

The Farmer's Cow Oral History Project

Hytone Farm, Coventry, Connecticut

December 15, 2009

Interviewer: Beverly Brazeal (BB), Roseland Cottage Volunteer

Interviewee: William Peracchio (WP), Hytone Farm

Interview length: 52 minutes, 33 seconds

Transcription by: University of Connecticut, Oral History Office

BEVERLY BRAZEAL: This is Beverly Brazeal, and I'm here with Bill Peracchio today. It's December 15, 2009, and we are at Hytone Farm in Coventry. Bill, could you just, for the record, state your name and how to spell it for us?

WILLIAM PERACCHIO: Okay, I'm Bill Peracchio, and you can spell my last name, it's P-E-R-A-C-C-H-I-O.

BB: Okay, thanks. So Bill, we're going to start off a little bit talking about, just, your life, and your family. And then we'll get into things like farm history, and labor, and then more specifically, issues related to legislation, and the farmer's cow, and those kinds of things.

WP: Okay.

BB: Why don't we start? First of all, where were you born, and when?

WP: I was born in Hartford Hospital in 1950, March 28 of 1950. And I've lived in Coventry my entire life, born and grown up in this town.

BB: Okay, and what about your early life then prepared you for the work you do on the farm today?

WP: Well, my father worked on a farm. My grandfather owned the farm at that time. We were doing more vegetables. We had some cows to keep us busy more in the winter time. And as a little kid, I helped out in the vegetables. So probably by the time I was nine or ten, I started doing my part on the farm.

BB: What kind of things were you raising then? What kind of vegetables?

WP: Well, vegetables, we were raising tomatoes, cucumbers, cauliflower.

BB: And were those for wholesale, or retail?

WP: Wholesale. There were markets. At that time there wasn't refrigeration, like we have today. There wasn't much for interstate highways, either. So the vegetables buyers would follow the season, and they would come up here. So there was a market in Manchester, there was a market in Hartford, and there was a market in New London, that the vegetables were sold at. So we'd pick the stuff during the day, and my

grandfather would leave, like two in the morning, to go to the markets. And he would try to pick which market was going to have the highest price. So the truck would be loaded, and hopefully he didn't come back with the vegetables! [Laughs] And sold them!

BB: You didn't have pigs or anything?

WP: No.

BB: Okay. And I read on the website that you had gone to Ratcliffe Hicks School of Agriculture at UConn?

WP: Yes.

BB: Want to share a little bit about what kind of things you studied there, and how did that prepare you?

WP: I studied animal husbandry, because by that time we had switched over to mostly dairy. The vegetable business wasn't that great. I went to the two-year school. I was thinking of going to the four-year school, but at that time, with Vietnam, and a whole bunch of other things, I decided to work on the farm instead of taking the other two years.

BB: So tell us what your role is today, here at Hytone Farm.

WP: I am a part-owner, with my brother and my son, of Hytone Farm. And we work here full-time; we're both chiefs and Indians, so we do a good share of the work. We also have two full-time people that work with us.

BB: Okay. And how long has it been since the three of you owned the farm?

WP: I started a partnership with my Dad in, I believe, 1973, maybe the year after I got married. And my brother came into the business I think in 1978; he joined our partnership. And then we formed a corporation in 1980, and then due to some tax consequences and stuff we dissolved the corporation in 1989. And we are currently an LLC.

BB: Okay. And in terms of the work that you do day to day, how has that changed over time, or has it?

WP: Well, it seems like we put in longer days now than I used to. We do less manual labor, but you have to do more labor on equipment. And you have to do a lot more planning. Things aren't as simple as they were. So, there's a lot more business planning that's involved than there was years ago. We kind of flew by the seat of our pants before. Now you have to figure everything out.

BB: Mm-hm.

