

The Farmer's Cow Oral History Project  
Fort Hill Farms, Thompson, Connecticut  
December 11, 2009

Interviewer: Beverly Brazeal (BB), Roseland Cottage Volunteer

Interviewee: Peter Orr (PO), owner of Fort Hill Farms

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BEVERLY BRAZEAL: Hi, this is Beverly Brazeal, and today is December 11, 2009. And I'm here with Peter Orr at Fort Hill Farms in Thompson, Connecticut. And Peter, if you would just start off by stating your name, and spelling it for us, please?

PETER ORR: My name is Peter Orr, and that's P-E-T-E-R, and the last name is O-R-R.

BB: Terrific, okay. Well, we're going to start off with talking about you a little bit, and your family. And we've got plenty of other categories we're going to get into. But just to start, would you tell me where and when you were born?

PO: I was born in Norfolk, Virginia, May 24 of 1957.

BB: And when did you first come to Fort Hill Farms?

PO: I would have started coming into this area, in Thompson, in the mid-seventies, and I was introduced to the area by my wife. We met as students at the University of Connecticut in 1975, '76.

BB: Okay, and then when did you actually move to the farm?

PO: We kind of did that in step-wise progression. We, both my wife and I, had lived away from the area. We lived in central Pennsylvania; we went to Penn State University for graduate school, and then came back into Connecticut in the early eighties to go to work. I went to work, accepted a job in plant biotechnology with Pfizer, Inc., in 1982. And we lived in Stonington, in the Mystic area, for greater than about twenty years. And we were both with careers and so forth, and over that time period there was an interest developing to get back to the land and so forth.

And in the late eighties we set up an agricultural operation on the tract of land that we call Fort Hill, which is a tract that's adjacent to kind of my wife's family's farm homestead, which was O'Leary Farms down on O'Leary Road. And so we came into the area here probably around 1988, '89, and rehabilitated a property that had been purchased to add on to the land acres, because the most important thing for a dairy farm is the land base, to feed the animals and to support the farm. And we were not part of the dairy farm. We set up our own operation. My wife moved here full-time in the early nineties, and we set up a wholesale plant nursery business.

And that gradually evolved over into a retail plant business, and with the addition of pick-your-own crops, as well as some agricultural hospitality-type things, such as a

corn maze. We have now shifted the focus of that property over a period of time to host the public and have them learn about agriculture, and so forth. And when we—we were given the opportunity in 19—I the mid-nineties, and completed the acquisition in 1997, of her parents' dairy farm, we were given the opportunity to purchase that farm. And we didn't even have to think about it. Remember, at this time I'm still living full-time away from the area. In fact, having gone through several mergers and acquisitions in my professional life, at that time I was commuting weekly from Connecticut to Saint Louis, Missouri. And I did not return full-time to the farm here until August of 2001.

BB: So it was a long transition?

PO: It was a very long transition, as this is kind of a long-term project. We have a very long look, a very long view, of what we're doing here.

BB: Well, I'm going to step back just a little bit, and you mentioned that you had met at UConn. So what is it about your time at UConn, and then at Simpson, that sort of prepared you for what you're doing today?

PO: Well, both of us, both Kristin and myself, were students in the College of Agriculture. Kristin was enrolled as an animal science major. That was her focus because she'd come off a dairy farm and was interested in animals, and the dairy business. My background was in plant science, and in basic sciences, and so forth. And we just so happened to meet in a Soils 250 class at University of Connecticut, and kind of the rest is history. We met, and that would probably have been around 1976, '76-'77 time period, and subsequently got married in 1980. And we both graduated from University of Connecticut with respective degrees in our majors.

BB: So, a little bit about the farm history, prior to you coming on board? Can you tell us a little bit about when Kristin's parents bought it, and the early history?

PO: Well, the dairy farm is derived from her father's side of the family, in the sense that they, too, were—Ernie's father, whose name is Truman, had a very, had a profession that he came from outside of the area. He came from outside of America; he came down from Nova Scotia to seek opportunities for his family. And he was pretty much like a master mechanic-craftsman for the mill industries that were very prominent in the area at the time. And so he worked basically a day job, and you'd have to ask my father-in-law about the detailed history—Ernest O'Leary—about the exact steps that were taken, but his parents, Ernie's parents secured the core of what we refer to as the home farm area down on O'Leary Road, or what we refer to as O'Leary Farm.

And that farm was started, in terms of into a production farm, by their son Ernest, and he was one of, I think, four children of the O'Leary's. And he, the history that I know of how—the stimulus of what actually started the direction in the dairy business was that when Ernest was in the eighth grade, he had worked for someone that could not pay him, and he was offered a calf in lieu of pay. And he brought home that calf, and that was the start of the dairy farm, so. And actually today, that bloodline of that calf is still present in the herd.

BB: Nice.

PO: And so that would have been, I believe, in the early forties, when that was happening. And Ernest O'Leary is responsible for having built the core of what is now the dairy farm at Fort Hill Farms, deriving from his hard work through the forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, and into the eighties and nineties. He literally had—I don't want to say a past active career, because he's still involved. But he directly managed his farming operations for in excess of fifty years.

BB: Terrific. Okay. There are some significant changes that occurred in the nineties, and why don't you share with us what some of those were?

PO: Well, the nineties was a pivotable time for us as a family, as well as for the farm. It was during that time period that while we were still working jobs elsewhere, we had a vision of wanting to have value and meaning to our life, and through development of our agricultural operations at what we called Fort Hill Farms. And we, Kristin and myself developed the plant nursery operations, the pick-your-own's, and kind of the hosting activities that go on at what we call our Visitor Center, or where we host the general public at the Fort Hill property.

