine or, you know, get let go full time. (**EK:** That's not who you are.) That's not, I don't like that way. And I said, Well, I want to be an ag pilot. I'm just gonna go be an ag pal. (**EK:** You wanted to be a bull rider, too.) Yep. And so, that's what I did. I we bought the Pawnee, I went to spraying. And I just made sure you know, because I wasn't going to school. I wasn't getting advice from people that have done this for years. I would... what little advice I was getting from a guy that had the same hours I did. But he was going to a school, and he'd come home that night. We'd sit there and drink a beer, and he'd tell me what he learned. And so, I just took a little... and of course, we already knew a lot of stuff

EK: [with amusement] Did he make you hand him like, five or \$10?

DE: [laughter] Nope! No, he got to fly my airplane, though, you know, and (**EK:** so it was a fair trade [laughs]) Yeah, we were we were kind of all in that together. But, uh, yeah, we had the Pawnee and I got my commercial pilot's license. Like I said about a year... a year and two months, I think from no time to a commercial pilot's license, almost all my time was in tailwheel, because that's just the way I did it. And we had... owned two airplanes. And I sprayed a little bit for the neighbor, just playing around. And you're not supposed to... you gotta... a 137 operations, which you have to have. the FAA has to come and inspect you and do all that before you can actually spray legally. And, or you have to be signed off working under another 137 operation. So, you know, you can go to an operator that's willing to let... to mentor you, and let you work for him. And

make sure you know, you have to do the fly... You have to fly for them and show them that you can do, with water, you know, be proficient. But most of them won't do that. They won't... they ain't going to help you out. You're not going to work for them, they ain't gonna help you out. Well, I was fortunate enough to have another friend in the business that no competition or anything. He he was a very good at... If I had a question, I'd call him and he'd give me an answer. I mean, there was no 'why don't you come down here and work for me? And I'll teach you' kind of deal.

EK: Is it real competitive?

DE: It is very competitive business. Fortunately for us here in this area, we're not overwhelmed with ag pilots. We've... there's enough of us around to get it all done. So, it doesn't have to be super competitive. We don't have to chase each other off territory. Normally, if I'm busy, maybe he isn't he can even come help me if I'm not busy and he is I can go help him. And that's you know, we all have good relationships right around here. As far as the local ag pilots

EK: Just driving up and down the highway, you see Kevin, south

DE: Yeah, he's about 30 miles out.

EK: And we see you here...

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DE: There's a guy out of Harrisonville...

EK: Are there two guys out of Harrisonville or just one?

DE: He's got two airplanes.

EK: Oh, okay.

DE: So he's up there. And then you got a guy in Fort Scott. And then there really isn't any farm ground east to hear to speak of. You couldn't put an ag operation in East of here and get in and have any business. I mean, there's nothing over there turns into the Missouri hills, you know...

EK: Rocks.

DE: Rocks. So it works out really good. where we're at. Yeah, and...

EK: What about in northern Missouri? Is it... Are there...?

DE: Yeah, there's several up in northern Missouri. And I know, I know a couple of those guys. They're so busy up there you know, they're not coming down here. Like they're trying to keep up with their own stuff...

EK: That huge bottom land they're probably... yeah...

DE: Yeah. So, we don't have a lot of gypsies coming in here and trying to take over.

EK: Is that an issue?

DE: Oh, in places it is. You know, big places where you know, you get down in Kansas where it's just farm ground everywhere. Shoot, everybody thinks they're gonna go out there and spray, you know, spray their life away on the big good run. And..., and so yeah, like they run out there from all over the country trying to get work.

EK: I noticed there were a couple of pilots in Southeast Missouri around the rice fields and that area...

DE: Yeah, even farther south you go there's a lot more... you get down into Arkansas and Louisiana and even southern Missouri and then over along the Mississippi River, you know. All the bottoms so now there's airplanes everywhere. There's airplanes every five square miles you know, there's another landing strip and another plane so they're, they're very competitive down there. And they they'll just... they price compete is what they do. You know, he'll do it for six bucks. We'll do it for 550.

EK: Does that happen around here?

DE: No, everybody kind of keeps her prices the same and, and it's a fair price and in fact it's... we're not overpriced by any means, especially as fuel prices going up. You know, we could probably get away with charging more the way fuel prices are, but I'm not gonna.

EK: So, the business part of it. Do you do that as well, or does Aubree do that?