- WP: When I was little, there was like three different varieties of corn seed you could buy. Now, there's all kinds of varieties of corn seed, and they have different traits, and they'll grow better on certain soils. So you have to match that with the soil, and it takes my son, like, a whole day to just go through and evaluate the varieties. And they keep changing them on us, so that as soon as we get one that does real well, they kind of take that one off the market, and we have to start again! [Laughs] There's less testing going on, too, at UConn, than there used to be. So we have to end up doing some of our field testing, in order to get data on what's going to work on your farm.
- BB: I've driven by areas in the past where you see these little signs up, and I always assumed that that's what it was, that there was different types of seeds being planted.
- WP: Mm-hm, that's correct.
- BB: Do you do that sort of thing?
- WP: We do that sometimes. It kind of goes around. Different farmers do that on different years. You have to have a lot of time to do that, and that's the sort of thing that UConn and other universities had done in the past. But they don't have the funding or the personnel to do that anymore, so—
- BB: I was going to ask: what do you think is the cause of that? But it's a funding issue?
- WP: I think so, yeah. Yeah.
- BB: Okay. In regards to your family, today, your son is involved on the farm?
- WP: Yes.
- BB: And what about your wife, your daughter? Do they participate at all, or is it really strictly just the two of you who are—obviously, they're affected by it! [Laughs]
- WP: [Laughs] Yeah. My wife is affected greatly by it, but she doesn't really have any part of the farm. She's not really a farm girl, and she has talents in other areas. And I think it works out—for us, anyway, it works out better that only one of us is involved in this. And my daughter wasn't interested in this at all. And my son has been interested since he was little, when, as soon as he could come up and help Dad, he did.
- BB: Yeah.
- WP: And he stuck with that. So my daughter's doing her own thing, and my wife is busy. And my son and I are very busy!
- BB: I'm going to switch over to a couple other topics here, and you tell me if this is something that you want to focus on, or we save for either your brother or your son?
- WP: Okay.

BB: But I wanted to talk a little bit about the farm history.

WP: Okay.

BB: And I read on the Farmer's Cow website where your grandfather purchased the farm in 1944. Do you have any sense of how the land was being used before he bought it?

WP: It was, again, into vegetables, a small vegetable farm, and as well they had a few dairy cows. There was only, I think, twelve stanchions under one barn where they were milking cows.

BB: So they would have been stanchions used then?

WP: Yeah. And my grandfather—actually, he came from Italy back probably back in the nineteen-teens, somewhere there. And he worked in New York City in a butcher shop. And then they bought a farm in Hebron, where the Tallwood Golf Course is.

BB: Okay.

WP: And they ran that for about twenty years. But that farm was too big. They were raising a lot of peaches, as well as vegetables.

BB: And did they have any cattle in Hebron?

WP: Again, they had a few cows, but that wasn't the main focus. That was just something to give them milk and stuff during the winter time, give them something to do.

BB: Okay, and that was—was it sold, though?

WP: They sold that farm, and then they bought this one, because—

BB: Okay, and was the milk being sold in the winter time, when they had a dozen cattle?

WP: That I don't really know. I believe it was.

BB: Yeah, it's probably more than one family could use, so probably it was a side income.

WP: Because there weren't many regulations, and I remember my Dad saying, I think, the Hood Company was picking up the milk.

BB: Okay.

WP: And in the spring, everybody'd let their cows out to pasture, so they would come up in milk. There would be more milk production. And he said invariably the Hood Company would come back and say, "Your milk didn't taste good yesterday," or something, "So we're not picking it up for the next week."

BB: Because they were being grass-fed, at that point?

- WP: Well, the taste of the milk may have changed some, but the bigger problem was they didn't need that milk. So obviously, they were going to pick up the milk that was closer to their plant.
- BB: Okay.
- WP: So if you were further away, they were just going to leave the milk.
- BB: Because I've heard just the opposite, where people seem to like the taste of grass-fed milk better. So your story sounds more logical! [Laughs]
- WP: [Laughs]
- BB: So in the winter time they had to go further out to acquire the amount of milk--?
- WP: To get enough supply right.
- BB: And so, how, when your grandfather used it, he was raising the vegetables?
- WP: Yes.
- BB: Do you know, during the time period that he owned the farm, whether there were any changes that occurred while he was here, that changed? Either the types of crops that he grew, or the technology he was using during that time?
- WP: Well, it started—there was a peach orchard here. And peaches don't really grow that well in these soils. So he had grown up growing peaches, but they decided to pull out the peach trees, and just do vegetables. So there was no more fruit; it was just a vegetable business. But as far as the dairy goes, they fixed up the barn, I'd say in the mid-fifties, so that now they were probably milking close to thirty animals. Because as we were going through the fifties, that's when the interstate system was coming in; refrigeration was coming in. And the vegetable business was kind of having a downturn in this part of the country.
- BB: Okay, so somewhere in the mid-fifties they started—it sounds like it was sort of a gradual process, though?
- WP: It was a gradual process. Nothing—you kind of did it without any guidance from anyone. There was nobody telling you what direction to go in, so you took small steps, and you did what you could pay for.
- BB: Yup, one season you'd decide to fix a certain section of the barn, and now you could accommodate another half a dozen cattle, or something like that?
- WP: Well, and then maybe you had a few extra heifer calves that were born, instead of bull calves. So now you've got three more animals, so we've got to make up a space for the three more animals.