And we were starting to see, or having a lot of comments from people coming into that, into our farm direct sales area, that people were interested in buying local, and wanting to know about local agriculture. And kind of developing independently of this was Kristin's parents getting on in their careers, and were basically thinking about, well, how to propel the farm into the next generation. We were offered the opportunity in terms of some discussion, as early as around 1995, to, if we were interested in taking over the dairy farm. And actually it all traces back to one visit by the O'Leary's up to us on Fort Hill, on the Fourth of July probably in 1995, that, so to speak, the passing of the baton began for the dairy farm.

And over, and it was kind of to some degree complex, because at the same time, Kristin was back here at Fort Hill working full-time in her agriculture operation. I was fully employed in my career, out of the area; my office was located fifty miles away, and I was basically here back in the evenings, and here on the weekends. And we did not have to think much of whether we wanted to purchase the dairy farm; it was just a natural fit for us to move forward and get into the dairy business. Because one of the things that we were seeing out in the general public is that people knew that there was a family dairy farm, you know, connected to Kris and myself, and people were coming in and asking where could they buy the milk.

And most dairy farms in Connecticut and southern New England are what is referred to as wholesale producers of milk. You produce the milk, and sell your milk generally through a farmer cooperative, to go into the New England milk shed. And that's what's referred to as the overall flow of milk that comes off the dairy farms into the New England milk shed, and kind of, our milk was disappearing as a faceless commodity into that milk shed. And at the time, the farm was a member of the Agri-Mark farmer cooperative, which is the producers, the marketer, of Cabot, and now Macadam Cheese,

which is just a very good fit for a lot of the farms in the general New England area. That's a New England cooperative, and that allows for farmers to also participate in having their farm connected to the marketing of a direct farm product, is marketing Cabot Cheese.

BB: It's identified more locally that way?

PO: Yes. And but, we were still getting a lot of, you know, the general population of people that were coming into our farm direct sales area were asking, "Well, where can we buy your milk to drink?" And so our early thoughts were to actually incorporate the dairy farm into our overall farm operations, Fort Hill Farms, and to actually set up an on-farm processing capability. And we went through a procedure, a study, in 1997-98 to actually build a processing capability on our farm and offer our milk directly for sale. But the output of that consulting project that a professional did up was that we had to sell eighty percent of our milk at retail price to be able to make the situation cash flow. And thus, the risks versus rewards scenarios were not that great.

We didn't pursue it at the time. And I also didn't believe the consultant, so I went and hired another one, because we were bound and determined that that's what we should do! And I mean, we had already purchased the, had taken over the dairy farm. And the output of that second consultant was the same: basically the economics were not that favorable to produce and process our own milk, and try to sell it off the farm or in the immediate area.

BB: So you had the concept of the Farmer's Cow?

PO: And so at the same time that we were coming to this, you know, this conclusion that we, as an individual farm, that the numbers weren't going to work for the processing situation—because most of the, there are some farms that produce milk and process it in New England, and you'll find out that most of those farms are ones that they've grown up with those operations, and that they have evolved over time. But to go out, and to build a new building, equip it to the current code and standards of today, the cost is very high.

So we started coming across other farmers in the area that were thinking, first and foremost they were thinking about how do we propel our farms into the future? And so just out of some casual conversations, it just kind of developed that the farms of what became the Farmer's Cow starting to have conversations, informally and then a little more formally, about, well, would it work if we were to join forces and to cooperatively work together to come out with a branded milk product that basically is based on the story of our farms and our operations, and offer that to the general public? And out of that effort is how the Farmer's Cow was born.

BB: Those must have been some interesting conversations! Were there some dead ends, some areas that you thought of pursuing initially, and decided not to? How did it sort of evolve to what it has become?

PO: Well basically, we were focused on—there are six farms in the Farmer's Cow, and we're located in eastern Connecticut, and pretty much from close to the shore all the way up—the northern-most farm, or the northeastern-most farm in the group, as well as in Connecticut. We are the most extreme northeastern dairy farm in the state of Connecticut. Our property line is actually the Rhode Island-Connecticut border, and we're just two miles or so from the Massachusetts border. In fact, up on the woods there's a rock that indicates where the three states, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, come together, which can be—the general area can be seen from the top of the hill.

And we—what you see with the Farmer's Cow is really what the farms are. We basically—I view it as a very simple way that we market out milk, is that we're just being ourselves, and we are just telling our story of how we basically, you know, tend our land, tend our crops, tend the cows, to bring milk to the public. And there's just been a beyond my expectation reception by the public, in terms of how they have received that product, as well as in doing that, how they have received our story.

BB: So tell me a little bit more about some of the other players—your processor, and the shipping of the product?

PO: The thing is is that we, you know, being a dairy farm, and the fact that there is not a lot of margin or profit in the production of milk on the farm's part of the overall picture, how milk comes to the marketplace, we who have survived as dairy farms, we also have to be very prudent in our financial management, and how we spend our dollars and make our decisions. And so we kind of evaluated all the different ways of how we could bring the milk to the market, in the early years.

It took—our going from informal to formal discussions were are about five years before we came to market, so it just wasn't a happenstance type of situation that we came to the marketplace with a product. We evaluated many different options, including, you know, building our own processing plant, or how we should do it. And we arrived upon a business model that we basically are subcontracting out the processing of our product. Our milk is segregated from our farms into our tankers that transport the milk to a processing plant, where the milk from our farms is processed into our containers, and then goes out for delivery to the marketplace.