DE: I take care of all of it. She, She worked for me for one year when she was between jobs. But I do everything. I've got one full time employee in the summer that helps take care of mapping. And he takes care of chemical coming in and mixing and loading and that kind of stuff. I take care of all, virtually all the billing and everything.

EK: When do you have time?

DE: When, when the wind blows. [laughs]

EK: Because when we when we ran into you in town earlier, I think it was still warm. You said it was Sam, what was the statement you...

SK: I think what you called it was 75 days of hell or something? It was something like that.

DE: Yeah. 75 days of hell. It starts about the first of July and goes for two and a half months. I mean, basically, that's your corn, corn run into bean run into cover crops. I mean, we work more than that. I've already been you know, it's March 7, I sprayed 500. No, what is today? The seventh? [verbal speculation of the date]. Saturday, I sprayed 550 acres of wheat. And we'll start progressively doing more and more wheat here for the next month or so. And then when it turns in flag leaf will spray a lot of wheat. But that run will be fairly short. And then we'll kind of have a little bit of a break and then we'll fertilize some corn after that. And it'll kind of go on and off, on and off on and off until the corn gets tassels. And then it's on. It turns on and it never shuts off. You know unless the winds blowing. Last year, I think we had the plane shut off maybe three days in that time. And it's just hectic. But you don't bill it, you keep you take all the spray reports, and you stack them up organized as you finish them. paper clip them all together. As you get done with a set of maps, you put sticky notes on it, you write down anything you need to know about that job, how you're going to bill it out, whatever, who bills to, all that kind of stuff. You put sticky notes on it that night, and you stick it in the pile. When starts blowing you have a day you start sending out bills and then...

EK: What time does your day start? Like on a spray day.

DE: I'm usually here, in the middle of summer, I'm here by 5.00-5.30 at the latest in the morning.

EK: You said earlier that there are some nights where you like lay down on the floor.

DE: Oh yeah, no, like I've had to, you know, do a little piddly maintenance or switch over like we'll go from spraying to spreading dry fertilizers. We got to take all the booms off and put the spreader on. Well, we may spray one night and then you're going to...

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DE: you know You're gonna fertilize in the morning, or vice versa. You know, the wind may supposed to pick up in the middle of the day, so you've got to run it early in the morning, so you stay here until whenever you switching everything over and getting everything ready and washing out and whatever you got to do to get ready. So there's nights, I may be here till 1130 or midnight, you know, and that's not doing any billing, that's just getting everything ready for the next day and then go home, lay down for a few hours and try to get something to eat. Get up, grab some coffee and head to the airport.

EK: But you're a, you're a one man show. So I guess you could go to work for a company. I know that there are some big companies in like North Central Missouri, Kansas, Kansas.

DE: I could but I have so much money to do that, you know...

EK: money and independence?

DE: Yeah. For me. It's independence. Yeah, I'm very hard-headed and pretty determined. So you know, I started this, I started this, I'm gonna finish this. And that's sometimes is a fault for me. Because I start some of them sometimes. And I'm like, Man, this sucks. But you finish it. No matter what it is, you know, like I start prying you know, in the wintertime, or in before that in the summer, I may start a project at home. Something that I may not be familiar with. I can do it myself. And you get halfway through it. And you're like, Oh my God, this fucking miserable. [laughter] I started roofing the house one time, you know, and Gosh, dammit. I don't roof every day. You know, I've roofed houses. I know how to do it. I thought well, I'll just roof it myself. There's only one layer on there. I'm just gonna shingle over it. I can do that. Go get a nail gun and start packing shingles myself and halfway across one side of the roof and I'm what the fuck did I get myself into? [laughter] But you have to finish? You just... there's not a choice. I started it, I'm gonna finish it. I think that through a lot more now. Whenever I get the house now I call the neighbors. You know, they roof. I don't.

EK: But you love this?

DE: Yeah, I do. And, and I like you know, I, I've got a, I've got a good friend that he you know, he started his own business. And he didn't like that part of it. He didn't like it. He likes flying. He likes spraying. Boy, he did. And he you know, he just didn't like dealing with the farmers. He didn't like dealing with the customers. He didn't like being responsible for the finances. He didn't like he didn't like that. He wanted to go fly for somebody and get paid and go home.

EK: So is that what he's doing?

DE: So that's what he does now. And he's a lot happier. You know? And that's just the difference between me and him.

EK: But when you think about the things that you have done, like, you know, that you've shared with us, they all have they all have some things in common. Have you given that some thought? Like what they have in common?