BB: Okay, so they might have been pushed more that way than the other?

WP: Right, yeah.

BB: Okay, all right. And then I think I also read that your parents took over the farm in 1960?

WP: In 1960 they bought the farm.

BB: Okay. And did things change when your Dad started working it from when your grandfather was running things?

WP: At that point we changed and we went strictly to dairy.

BB: Okay.

WP: We had some strawberries and stuff on the side, but basically it was full-time dairy. And we fixed the barn up so that we could milk, I think, thirty-two, at that point. And by '64 I think we'd moved it so we could milk forty. And by 1968 we built a new barn, so that we could milk up to eighty-five.

BB: Okay, so that's kind of a little bit bigger jump, anyway. Well, it's still kind of gradual, though, over time.

WP: Yes.

BB: Incremental steps?

WP: Yeah.

BB: Were these still the stanchion-type barns, or did you go to--?

WP: They were up until 1968. 1968 was when—I was graduating from high school, at that point, and I was interested in staying on the farm. So my father decided that that was the time to take the step, and we built this free stall barn, with a milking parlor, to milk eighty-five cows.

BB: Now, the milking parlor, is that when—did you have automated milking machines before then, or was that when--?

WP: We had milking machines, and we had what we call a transfer system in the stanchion barn, which was a little cart that had a bucket on it. And you'd dump the milk in it, and it had a little pump, and you had a hose going from that all the way back to the milk room, so that you could pump the milk into the tank. Before that, you'd milk the cow, and you'd dump the milk into pails, and then you'd have to carry the pails of milk—

BB: Lug it over, yeah.

WP: --up to the barn.

BB: And I'm curious. I've seen, you know, automated milk machines, but I have to believe that the technology of these have changed considerably over time as well? What does the automated milk machine do today?

WP: Well, it's a lot more sophisticated, but the basic milking hasn't changed at all since the first man invented it! [Laughs] So they've had milking machines from as long as my grandfather was alive. But today, there's a lot more sensors. We have, like, automatic take-offs in our—so when the cow's done milking, it comes off automatically. And there's robotic ones now, where the cow voluntarily moves into a stall, and the robot will put the machine on, milk the cow, cleans up the cow, dips her with an iodine solution, and out she goes!

BB: Kind of like my I Robot for the carpet, huh? [Laughs] Same idea.

WP: It's a little more complicated than that, but yeah. And a number of farms are trying to adopt that technology.

BB: And they, also, I presume—I don't know if it's part of the milk machine process, but you can track the volume of each cow?

WP: Oh yes, yup.

BB: And butterfat content, and all that sort of thing?

WP: Yeah. We currently aren't set up to do that, so once a month a person comes in, and they have meters that they hook into the line, and we weigh each amount of milk that each cow gives.

BB: So you do that just as a sample, once a month?

WP: Right. We also take samples out of that, so that we know what the butterfat and protein content is, as well, so that we can track each animal.

BB: Okay. Moving on, then, into the category of labor. Can you describe to me what a typical day is like for you, from start to finish? And then, if that varies with the season?

WP: Okay, one of the reasons I like this job is because it does vary. Even though you have basic things you have to do, there's a change in scenery. So, I'm not involved with the cows as much as my brother; my brother's more in charge of that. So this time of year, I'm more in charge of fixing up buildings, working on equipment, doing chores as far as cleaning out the cows, and stuff. I'm not really involved with the milking procedure, per se.

BB: So what buildings are you fixing right now?