Kind of the custody of the milk, in a simple situation, I can say from my farm, our milk is picked up by nine o'clock in the morning, which is—that would be a day's worth; that would be two milkings of the cows. And that milk is picked up. There's another farm that is picked up on that trailer, and that being Fairvue Farms over in Woodstock. Both between the Miller's and us, we make up a trailer load of milk a day. And that is taken down to the processing plant, in which it is by say, approximately, early in the morning, that starts flowing into our Farmer's Cow containers, and it goes right out onto the trucks for delivery into the marketplace.

So what we're doing is bringing, because of it being a local product, our milk is picked up at the farm and delivered—you know, can be delivered—into the marketplace,

available for the general public, in a fairly quick period of time. I don't see how it could be any quicker, other than people coming and buying the milk directly off the farm from the business end of the cow, which would be the teats and the udder!

BB: [Laughs] So therefore your product in the stores, it's going to have a much longer shelf life, because the footprint is much smaller, and it gets there so quickly?

PO: Our product has a—the code for milk is established by health guidelines, and so forth. And our product has a very good code. There are different ways that milk is processed, and this is maybe an area that we should talk about, because it does influence, kind of, the product, in terms of how it tastes and how the shelf life is. And our milk goes through what is referred to the old-fashioned form of pasteurization. It's a lower temperature for a longer period of time, versus what is more prominent in the milk business is what's called ultra-pasteurization, which is exposing milk to a very high temperature for a shorter period of time. And we believe that there's a discernible taste difference, as well as a physical product difference, between milk that goes through the two processes. And we prefer to bring milk to the public through the old pasteurization process, which is kind of referred to in the industry as cold pasteurization.

BB: Okay.

PO: And we have a lot of comments from the general public that there is a discernible taste difference on our product. And we believe it's through many different things, in terms of, you know, just how we handle the milk on our farms, getting it to the public as freshly as possible, and then how it's subsequently processed and moved into the marketplace.

BB: So you're not just in the local Mom and Pops, but you're in some of the big chains as well. Tell us how you were able to break through into that larger market?

PO: We were lucky, in the sense that our original business plan was to basically start with the Mom and Pop stores, you know, call it your local general store on the common, or in your village center. And we were focusing on that that was how we were going to bring our milk to market. And we had, just several events happened in the later stages, as we were, as it was becoming public knowledge that we were coming to market with a fresh, local milk product.

And we had an article that was published in the *New London Day* that we were, that a group of farms in eastern Connecticut were bringing a local milk together cooperatively. And that was read by some who are now customers of ours down in the New London area. And one in particular person wrote a letter to the editor for the *New London Day* that basically complimented the *New London Day* for covering this bit of news about local dairy farms banding together to bring fresh milk to the market. And she—in her letter, which was published by the *Day*, she indicated that she was a shopper for Stop and Shop, and she requested that her local Stop and Shop carry the Farmer's brand milk.

Well, the manager in the Waterford-New London Stop and Shop saw the letter to the editor, and he forwarded that letter to the editor up to the corporate offices of Stop and Shop, which is in Quincy, Massachusetts. And if just so happens that Stop and Shop is a major player in southern New England for food shopping; they are a major chain. And we received a phone call from the buyer of dairy, the dairy category, for the entire Stop and Shop organization. And the farmers made a trip up to Quincy, Mass., to meet with the dairy buyer. And kind of, Stop and Shop signed on as the first store to carry our milk.

And it really made us have to grow up fast, in the sense of its—the delivery into a larger retailer. It's a very professional delivery platform that you have to gear up to achieve. It's all done electronically these days, that your product has to be, you know, bar scan-able into their system, and that basically all the electronic handshakes make it all the way through the cash register with the product going out the door. So it's an electronic world on the back side of the retail large grocery stores, as well as the progression all the way to home, through the purchase of that product. So we—those discussions were held in August of one year.

We now have been in the marketplace for over four years. Last October, this past October of 2009 would have been our fourth anniversary. The other thing that we found out is that the shelf space that Stop and Shop basically gave for our product, that we have to go out there and kind of maintain that little shelf space. And we had to do what is referred to as a re-set, that when they give you the shelf space, it is the person whose product that is responsibility to go in and renovate that area in the store. So our first list of stores to do were about eighty-six stores in Connecticut, to introduce our product to. And here we're given the opportunity to service eighty-six larger grocery stores, and we had no staff!

BB: You now have to—do you have to configure the actual shelving?

PO: Not configure the shelving, but we have to—

BB: Stock it?

PO: We had to physically go in and remove the product that was there, under the direction of the dairy manger in the stores. It had to be, you know, stored in their back room for however they were going to deal with it. Clean the space, and then get up the signage, or just the pricing information, and verifying that that pricing information and that bar code was scan-able at the cash register. And if it doesn't, then you know, you can't have your product in the store. And so there's this coordination of, between the home office up in Quincy, and the stores, in terms of the placement of the product.

And so, how we accomplished this re-set—and this was coming into the latter part of September of the year, and into October. And this is at a very busy time for the farms, that we're dealing with our harvest of our yearly corn crop, to make into corn silage and feeds for the dairy cows. It came at a very busy time, but the six farms mobilized. All

of us sent people, and we conducted a re-set of the eighty-six stores in about two to three days!