DE: Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's...

EK: Not to get too deep here.

DE: Yeah, no...

EK: but I think that's the interesting thing about these sorts of individual jobs. Like, (**DE:** I think there's a lot of careers...) whether you're over the road trucker, or you're an ag pilot,

DE: There's a lot of careers like that. And I think it's and I'm not sure where it comes from, whether you're willing to settle or not. And I don't know if that comes from genetics, or if that comes from the way you were raised or whatever. And I've just never been willing to settle. And I've always been a hard worker. So growing up. I was always taught to just work. You work. You

work, you work, you work, you work. You don't quit. You start this project. You fix it. You finish it. You started hayin', let's get the hay done. It's gonna rain tomorrow. You finish it. You got to get it done today. Cattle need fed. We got to grind feed tonight. They got to eat in the morning. There's never... there was never ever an option to just put something off. Like the where I grew up my dad just quiet, quiet, man. That'd just go and work. Well, I got to do that. We got to cut wood. We need wood for the fireplace. We got to grind feed, you know. I mean, it was just I don't know what you're thinking. This is what we got to do. **(EK: Does he still live on the farm?)** Oh, yeah. Yep. But that being said, it was like we grew up poor. You know, you didn't, What do you need all that for? You don't need... Why do you need those shoes? We can get shoes at Walmart for half the price. It wasn't a matter of whether he had the money or not. He didn't need the money. He is practical. And I always wanted more. I always wanted you know, like he would work why would you buy a new tractor we can fix this one. You know, and I was... **(EK: We're familiar with that.)**

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I was always, even, even as a child. Why would we, we're gonna fix this 15 times from what we have in fixing it. We can sell that one, buy another one and get more work done. And it never made sense to me, even when I was little, you know, so I don't know where that comes from, because my dad wasn't like that. But I that I got that from someplace. Yeah, I got the work ethic from my dad. But I don't know where I got the business side of things. You know? So it's just kind of different.

EK: Yeah. Well, you do what you need to do to make this happen. Would you, would you consider this like a dream come true, in a way?

DE: No, because I did it.

EK: So it wasn't anything that was ever. I guess that's the point that you're making that if you thought something, then you could make it happen.

DE: Yeah. And everybody says, that's something I've preached a lot. I had a guy tell me the other day. He said, Can you believe those guys that I golf with? They said that, uh, you know, Tiger, they're talking about Tiger Woods being so good. Well, yeah, if I hit, you know, 10,000 golf balls a day, I'd be as good as tiger woods to and he said, he believed they said that. I said, Well, they're right. He said, No, they're not Tiger Woods is special. I said he's special because he can sit down and hit 10,000 golf balls a day. If you can sit down and hit 10,000 golf balls a day, you can be as good as Tiger Woods, too. The difference is you're not gonna sit down and hit 10,000 golf balls that day. There is zero difference between Mike Tyson, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, you name it. The best athletes of any kind all over the world. Nothing different between them, and another normal human being other than they were willing to do what it took to be what they are. They weren't born with some God given talent. They're born with more work ethic. That's my personal opinion. And so yeah, he's I said, Yeah, if they go hit 10,000 golf balls a day, they'll be as good as him too.

EK: So, the flying part of it, do you still... Do you still like the flying? I mean, I like when when we see you, when I hear you coming over our house. I always get really excited about it. I don't... you know, because it's like, oh, it's Dusty! You hear him? He's coming, I hear him! And it's just like, there's just something about the yellow plane in the sky, you know,

Unknown Speaker 47:41

I do. And there's times in the summer where you're sick of it. You don't want to get an airplane, you don't want to get up at four o'clock in the morning. You don't want to fly that last load at night, even though you know you have time to get it out. And I have to check myself up sometimes, in the middle of summer when I get to feeling that way. And I'm tired of it and you get complacent. And you're you just jump in it and you go do it. Like you're gonna jump in the pickup and run to Walmart, you know, you just do it. And you don't think about it. And then you realize, you know, you're driving down the road, you're not really paying attention to what you're doing. And oh god did I pass somebody you know, or whatever, and you got in an airplane, you got to be really careful. And I got to just wake myself up sometimes say, look, take a breath. Think about what you're doing. Just one more load, pay attention the whole time, calm down, and never fly mad. I just made that rule, if I'm mad because something didn't go right at the load pad, or I got a customer that's mad, or I got maps that are screwed up. And I got back from a load and everything's a mess. And I lose my cool. And I do once about once a year over something. When I get back in the airplane, I'll taxi out and I may pull off into the run up area and just sit there for a couple minutes and take a breath and just not be mad. I gotta fly now. That'll work itself out later. I can't be mad and take off from this airplane and try to fly over trees 10 feet off the ground miss powerlines, and all that stuff, and be pissed off about something. So, cool myself down. I get in there I take off and I might turn the radio on and just kind of relax for a minute and get my nerves right and make sure that I'm not gonna miss something or, you know,

EK: Yeah. How is that any different from when you get on a bull or... riding? I mean, you do the same thing right? sit there until...