- WP: Right now, there's a greenhouse that houses our calves, and we're recovering that today. But I've been, this last couple of weeks, before the ground freezes too hard, we've been fixing gates, and any post that looks like it might break over the winter time! [Laughs] We're trying to change all those now, and get all the equipment that we used all summer, get that all cleaned up, and under cover, and protected. So there's plenty of stuff to do.
- BB: Okay. How many people work at your farm? The three family members—you said you had two other full-time?
- WP: Two full-time, and then there's two part-time people.
- BB: Okay. And what are the roles of each?
- WP: We have one Hispanic, and he works real close with my brother and the cows; he's involved with that. There's one girl that works part-time, and she does mostly milking. And actually, both part-time people do milking. And then we have a young man here—he's a little younger than my son—and he works out more with the equipment, cropping, and helps on building repair and machinery repair.
- BB: Have you—in the past, has that been a sufficient number of people to run the farm? Or has the number that it takes to maintain it gone up or down in the past?
- WP: We probably need more people for what we're doing, but there's not enough money in this business to afford that. So, I probably put in—I never really figured it out, but probably seventy, seventy-five hours a week, is probably a normal week. In the summer it could be even more than that. So.
- BB: Have most of the non-family members—have they been with you for a long time. You've got someone who sounds kind of young, so obviously he hasn't been here that long. Or, is it transitory, or is it more they stay around, or what's been that kind of history?
- WP: Well currently, we're milking about two hundred and thirty-five cows. My brother can give you an exact number. So, we didn't have too much for full-time employment up until last four or five years, because we were only milking a hundred and eighty, a hundred and ninety cows, and we were able to get through. And now that we have fifty more cows or so, we needed more full-time people.
- So both these fellows—one's been, well, on and off. He had an opportunity to go to Wisconsin. There was a farm that he had worked out there, and the guy called him up and said, "Do you want to come over and work for me, and take over the farm?" And I said, "Well, that's an opportunity you can't pass up! Give it a try." But that didn't work out for him. So he left, and he was gone for about a year, and then he came back.
- BB: Interesting. And is this one of these big mega-farms?

- WP: No, I think it was a smaller farm, you know, probably a one or two man farm, but a place that he could get started. But then once he got out there, it didn't pan out. So, he's probably been with me for three or four years, and our Hispanic's been with us maybe five years.
- BB: All right, I've got categories regarding the land, and the cows, that I think I'll hold off and talk to Tom about?
- WP: Tom will do the cows.
- BB: Okay, do you want to talk about the land, in terms of acreage, and that sort of thing?
- WP: I can.
- BB: Okay. So, we'll ask you about, like, how many acres do you have, currently?
- WP: We own four hundred and fifty acres.
- BB: Okay, and so you're leasing some?
- WP: Yeah. And of the four hundred and fifty acres that we own, there's probably two hundred of which his usable: a hundred and sixty, maybe for corn, and about forty for grass.
- BB: Okay.
- WP: Then we rent another, probably seventy-five to eighty acres for corn, and another hundred and fifty of grass.
- BB: Okay.
- WP: So we go into seven different towns, so we spend a lot of time on the road. That's one of the drawbacks of working in suburbia.
- BB: Because these are small lots--?
- WP: Right, right.
- BB: --relatively, for your need?
- WP: Yeah.
- BB: Okay.
- WP: So we go over to Vernon, Bolton, Andover, Mansfield, Willington, Coventry. I guess that's—
- BB: What's like the smallest acreage that you'll bother with, if you will, in terms of if you're planting corn or haying?

WP: Well—

BB: That's worth your while? Or does that kind of depend partly on how far away it is, too?

WP: It depends on how far away it is, and it also depends where my other land is. I have a number of small pieces over in Bolton, former vegetable growers, that are small, and might be five, six, seven acres. But I have four or five of them—

BB: Adjacent to each other?

WP: --close to each other, so it pays for me to go over. So combining them all together puts thirty acres together, but you have all these little—

BB: Little lots?

WP: --little lots that you're playing with.

BB: I heard from one of the other farmers where he removed some of the stone walls—

WP: Yeah.

BB: --because he needed that open space.

WP: Right.

BB: And there maybe some people who are kind of anti- removing stone walls, but he had obviously a farming need for it, and so it, in effect, continues open space.

WP: Well, the equipment keeps getting bigger, so that we're handling more acreage, but you still have the same window of time in which you're supposed to do that. It's like planting a garden. If you plant—you can only plant it in May and the first part of June, and if you have a bigger garden, you've still got to get it all done in that same time period.

BB: Right.

WP: So you try to get a little bigger equipment so that you can do that. And then you go into these small fields, and you can't operate. You lose a lot of time going around to small fields.

BB: Yeah, yeah. When your grandfather purchased the land, was that the full four fifty? Or has that been added on over time?

WP: No, at that time there was only seventy-two acres. It was just the farm here.

BB: Okay, so the land that you own, it's not all contiguous? It's in different locations?

WP: Right, yeah. Yeah, we own land up on Cedar Swamp, up here on Grant Hill, and down in South Coventry by the river, on Flanders Road.

BB: Okay, okay. Do you also—you use the grass for hay, but are you making a silage out of that as well?

WP: We probably put the majority of it into silage, because you handle that mechanically. Hay, somebody has to handle it physically. And there's not much part-time help around, and our full-time guys are pretty much—they're busy all the time. So we don't do a lot of hay; we probably only do seven or eight thousand bales, total.