And upon the production of the first Farmer's Cow products, which were four what are called SKU's, four products of whole milk, two percent, one percent, and skim milk, we had to go into the stores and basically introduce that to the marketplace. And we kind of divided it up that we each, each person or each group—we went out as a team, maybe one or two people from different farms. We followed around the delivery truck. The product was placed in the back room, or the cooler, of the store, and we, the farmers, went and renovated the shelf space, and got the product on the shelf.

And you know, it went as smoothly as you could picture, in terms of trying to get product, and moving around, and so forth. We had a delivery truck that broke down, and the way that we made the—to keep on the schedule we basically had the truck towed around with a tow truck, making the delivery. Because basically you have refrigeration, and you need to maintain the correct conditions to have good shelf life. And so the truck was towed around to make the deliveries, and we met our schedules. And that's partially because we think as farmers, and we need to get the job done by a certain time, and that's how we did it in that particular circumstance.

BB: How about Yankee ingenuity? [Laughs]

PO: And we had high feedback from Stop and Shop, because we found out in a short period of time that usually it takes a large company, a large corporation, to get that many stores re-set, that that usually takes one to two months to do it. And we did it in two to three days! And of course, there was some adjustments that needed to be made and so forth. But we went out there, and so to speak, claimed our shelf space, and got the product to the public in about two to three days.

BB: So, that was Stop and Shop. You're in a lot of other stores now.

PO: [Sighs] And what we found out was that when we had the introduction of that product with a major player in the marketplace such as Stop and Shop, that that led to other food retailers wanting the product as well. And so we subsequently have gone into just about every other major food retailer in Connecticut, such as Big Wide, Price Chopper, Shop Rite, and we're even in a select group of WalMart stores in Connecticut, as well as a lot of independent grocery stores, IGA stores such as Tri-town Foods. And there's a lot of independent groceries in the kind of Connecticut River valley that we've gone into, as well as a lot of Mom and Pop stores. I believe that the Farmer's Cow products, I think we're probably pushing over three hundred different stores in the state of Connecticut, which represents easily in excess eighty percent of the food marketplace—or, the retail food marketplace.

BB: So, does the Farmer's Cow now have staff members that are responsible for that piece? Or, the farmers are still out there at harvest time?

PO: Well, the farmers go out, but we go out in a way to basically support our product, and to allow for the public to meet the farmers behind the products. And so we go out to a

lot of events, and a lot of tastings, where was actually have someone from the farms going out there. But we do have staff people who now are the front line sales and marketing representatives for the Farmer's Cow products on a daily basis. And we're fortunate that one of the people who does that is actually from one of the farms. And so, and her name is Kathy Smith, and she basically services a lot of the accounts across Connecticut.

And now we've added an additional person so that she can focus on—Connecticut, it's not a big state, but it's a difficult state to get across, because of kind of just how our transportation is set up, and kind of our traffic patterns. And we have now kind of put on the second person to handle some of the territory. So, we're growing! We're having to put on more staff to meet basically the demand of the public for wanting the Farmer's Cow products.

BB: So you do a lot of marketing. I see you at places like Celebrating Agriculture. What are the other types of venues that promote the products?

PO: Well, we get a lot of invitations to, like, health walks, Cancer Society walks, that are fairly large events in our populated areas. We also get invited to participate in a lot of farmer markets. We don't necessarily go out to sell product at the farmer's markets; we go there, maybe to a market once or twice during the year to promote the product, and to try to allow for where the product would be attainable in their community on a daily basis.

We also have what has now become one of the Woodstock Fair's annual events, which is the sponsoring of a birthing center at the Woodstock Fair. And we were asked probably three to four years ago if we'd be interested in donating cows that might have a chance of delivering a calf during Labor Day weekend, when the Woodstock Fair is held every year. And fortunately, one of the farms with the Farmer's Cow is located right next to the fairgrounds, and that farm is able to supply cows that have their due date, their deliver date, plus or minus, around Labor Day weekend.

And that, it was the fair committee's idea and concept to come up with a birthing center. They had seen that the concept was successful at several other major fairs in the country, one being over in New York State, and one being down in Florida. And they thought that they wanted to kind of get back to the roots of the Woodstock Fair being an agriculturally derived fair, and they wanted to extend already quite an offering that they have for agriculture through putting together the birthing center. And we'd cooperate, and supplied cows, and we also basically helped man the booth, doing a lot of the narration or the explanation of what goes on during that. And that has, for the exit interviews for the Woodstock Fair, it has been ranked one of the top attractions at the Woodstock Fair.

BB: It's a good educational program. A lot of people bring their families there. Well, that's been terrific! I've really enjoyed this part of the interview, Peter. There's an area that I want to get into, that I haven't talked to the others much on, and I'm hoping that you can shed some light on some of this. It has to do with kind of the political arena, and

the price of milk. And so, I didn't know if you had been involved with any kind of lobbying, or farm-friendly legislation, and what you can share with us on that whole topic, and where it stands, and what we've gone through in the past few years.

PO: Well, I'll start off, Beverly, in that area by saying kind of a joke, how we introduce that topic. Milk pricing at the farm level is a very complicated process, and it's been joked that there's maybe three people in Washington who understand how milk pricing is derived at the farm level, and they don't agree with one another!

BB: [Laughs]

PO: And it's, the pricing for milk at the farm level, at the wholesale producer level, the rules and regulations for it had its birth in the 1940's. And so it's a very arcane, older type of system that has evolved over time, and it's just a very complicated set up for, in the last ten to fifteen years, the price that a farmer receives at the farm level has become more volatile, in terms of having peaks and valleys. And it's somewhat cyclical, and the valleys have been getting deeper and longer, and the peaks have been getting just shorter. And for a lot of that pricing cycle, the price that a dairy farmer receives for his milk, and for his efforts, and for his investment, has largely been under the cost of production for long periods of time.