DE: No, kind of, you usually have that worked out in your head ahead of time Yeah, you're going to do this job. And that's more of a physical thing, making you... because to make your body physically do something that intense and that fast with those reactions that you have to kind of have that prepared. You know, you have to get the fear out of there ahead of time, you know...

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EK: Is there fear with this?

DE: There can be, sometimes, you know, there's been times where things get really close and you Oh, man that was close. You know, he kind of just, same deal if something happens, you know, the swath ain't right and, or whatever you... wait a minute, there's some something doesn't look right.

Is there a wire there? Sometimes you just got to fly off, circle around, look at it. Check it out again, make sure you didn't miss something. And that way you don't get those feared moments. Like oh, no, you don't you know, usually if it's Oh, it's probably going to be too late or close to it.

EK: Have you ever had an accident?

DE: Never had an accident, never had an incident. I had a couple of times where I hit limbs with the trees or with the main gear you know, or something, but just brushed it knew I was close anyway. (**EK:** You were prepared?) Oh, yeah. I mean, it was kind of like, ah, dang it, that's gonna be close. And you just kind of drag them. But then you know, then you fly off and you think, man, I'm pushing it a little too close. Reset my mind. And then, you know, I may fly off for five minutes and just burn some fuel and just, Hey, wait a minute. Be careful. I need to go home at night. That's the whole, you know, deal.

EK: Yeah, you do want to go home. oddly, what you just said reminds me of watching Patrick Mahomes play football. You know, because he gets sacked. And he resets. And...

DE: Yeah, you can't dwell on something.

EK: So what you said about, it doesn't matter what you're doing. It's like how... like... your approach to it. The Tiger, Tiger Woods thing? That's what I just had that thought that it's the same thing when you reset? Yeah. So you're just like Patrick Mahomes! Yeah, no, seriously, you know, (**DE:** Different, different situation) well, he's got a football, but all that pressure. I mean, that's a lot of pressure.

DE: It is a lot of pressure. And you know, it's not only just the pressure of flying the airplane right and getting, getting the chemical on right, and not crashing. But you also have the pressure of 10 farmers showing up at the same time, with more acres than you can possibly get done in the two days that they all want it done. And now you have to compete with all the spraying and runing airplane and making sure you know, I've got somebody here now to sort chemical and make sure that's right. I mean, I can I trust him. Yeah, good. But now, you know, I can't get this done. Now I gotta get on the phone and make some phone calls. See if I get another airplane to come in here for just if I can get him for one or two days. And then that'll you know, and you have to do that sometimes.

EK: But you can't let that enter in when you're flying.

DE: No, you know, so you have to do that, you know, while you're taxiing out or something or, or stop and go in the office and do it... When you're flying, you can't be talking on the phone and trying to coordinate, and jot down notes, and spray a field at the same time. I mean, you're not in a ground rig, you can't just stop and write something down. So you got to kind of coordinate that with the pressure, you know, the same, same deal, you just got to wipe your mind clean your spray jobs job, let's get this job done. We'll figure out how we're gonna get the next one's done between loads. You know,

EK: So, you mentioned earlier that like that, when we were talking about, like clean energy and stuff that... I wasn't quite sure where the beginning of the conversation was, but like you mentioned, like the bad... that that you saw, like an anti something advertisement for and they used a... like the spraying and the...

DE: Parkinson's. Herbicides causing...or, uh, pesticide causing Parkinson's was that ad was about.

EK: So, what, what sort of safety precautions like, obviously, you can't, like you can't get your hands in this stuff. You can't, you can't breathe it, you can't do any of that stuff, or you're gonna be dead and not be able to do your job. So how do you feel that misrepresents what you do I guess is what I'm trying to ask. Like that ad that using...