BB: And you have silos that are the round silos?

WP: Horizontal.

BB: Horizontal?

WP: Yeah, like foundations in the ground. And we've had that since 1968.

BB: Okay. Are there any other crops that you're raising for feed—alfalfa, or--?

WP: No, no.

BB: No?

WP: Our ground here's too wet to grow alfalfa. You have to have a certain soil type? We don't have that, so we just grow corn and grass. And then on your rented land, you have to be careful. You can't afford to put too awful much money in building up a crop, because you might not have the land the following year.

BB: Right, okay.

WP: There's a lot of input costs.

BB: Have those lands—it sounds like some of the small ones that you had, where they're all together, you've had those for quite a few years. Have you lost out on some?

WP: Oh, I've changed a lot of land in my lifetime! [Laughs]

BB: Yeah! [Laughs]

WP: I've traveled in a lot of places!

BB: All right.

WP: Yeah—

BB: People change their mind. The land gets sold?

WP: A lot of times, the owner dies, and then it goes to the next generation, and they just sell it for the highest bidder. I bid on some of it. Some of it I've been successful, but most of the time I can't compete with the builders.

BB: Yeah, okay. So who does the planting when you're planting your corn, and who does the harvesting?

WP: That's mainly my son, myself, and our employee Zack. Zachary is the employee that works with us. So it's mostly the three of us. We hire part-time truck drivers. I end up hiring Richard Eberly and Bill Truman.

BB: Have you had times when you didn't have enough feed, that you've had to buy feed?

WP: We have, but lately we've done well with growing enough forage. We still have to buy grain in, but we've been able to supply enough forage for the cows.

BB: So the grain that you purchase, is that mixed in with it?

WP: Yeah.

BB: Or is it fed separately?

WP: No, no, it's mixed in. We have what they call a mixer wagon. It has a scale on it, and you know what the cows—you figure out what diet they need for the milk production they're producing. We have our cows in different groups according to milk production.

BB: Okay.

WP: So then you put in the ingredients, according to what they should get. And it's all blended together and fed to them.

BB: So that differentiation between the cows, in terms of what they're producing—do you think that's genetic? Or, how is it that they, some--?

WP: Most of it is stage of lactation.

BB: Okay, their age?

WP: No, no.

BB: Okay, in terms of pregnancy, yeah.

WP: They've just had a calf; they're going to make the most milk for the next ninety to a hundred days, and then it's going to tail off after that. Of course, at the same time, ninety days out, we're going to start breeding them to have another calf.

BB: Right.

WP: And so then they kind of get moved around into different groups.

BB: Okay, yeah. I didn't understand that before.

WP: They have to keep having calves to make milk!

BB: Have you considered, or have you sold any of the development rights to any part of your property?

WP: We've talked about it briefly, but we haven't ever sold any.

BB: To the state, however—

WP: To the state. We haven't even—we've talked about even approaching the town to see if they would get a fund going, so that, you know, when they needed to, they could—

BB: Maintain the open space?

WP: --help, help some. The problem with where we are here, and seeing the dairy industry, it kind of appears that the ones that are going to survive are the ones that have a niche market, or are going to be tremendously large. We can't do that here. We're kind of boxed in to a certain size. And as I said, we're already on the road a lot, going to different fields, which is a cost and hassle, both, trying to fight the traffic.

BB: A drawback?

WP: A big drawback. So if you were going to, if you really wanted to dairy big time, you've got to move to a different location. So, our thoughts are, if you preserve this land—and don't get me wrong, I think it's a great idea, especially in certain places. But right around here, there's not an awful lot of land that they can put together. And what do you do with it after, if there's no viable farming operation to go on there? But, you know, that doesn't mean that—we might still do something like that.

BB: Right.

WP: It's just that we haven't—we've been able to make enough money so that we haven't had to tap into that. We've seen too many farms tap into that source of funding, use that funding on the farm 'til they didn't have anything left, and then have to walk away with nothing.

BB: Because then you can't get anything for it--?

WP: Right, and we weren't going to do that.

BB: Okay. All right, let's talk a little bit about the products. I know what the Farmer's Cow sells, and they've got lemonade, iced tea, and eggs. Any of that you participate in, or is yours strictly the milk products?

WP: Well, we only supply the milk.

BB: Yeah, yeah.