And we're just coming out of what is ranked as the worst financial situation that the dairy farmers have faced in modern dairy farming. And in modern dairy farming, I think you can say since they put the rules in place, so pretty much since the last Great Depression in the thirties. Because a lot of these farm programs that established rules in the forties were out of coming off the Great Depression, and so forth. But the period that we are just coming out of right now is ranked as the most financially challenging time since the Great Depression.

BB: So what do you see happening?

PO: Well, there is a cry out there right now that the dairy industry, that the farms, are asking for some type of change, and particularly to take out the volatility. I don't want to say that we're in a feast or famine type situation, because we're more into a famine, famine, famine, feast situation, that the good times are largely diluted out by the substantially negative volatility that we're receiving. And it all traces back to the supply of milk, in terms of the prices tend to be good when milk is in a short supply, but it doesn't take much for the milk market to basically get out of whack with regards to supply and demand.

And so, there is a move out right now to look for some type of national—and I'm just referring to it as this, not that's what it should be called, but this is the terminology that's used out there—is for some type of supply management system to get put into place, so that there's not this somewhat mismatch of milk to demand, and that the price would be more of an average to better reflect what it costs to produce milk in today's world.

To give you an example of the type of milk pricing that we have been exposed to over the last year is that it cost us, on average, about two dollars a hundred weight. Let me convert that into what people are more familiar with, into gallons of milk. It cost over two dollars a gallon to produce a gallon of milk at the farm, but at the peak of the trough, or the bottom of the trough of what the farms have experienced over this past year, we may have been getting ninety-five cents. So basically, we're losing over a dollar a gallon producing milk.

And the problem is is that you just—this is not like making soda pop. You just can't go out there and turn off the spigots on the vats that are supplying the syrup, and turn milk to tap water. We have over two years invested in the cow before she becomes a milk cow, and then it takes several years for her to be a productive milking cow, to basically pay for that investment of having the animal on the farm. And so during these time periods that we're under the costs of production, the cows need feeding day in and day out. The equipment that support the dairy farms need, you know, repair and maintenance, and fuel to run them. We need to produce the crops to feed the cows. And so what's being requested is that there be some type of review to look at trying to address this volatility in the milk pricing situation to the typical farms. I want to say in New England, but this is a national crisis.

BB: Yeah, that was going to be my question. You mention this as being a federal view of things. Is there something that should be specific to New England?

PO: Well, the thing is, in New England, and particularly in southern New England, all farms, depending on where the farm is located, to some degree have different cost of production structures. We in Connecticut are in southern New England, and southern New England being Mass., Connecticut, and Rhode Island, have somewhat of a higher cost of production than say, even, even some other portions of New England, or New York State. New York and Pennsylvania are the major dairy producing states, followed by Vermont, for the Northeast.

And collectively, we in the Northeast have a higher—so we in southern New England have a higher cost of production compared to the rest of New England or the Northeast, and the Northeast has somewhat of a higher cost of production than, say, out in the upper Midwest or in the far west. And there's been, you know, people have always thought, they've heard, you know, Wisconsin is the dairy state. Well, Wisconsin was replaced as the number one dairy state maybe ten to fifteen years ago by California, which now has the most milk produced. And that's due to having a good environment that they basically don't have to have an investment in a lot of barn structures to house the animals.

But the other thing that they have an advantage, these farms out west—whether they be in California or in the west meaning states like Idaho, New Mexico, Texas—that they have a lot of advantages that we don't have in terms of having—if they didn't have subsidized water, access to water, their cost of production would be substantially greater. So there's kind of like situations where they're subsidized in one are that people don't really think about, but that allows for an artificially low cost of

production, versus where I'm getting at with these comments is that there probably needs to be some regional consideration with regards to what the cost of production is, and what the paid price should be.

Because the other component of this is is that in general that the public, at least in our neighborhood, meaning for Connecticut and for southern New England, the general public wants local farms. They want local farm products. They want to buy local. And if we are forced out of business due to, say, a common pricing strategy across the country, which is what it is today for the most part—it's one price for all, with some, you know, there is a slight adjustment depending upon where the farms are located—but unless something like that gets put into place, you could see the further demise of local dairy farms in southern New England.

And getting to, kind of, how this fits with the Farmer's Cow story is that we're not waiting for federal reform to come about. We, the six farms that participate in the Farmer's Cow brand, we decided that we're going to try to, you know, help out our financial situation and not basically have our price solely dictated by the federal government, that we want to go directly to the market, and basically participate in that popularity of buying local, and so forth, as a strategy to propel our farms into the future.

BB: Again, kind of like with the marketing, does the Farmer's Cow have anybody other than the farmer's themselves who are lobbying on their behalf?

PO: No, I mean, when we get—I shy away from—I don't go out and lobby; I go out and tell our story.

BB: Right.

PO: And we, as individual farmers, we have, we spend the time when it's appropriate. We get invited to our State Capitol to voice our concerns. We get asked, you know, questions from our legislatures, or executive, the Governor, to find out what it will take to have dairy farms in the area. And Connecticut has been itself a very receptive state for wanting to support, or try to keep dairy farms, but there are limits to what they can do on a state basis, especially under today's economic scenarios in our state.