DE: Well that ad was a spray plain spraying field. You know, they had a video of it from Arial-y spraying a field that says pesticides killing, or causing Parkinson's disease or whatever. That's saying that the airplane causes Parkinson's disease. And it doesn't, it's - it's the chemical, But what they don't... know... what they're miss.... I guess they're misinterpretating [misinterpreting], however you say that, is we don't spray if the wind's blowing too hard. We don't spray off target we do. We take precautions, you know, to make sure that what we're putting out goes where it's supposed to go. If, if the winds over...

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DE: You know, like my limit is 10 miles an hour. And that's, it's less than that on herbicide. You know, but a bug spray, that's my limit. And I won't spray. You know, there's a house, when I get to a field, there's a house downwind at the end of that field. I'm not going to spray that field, right, then. I may spray half of it and go on someplace else, you know, and wait till either, you know if you know call them, we're not going to be home. We're not going to be home all day. Go spray it in the morning after they leave. You know what I mean? Do something like that. And the same way on the ground here. We got goggles, we've got respirators, we've got gloves, you know, you wear the long sleeves. You don't... you know, be careful. Take your time. That's why I have the load crew. So you know, they've got an hour, I take off that... you've got an hour to dump all this chemical in. There's no point in just splashing it all over, getting in a hurry and slathering it you know, take your time. wear your gloves, put on the respirator. Dump it in...

EK: Don't get Parkinson's. [laughter] Sam, do you have any questions.

SK: Um, actually the one question that I did. have you covered with the Parkinson's? Oh, we're coming up on an hour for the interview.

EK: Oh, yeah, we could I could keep talking. Yeah, this is really interesting.

SK: I don't particularly have any questions that haven't been covered. yet. Is there anything you'd like some something final, you want to say about being an ag, ag pilot. Just to kind of close this interview out? Yeah.

DE: It's very rewarding. At the end of the day, at the end of the day, and you see, you know, you got all these acres done and you got happy customers, when they come I have customers call and say, Hey, we want to do this... we're gonna do some more fungicide next year, we saw huge results. Because, you know, maybe they only did a few fields, man. It was night and day and, or the herbicide work and oh my god, you got it right to the edge. Or you hear people talk about it, like, hey, they put the airplane up against the ground rig anyday, they do a good job, you know, or Dusty did a good job. That, that kind of stuff, that feedback and the positive stuff that comes from the local community and the way that people treat you. That's, that's real really rewarding at the end of the day.

EK: I think it's interesting that like, if I have ever mentioned your name, like in when I you know, my classroom or just around, so many people know you. Oh, yeah, Dusty. Yeah, we're buddies. I'm thinking maybe not...[laughter]

DE: You got friends you didn't even know you had!

EK: Yeah, sometimes. Yeah. You don't know what, like you don't know. What you mean to other people. In daily lives.

DE: Yeah, Halloween comes around, and somebody you know, sends you a picture of their niece or nephew or something that's dressed up as dusty. And you're like, Oh, yeah, like Dusty the Crop Duster? Like, no. That's Dusty Elkinton Yeah. You know, and that's pretty cool. When a little kids... and I you know, I tried to, I try to make time in my day, sometimes if I see little kids out, you know, running through yard waving or something. I'll blow a little smoke at them. The other day. I know family, they've got like a little campgrounds up on a hill. And I mean, it's way up on this hill, I was spraying a field a half mile away from it, I could see that they were all up there, you know, and they take their kids up there and they have a fish fry every, on the weekends. And that's what they do. And I know, I can see the kids out running around all over the hillside over there. So when I leave, I'll go by and get down pretty low over here. You know, where they can kind of level with them cuz they're up on this cool knob, and I'll blow smoke the kids fly off and the kids they Oh, they out there running around with their arms out. That's pretty fun. That's, uh, that's the probably the funnest part of the job is the reward of being welcomed. And, you know, the kids seeing the kids excited.

EK: And even if it's a grown up woman running outside to wave at you. [laughter]

DE: Or text messages from your friend that says, 'asshole, you woke my mother up again! [laughter from all] She's not happy!'

EK: No, that's good. Well, I guess we're done with the formal part.

SK: Yeah, I guess we just like to say thank you for taking the time to sit down with us.

DE: Oh, you're welcome.

SK: I mean, this is not something that's been done. So it's really like taking off the rose-colored glasses on an industry, industry that is so vital to this, to this community.

[crosstalk and chatter as mics and recorder gets turned off]

01:00:08