WP: Obviously I'm involved with the Farmer's Cow. We just had a meeting last night. The eggs and stuff are things that the retailers want us to actually do. That's how we got started in the cider. The retailers asked us if we could market—we hadn't even thought about that!

BB: Okay.

WP: So we said okay. So we found a Connecticut apple grower that was making cider, and tested him out. And yeah, he wanted his market expanded, okay?

BB: Okay.

WP: So we were buying cider and selling it under our—

BB: So it's basically your brand label, then?

WP: But we're trying to—you know, part of our focus is to promote Connecticut agriculture with the Farmer's Cow.

BB: Mm-hm.

WP: I mean, ideally, it would be nice if we could bring up the milk price for every farmer in the state. That's not going to happen, but I mean, I think that's kind of what we're trying to do. We're trying to secure the market. We're sitting on a market. We know our costs are more expensive than you can produce milk in western New York, or other places, but the market's here. And as time goes on, I think it's real important that people understand where their food comes from. And that's the big advantage that we have. They can see us; they can visit the farms. They know where their product's coming from. They can have a little trust into us, because they know who we are.

BB: Right, and then it lowers the green footprint, and that sort of thing, so that you know less fuel is being used to transport it to the market, and that sort of thing. Let's talk then about the Farmer's Cow. How and when did you get involved?

WP: Well actually, it started out there's another group that we were all involved with called the Very Alive group. And the reason that got put together was to get funding for land preservation, because it was just sitting there, and it wasn't being utilized. And we knew that we needed that tool to save Connecticut agriculture, because you've got to have a mass of agriculture in order to support all the dealerships and stuff that go with it. Because if you don't have anybody behind you, you know, equipment dealers, machinery dealers, milking equipment dealers, the feed companies—if they're not around you can't survive.

BB: Or if they start folding, it affects you, the other way around?

WP: That's right. So we needed to do that. Well, while we were doing that, the milk price took a real heavy dive, and we were all struggling there for a little while. And actually, Robin Chesner is the one who said, "Why don't we market our own milk?" And at first, I kind of had doubts. I'd been involved with Agri-Mark, which is the co-op that buys all our milk, and I know it's a tough business to get into, with low margins. But the more I listened and thought, you know, it sounded like a decent idea.

And as I stated earlier, people want to see where their milk comes from. And in all fairness, we've done a poor job of educating the public on agriculture. As we've gone out several generations, they've been removed from the farm. There's no more grandfather or uncle that had a farm that they visited, and there's some people that don't know what a cow is, or why a cow gives milk, or anything. And so there was an education process that needed to go along with this, and obviously, we're where the population is; we thought we'd give it a try. So.

BB: Interesting. Growing up on a farm, I just have a hard time understanding that, but I guess it's true! [Laughs] That there's people who don't know where milk comes from!

WP: Well, I've had tours, and you have mothers here with kindergarten kids, okay? Now obviously, I'm going to talk to the mothers; the kids just want to look at the cows. And you'd be amazed at how many mothers don't realize that that cow has to have a calf before she's going to give milk, you know! They think I just give them a shot or something, you know?

BB: [Laughs] Okay! Pretty basic biology there.

WP: But they're removed, so they have no way of knowing that.

BB: How have things changed at Hytone Farm since you joined the Farmer's Cow?

WP: Well obviously, that's given me another job to participate in, which just makes my life a little busier. We had had some farm tours before that, through Farm Bureau, to help educate people, but now we have farm tours more often, in order to try and enlighten people on what actually happens here—dispel some myths.

BB: Did you change who processed your milk at all, as a result of Farmer's Cow? Or is it all still kind of the same as when you had--?

WP: Actually, where we're located, Guida's Dairy does our packaging for Farmer's Cow. Most all our milk was going to Guida's Dairy already, because that's the closest dairy to us. Agri-Mark buys our milk, and sells it to the different dairies. So our milk is still going to the same place. But we felt our group did a little better job—did a lot better job, actually, at producing milk, and having good quality milk. Whereas in Agri-Mark—and I don't want to knock down their quality, but they pick up a number

of farms. And so your milk could go on with some other milk that maybe wasn't up to the same standards as what you have.

And we just thought we had a better quality product, and if we kept our quality product together and put it out there. And I think we've seen that. We have an eighteen day shelf life on our package, and I keep packages in my refrigerator and don't open them up until they expire, and use them in my cereal and see how long they'll last. And they'll go another week, ten days, easy!

BB: You're doing your own kitchen testing? [Laughs]

WP: Well, I want to make sure we still have a good product out there! And people have mentioned that it does keep well.