And the state of Connecticut has stepped forward, because it's not only--there's many different aspects that the state of Connecticut has, values its dairy farms. There's this thing about having a fresh local product, and so forth. There is also a component about food security, in terms of having food security within our borders. Because there have been studies done that indicate that there's only like a three to seven day standing supply of food within the state borders at any one time, and that the food that is brought into New England is largely transported over just a select few bridges that go over the Hudson River. As an example, you know, we've seen what the situation in 9/11 can do to kind of grind things to a halt, and so forth, that there is some aspect of food security that they want to have local food production within the borders of the state.

And then there's also an economic piece, is that the dairy farms, which there about a hundred and fifty dairy farms in the state of Connecticut, we are the economic engines

for about a billion dollars worth of economic activity in the state of Connecticut. And so at a time where we're losing jobs, and losing industries and so forth, that it is recognized that the dairy farms are the basis for over a billion dollars worth of economic activity in the state of Connecticut. And this was with a recent study that was done by University of Connecticut, published in January or February of 2009.

And another—so, we've talked about the desire for the public to have access to a local product. We've talked about food security issues. We've talked about the overall economic contribution that the dairy farmers make. There's also the aspect of the quality of life component of the dairy farms, is that the dairy farms are kind of the place-keeper for the agricultural open space in the state of Connecticut. Greater than fifty percent of the farmland in Connecticut is held by the dairy farms. The typical scenario when a dairy farm goes out of business, because it's usually good land, because it produces crops—well, unfortunately, aside from producing good crops, that land, by some people view that it grows good houses. And once you basically put that farm into development, the last crop that will be grown on that land will be houses or development, and that land will pretty much be forever taken out of agricultural production.

BB: Have you or other members of the Farmer's Cow thought about selling the development rights to the state?

PO: The one thing about the Farmer's Cow farms is that there's been a fairly high level of participation in the farmland preservation efforts, and some of the farms would be considered leadership roles in fostering, you know, supporting the concepts of those programs and providing kind of a driving force of why Connecticut has some very good programs in place to do that.

BB: Have you ever thought of doing it for your own farm, or is it just, maybe in the future?

PO: It's there. We've been in—because our farm is kind of in its new footprint relatively soon, in the sense that we've gone from about—there's, with Kris and I coming into the farm situation, there were two hundred and forty acres of home farmland, and we basically have, over about a fifteen year period, have taken that land base up to over a thousand acres. And that came about due to a lot of the lands that were available to the dairy farm came up for sale, and we either had to step up to the plate to purchase them, or they would have been—they would definitely have gone to development. Because as we're sitting here today, this field out here, this was a fifty acre farm that was purchased probably about twelve years ago, and it was purchased, again, because of the agricultural lands. And this would have been turned into—there were some other plans that people had as they were discussing the options with the seller of the property, and fortunately the seller of the property, you know, recognized the value of the land for farmland and so forth, and he chose us to sell it to.

But at the time that we were acquiring some of these lands, the farmland preservation program were not—either they were just not active or responsive enough, either due to, you know, a time period of not having funding, or not being able to react quick enough

to a seller's desire to sell the land. So we basically just stepped up and purchased it. And as we move forward in contemplating how we're going to project this farm into the future, that certainly would be a tool that we'd look at to possibly keep this together. Because what we've done here, and it's taken, you know, through this interview series you'll hear that it's taken at least three generations to build the farm land base up to where we are today. It actually has taken three generations to build the land base up to what we are today. And quite frankly, we still need more land base, because we still are dependent upon some leased properties to feed the cows that make the milk for you to enjoy!

BB: Yup. So you're leasing land to grow corn silage, and that sort of thing?

PO: Yeah. It has—in our own farm situation, our risk of doing that isn't as great as what it is, because we understood that the farm land base was crucial. We either secured as much land to grow the crops, or we potentially would be out of business. I believe that we probably would not be the dairy farm we are today if we had not taken the steps we had done over the past fifteen years, because a lot of the lands, we know that there would have been a different—and not necessarily available for us to lease.

One thing that we've had to do for the farm to stay in business, and to support this land acquisition and so forth is to actually increase the amount of milk that we produce on the farm. And since 1997 we have virtually tripled our milk production, in the same footprint of the dairy farm. So we've had to do that by just being more efficient at what we do, and to basically take advantage of new technology and new ways of doing things. But it's not to say that the farm has, at least since it was derived as the dairy farm in an existing direction, the farm has been a very progressive farm, since the forties, to achieve what we're doing today.

BB: I've got a couple of avenues here of questions to ask you! [Laughs] I'll start off with one of the older ones. You had said that there's about a hundred and fifty dairy farms in Connecticut today. Can you give us a sense for how quickly that has dropped?

PO: Oh yeah! I can address that several different ways, is that I recently gave a talk at the Working Lands Alliance annual meeting in Hartford, which is kind of the, would be considered like the yearly meeting for people in farmland preservation. And I was the keynote speaker at that luncheon. It's held in the Capitol, and there's the attendance of a lot of the legislative people as well as people from the Governor's Office.

And I pointed out to the people attending that, at one point in time, not too long ago—a couple generations ago—that every legislator in that building had dairy farms in their district. And now, that's not the case—very few of them have dairy farms within their district. But they all have something in common to the dairy farms, or for the farms in the state of Connecticut, is that they all have constituents that eat!

And to give you an example of the question that you asked me, about, that we have a hundred and fifty dairy farms in the state today, off the top of my head I can't tell you the exact numbers. But when we took over the dairy farm in 1997, there were about

three hundred and twenty-five dairy farms, and that was only maybe twelve, thirteen years ago. So the number in, call it a decade, has been cut in half. And the demise of the dairy farms kind of goes with this peaks and valleys of milk pricing, in terms of there tends to be more dairy farms that go out as the financial stress increases, and what comes with that is people needing to take care of the financial situation, which may wind up for the sale of the property, actually against the will of the seller.