BB: It does.

WP: And that it tastes good, too.

BB: I can vouch for both of those! [Laughs]

WP: So.

BB: All right. Tell me a little bit, then, on the whole political side of things these days. Have you been involved with any kind of lobbying efforts? Or have you had to go into Hartford, and kind of plead the cause of Connecticut dairy farmers?

WP: Unfortunately, the answer is yes! [Laughs]

BB: Yes.

WP: I'd rather have the answer being no, that we can just go about our own business. But no, this, our Very Alive group that we have has been very active, the last, probably, three years, as far as that we need something for dairy. Because as the politics throughout the nation and the world change, Connecticut, if they want to hold on to dairy farms, they're going to have to step up to the plate. And it's almost going to be a constant support for dairy. And it doesn't necessarily always have to be monetary; [doorbell rings] it could just be some other laws and stuff—

BB: Legislation?

WP: Legislation.

[Pause in Recording]

BB: So we were talking about the political necessities of dairy farmers today, and you were mentioning that Connecticut needs to step up to the plate a little bit, what they're doing for Connecticut dairy farmers.

WP: And I think we've had a good rapport with the Congress people, and the Governor. I think they realize that they want to try and keep the rural character the state, and that they need to do something to help us out. I'd like to see a perfect world where they didn't have to help us out, and we could just maintain what we're doing, and being part of the Farmer's Cow, we're hoping to get to that point. But in the meantime, the way things are changing, we need a little help to get through some of the rough times.

BB: Okay. So I guess your perspective is that it's more important today for farmers to be involved with what's going on politically at the state, and probably the federal level as well?

WP: I think so. You only have a small group of farmers that actually take that plunge, and get involved. Most farmers—we're independent by nature. We're all doing our own thing a little bit different. And most farmers put the milk in the tank, have a co-op like Agri-Mark pick it up, and they're done with it. They don't look into the marketing side of it. They produce it, and away it goes. And there's a lot of commodities that can do that, but milk just happens to be one of those that you can. And it's hard to get everybody on board.

BB: Interesting. Can you describe for me a little bit about what the Federal Milk Marketing Orders are? Or is that—they call it F.M.M.O.

WP: Yeah.

BB: Or is it too complex.

WP: It's very complex. Even the experts agree that they don't know what it all means. It started back, basically, I think in 1949, when there was kind of chaos in the marketplace. As I had mentioned before, if dairies or cheese plants had too much milk, they would just come to you and say, "We don't need your milk." And then, what do you do with it? It's not like a commodity you can store. Even when you were growing vegetables, if there was no market you could leave the vegetables in the field for another week. Or if worse came to worse, and the market wasn't going to turn around, you could just plow the vegetables down. But milk is hard to get rid of, once you've produced it. And you can't shut off the supply, either, because the cows are going to keep producing it day after day.

So the Federal Marketing Orders, I think they kind of made sure that all the dairies were playing by the same rules, that they were paying their customers, that they weren't cheating them out on the pounds of milk. They kind of audit how much milk everybody produces, and how much milk they're taking in, and make sure that all the receipts kind of line up. Because that didn't happen before, either. You'd get cheated on stuff. Not everywhere in the United States is regulated. There are certain areas that aren't regulated, but we are under Federal Marketing Orders.

BB: And then I read a little bit about the New England Dairy Compact. What is that? Does it have an effect on your farm?

- WP: Well, the New England Dairy Compact is part of history at this point. That was something that was passed, had to be passed by the federal level, because it was a group of states—it ended up being the New England states. And what they basically said is that we're going to try and get a little more money out of the market, and send that back to the farmers. So we could work collectively, it allowed us to work collectively to set a minimum price for milk. It was on the fluid milk, and by fluid milk, that's the milk that goes into bottles. And that was going to be a steady price, so that we could get more money back for the farmers. Unfortunately, it had a sunset on it, and the federal government decided to let it sunset at the end of maybe a three year run. So it worked well, but it's hard to make that work clear across the country. So.
- BB: Okay. So what do you see as the major events that have shaped your farm business since its inception?
- WP: [Sighs] Well, technology has to be, probably, the number one. There's been a lot of changes over the year on how we grow crops, how we handle cows, the amount of milk. And it's so easy to handle a lot of acreage and a lot of animals nowadays, than it was fifty years ago. So technology would be the first thing that has changed things greatly. I think the other impact that has happened on us--probably more so than a lot of other farms, but this goes clear across the nation—is that I don't think we expected as much population and housing to surround us like it has.
- BB: Encroachment--?
- WP: The urbanization of the rural parts. You know, when I was little, we'd come out of Manchester, and there wasn't another street light, or any kind of light. [Laughs] It was dark from there until you got home, if you came at night. And now it's, you know, there's lights everywhere, houses, a lot of traffic. Also, when I was little, we used to drive cattle right down [Route] Forty-Four! [Laughs]
- BB: This is a huge amount of traffic, because you're on the main track into Hartford.
- WP: Yes, right, right, yeah.
- BB: So it's very busy.
- WP: In fact, if there's a UConn game, you might as well figure you're not going to get out of the driveway! That's it.
- BB: Yeah, and I'm sure that four o'clock on, 'til six o'clock--?
- WP: Yeah, even probably two-thirty, when the schools get out, when we're chopping corn, I'll notice the trucks aren't coming back nearly as fast, after that.
- BB: That's amazing, how that affects you! To technology, what's the most significant technological improvement on your farm, in your lifetime?