But it's kind of, a lot of dairy farms, that's the last resort step. But it's easy—I think the number, at one point I think there literally were, you know, over a thousand dairy farms in the state of Connecticut, not that long ago, meaning a generation or two ago. And that's to some degree what has come about, is that maybe two or three generations ago, most, a lot of families would have had a relative that was a farmer. And that's also not true today, that that connection of where food comes from has somewhat been broken, or disconnected, because of just how farms have disappeared in our landscape, and have become fewer.

I have a lot of—given the fact that I go out and visit with the public quite often, in the marketplace, I hear a lot of comments that people think that food comes from the back room of a supermarket, and they don't understand that food has come off of a farm from somewhere, to be offered to them. So there is somewhat of a disconnect these days from where actually food arrives from.

BB: More education is needed. [Laughs] Let's get into the topic of technology a little bit. You mentioned that you've tripled your production on the same footprint?

PO: Yeah.

BB: There's obviously been some technological changes, I would assume, that have helped you do that, be in even in what the cows eat, what kind of immunizations they have, the equipment that you have?

PO: All the above. I mean, it's just been a—I cannot point to any one silver bullet that has gotten us to today. But one, we renovated the area on the dairy farm where we could accommodate more animals in that footprint. And two, we basically have had to increase the size of our equipment, and the type of equipment that we have today, to be able to reduce our cost of production on a per acre basis.

And an example of that is just our corn crop. We grow over three hundred acres of corn to support the dairy herd, whereas in '97 we pretty much were—the farm was probably about a hundred to a hundred and ten acres of corn. And in order to plant those acres and to harvest those acres, we've had to go to larger equipment. We have evolved from, since '97, from a four-row corn planter to an eight-row corn planter, which cuts our planting time more than in half. And we have invested in harvesting equipment that allows for us to chop our corn crop, weather-dependending, in a week time period, versus taking over a month if we had done it by the old style of equipment that was in use on the farm. And that was going from a two-row pull-behind corn chopper to a six-row self-propelled machine that's kind of like a factory on wheels, that it's not

only chopping the crop, but it's actually processing it, and making the corn more digestible, the corn kernels as well as the fiber in the plant, to be more digestible for the cows.

And basically, you can view, just from how milk is made, I mean, the cow is one big fermentation vat, of taking in the forages, and basically going through a very complex digestive system, where they have four stomachs that basically break down the plant material into energy that allows for milk to be produced. We've had a lot of increase in technology with regards to how we balance the food for the cows. We have what was referred to—I refer to—as a farm-size Cuisinart on the farm, that we basically produce what is referred to as a total mixed ration to the cows, where we're taking different proportions of the corn forage that we produce, the haylage that we produce—haylage is just our hay crop that has been harvested while it's still wet, chopped up into smaller pieces, and packed into a silo and fermented, which makes more digestible protein.

The corn is our carbohydrate source in their diet; the hay or the haylage is the protein source. And we balance out, we actually test the quality of that crop, and balance the proportions that are fed to the cows by mixing it in this total mixed ration with this big, farm-size Cuisinart. We're literally mixing these proportions; our measuring cup is by the ton!

BB: [Laughs]

PO: And pretty much in the end, what I'm pointing out are a lot of things that we're doing to keep the cows happy, okay. We're giving them, we're feeding them a very good diet that keeps them happy. And we've seen the ads out there that say about happy cows? Well, happy cows make a lot of milk.

BB: What about more on the medical side? Have you introduced any kind of hormone treatments, and just the vaccination side of things?

PO: Well, the thing is, one of the core things that was done on the farm, and this would have been in our early association with it, was to get the farm over to computerized records. And that, basically every animal on the farm has an area in our computer that we track from the day that that calf is conceived, is actually when the record starts, in terms of having a breeding date for the animal.

That's another, you know, again, another technology is that we are a hundred percent artificial insemination. The farm had been artificial insemination for a long time. And we have a philosophy that we use the ten percent best genetics in the world to improve our herd. So a lot of the, so to speak, technology gain that has been in our herd has been just breeding for improved animals through genetic selection. So we start off with kind of the record-keeping when a mother cow has been artificially inseminated to be bred, followed by a vet check with that animal to see that there is conception, and the developing calf. And then when the calf is born, the heifer calf is tracked for the rest of her life on the farm.

And that allows for just very good management, down to the individual cows, to make sure that they are getting their vaccinations, and the vaccinations start right from the get-go, just like a human baby would receive certain medical technology to increase the probability of successful life. And we track that animal for the rest of its life.

We have over two hundred milking cows on the dairy farm today, but they're part of an overall herd, between four hundred and fifty and five hundred animals. Because all the replacements that we have on the farm are derived from animals that have been bred and grown up on our farm.

BB: It does raise one little question. What do you do with the bull calves?

PO: The bull calves don't fit into the economics of a dairy farm, and the bull calves are sold off the farm. And what—I don't think, what the general public doesn't realize is that there's—a substantial component of the beef market are from dairy cows, and particularly Holsteins are the number one breed of milk cows in the country. There's a standing herd of about nine million dairy cows in the country, the highest proportion of those being Holstein, and that there are a lot of Holstein bull calves that go into the, to be raised for beef, and participate in that industry.

BB: The girls have it better?