WP: Boy, there's a whole bunch of them!

BB: Well, pick a few.

WP: I guess it would be the mechanization of doing the crop work, as well as the mechanization of handling the animals.

BB: So the crop work mechanization—this is the type of equipment for planting and harvesting, that sort of thing?

WP: Yeah, yeah, right.

BB: And then for handling the animals, what are you referencing there?

WP: Well, probably more the milking centers that you have, the way we clean out the barns, and handle the manure and stuff.

BB: Okay. Now, with the manure, are you using that back on the fields again?

WP: Yes.

BB: How do you handle--?

WP: Well, we have a nutrient management plan that we use. And we test the soil, probably every two or three years, so we know what it needs. And we put the nutrients from the manure back on the different fields, according to how much the crop needs to take out. So that can also be effective when I'm renting land. Some land renters don't want me to utilize that, and others don't mind, and I can actually put manure on at heavier rates, because the land usually is deficient in a lot of nutrients. So, it's a balancing act.

BB: There's a question on our list involving Synthetic Bovine Growth Hormone. Does that affect dairy cattle, at all? Do you ever use anything like that? Or would that be more a beef question?

WP: That's what they have on packages, we don't use the growth hormone, and that's what they're talking about. And we don't use it here on our farm.

BB: Would that be typically more a question that they would be asking for people who are raising beef cattle? Or is growth an issue for dairy as well?

WP: No, this is—they'd produce more milk. Cost-wise, it doesn't—there might be a little advantage to it. Some farmers like that, but we don't use it here.

BB: Okay. And then I've got questions about cross-breeding, and that sort of thing, but I think I'll save those for Tom.

WP: Okay, yup.

BB: Because they're more related to the cows themselves. What do you vision for the farm for the future, for the next hundred years?

WP: Well, my son, at this point, is interested in the farm. My brother has three boys; none of them are interested. So, we're kind of, we're coming up here to a crossroads, where my brother and I are getting older, how we transfer the farm down to my son. And at the same time, the farm has to be profitable. If it's not profitable, there's no sense in passing it on to anybody! But at this point, my son's interested in taking over the farm, so that would be our first goal, to try and make that happen.

BB: And what about just dairy farming in Connecticut in general?

WP: I think with a little help, I think dairy farming can stay in Connecticut. I mean, we utilize a lot of land. We hold a lot of open space. And it's a product that we need. Currently I think we're only producing forty percent of the milk needs of the state, so we're in a deficit situation here already. It would be a shame to lose all the farms that we have, because I don't really see too much filling in all that empty land, if the dairy farmers go. And I'm not a big fan of just seeing empty brush lots grow up where there was once a field!

BB: Okay. This has been great, Bill, and I really appreciate it. Are there any other subject areas, or topics, that you think are important that Historic New England capture? Is there any other bits of wisdom, or experience, that you think we ought to talk a little bit about?

WP: Well, the biggest thing is to make people aware of where their roots are from. And I think in this whole country, as we keep farming things out to other countries, we're going to buy stuff from other countries, you have to be aware that it was agriculture that made the country great to start with. Because we could feed our population relatively easy, and that freed up more people to do other things. And I think our federal government doesn't understand that. Their mentality looks to be going to wherever we can get the food the cheapest is where we're going to buy it. And we're already in a mess with oil, and we're farming out a lot of our manufacturing jobs to other countries. And it just doesn't make sense to me to sell off our agriculture as well.

BB: All right. Bill, thank you so much!

WP: Okay.

BB: I really appreciate it.

[End of Interview]