PO: This is a woman's world!

BB: [Laughs] Well, let's talk a little bit about labor on the farm. Your family is involved, but you've got hired staff as well?

PO: Yes.

BB: And maybe you can talk about the different jobs that people hold?

PO: We pretty much, we're structured on the farm in terms of we have an a.m. shift, and a p.m. shift. And we start milking—we milk the cows twice a day; the shifts are focused around those milkings. And it takes a core of three components to achieve each of those, and that is a person who milks the cows, a person who is feeding the cows, and cleaning their stalls and their general barnyard area, and then a person who is feeding the young stock, or the calves. And so that happens twice a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, and the farm operates on a daily basis.

There's someone in the barnyard starting around one a.m., until the last person leaving is about nine p.m.-ish in the evening. And I say all those hours, you know, tentatively, because there's a chance of cows being born at any time. Or, I also use the analogy that since we have animals of every different age, from calves that are just being born to the oldest boss cows on the farm, that it's kind of like a population of school, from preschool up through the twelfth grade, in terms of there's always going to be issues that, you know, someone needs to go visit the school nurse. Someone, you know, groups need to go to the cafeteria. And maybe someone needs to go see the principal.

So the dairy farm are just a very active, dynamic place, you know, every day of the year!

BB: So how many hired staff do you have?

PO: We have a core of about, aside from family participation on the farm, we have about six full-time employees on the farm. And we do increase during some peak periods of time. The activities I just mentioned are kind of the core activities that support making the milk on a day to day basis, but we have, like, I go through, this time of year I have what I refer to as one and a half times a job, and at the peak of crop season I'll have 3X. And a lot of other people will go from having a full-time job to being very overly employed during the cropping season, and so forth.

BB: When you're planting, and when you're harvesting?

PO: Yup, and kind of the cropping season begins early for us, in terms of it's usually around the third week of March, because we're needing to get the nutrients out on the land to grow the crops. And when we have a herd of dairy cows like that, we're going to have a product on the farm aside from milk; we're also going to have manure.

BB: A lot of nutrients.

PO: And you know, you can look at dairy farms as being, you know, just very, to some degree, self-sustaining green industries. And it is, you know, it's referred to as agriculture, and farming is the original industry in the state of Connecticut, the original green industry. And in March of the year, weather depending, we start moving the manure that has stockpiled for the winter months out onto the land, getting the land prepared, and getting the crops in. Followed by, once we get the corn planted, we're also dealing with doing several cuttings of hay throughout the year, and then followed by a harvest in the fall time of our corn crop.

So, you know, and in the fall time, we're always pushing the envelope, and we're out there, and it's not until Mother Nature and winter rolls in; that's kind of what calls it quits on when we stop doing the so to speak outside, or field work, or maintenance work, on our fields, in terms of going out and removing the rocks that seem to appear yearly in our fields. No matter how often we pick the rocks, there's a new crop.

BB: I told your father-in-law, they grow. They grow every year! [Laughs]

PO: And you know, like we just had some wind and ice storms that came through here. We have trees that, you know, get knocked down on the edges of the field, and we have to go out and remove them, to be ready for the spring time.

BB: So, back to the manure. Do you ever have any run-off issues, or are there any concerns of that? And how do you process that?

PO: No, actually the farm invested very early, and in the sixties it was one of the first farms, if not the first farm in the state of Connecticut, to have a centralized keeping area for

the manure on the farm. And the farm has been very progressive in terms of just the conservation measures. We have a high level of concern about how our farming practices are, and we try to minimize any run-off risk, in terms of that's why we're not—we don't spread manure year-round. We do not spread manure in the winter time, when the ground is frozen, where there would be run-off. We choose to stockpile it in a containment area, and then get it out on the land when the conditions are correct.

BB: So, what do you envision for the farm over the next generations?

PO: In terms of we kind of have changed the direction of the farm, in terms of being more positioned to try to fit into the marketplace that we sit at. Arguably, the New England or the Northeast area is the number one food marketplace in the country, that being basically from Portland, Maine, through Washington D.C. Within just a two to three hour sphere of this farm, we have thirty million people, and that's covering, getting the New York metropolitan area, into that. But if you just do an hour radius around the farm, we're closer to Boston here than we are to Hartford. Providence is less than a half an hour's drive from here; Boston's an hour. Worcester, Mass., which is New England's second largest city, is twenty, twenty-five minutes away.

And so what we're doing is positioning our farm to participate in that marketplace, and sell our products as directly to the public as we can. And that'll be through the participation that, at several levels, in terms of whether it be wholesaling a milk product to a store for resale, or selling a farm product or a farm experience off our farm directly. So, we are probably a little more diverse than the typical dairy farm in Connecticut, or in southern New England. We have renovated area on the farm that we allow for the hosting of the public to come in, to see and to share our farm story. And as we're sharing that story and experience, hopefully they'll take a little piece of the farm home through the purchase of a dairy farm product or activity on the farm, or another product that we produce on the farm.

BB: Peter, this has been really informative. I appreciate all the time that you've spent with us. Is there anything else that you feel is important, that you want to get down there, and recorded in history?

PO: Well, I think the number one challenge that we have, in terms of the direction that we're taking, is the public awareness. And that's the biggest challenge that we have, in terms of trying to get the word out about our local farm, or the local farms. And I think that the time is right, that it seems that the public mindset is right, about the desire for wanting local farms in the area, and to buy local. If I were to have a message out there, it's to challenge the general public to support your local farm by requesting local farm products.

BB: Terrific! Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]