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Summary: Retired professor of Canadian and Prairie history at the University of Manitoba Gerald Friesen discusses his interest in early Canadian history, including the development of the western grain industry. He begins by sharing his own family's history on the Prairies, the agricultural issues he overheard as a boy helping on the farm, and his career path to becoming a professor and lecturer. He explains three early developments that helped Canada become a leading global grain trader, namely the creation of the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, investment in grain science and wheat breeding, and the development of national grading standards. He describes the other key development of the railway bulk-handling system. He shares the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway's monopolizing of eastern transportation, the growth of the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific Railway to the west, and the eventual creation of the Canadian National Railway from these. Friesen lists some recent changes the industry has had to adapt to, like improved technology, climate change, GMOs, and the demise of the Canadian Wheat Board and farmer cooperative movement. Friesen also highlights an often-overlooked aspect of the grain trade—the government policies that detrimentally affected Indigenous communities on the Prairies through the taking of land and erasure of Indigenous agriculture practices. He ends the interview by imagining what the nation of Canada would have looked like had there not been such a strong push to create a strong grain industry on the Prairies.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative

NP: Nancy Perozzo conducting an interview at the provincial archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on November 28, 2014, and I'll have our interviewee of today introduce himself and his connection to grain in Canada.

GF: Okay. My name is Gerald Friesen. I taught at the University of Manitoba between 1970 and 2011. I grew up in Saskatchewan with a family that had farms, and therefore—various members of the family had farms—and therefore as a child worked in grain, so I have a link to the grain trade through the production side to the age of 17 or 18 or 19. Then as a university student was interested in Prairie history and did a doctorate in Prairie history at the University of Toronto, and then taught at the University of Manitoba courses on western Canada and Manitoba in particular for my entire career, and taught some bits of those courses in other universities around the world when I was seconded to them. I've taught in Berlin at the Freie University, and Yale in the United States, and at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and McGill in Montreal, Canada, as well as the University of Manitoba.

NP: Now this is a bonus that you have the family farm experience because one of the things I do like to explore with everyone is what was your first contact with the grain industry? So where in Saskatchewan did your family have their farm?

GF: Well, it wasn't mine. It was my aunt's and uncle's so the range of extended family.

NP: Same name?

GF: No. I grew up in Prince Albert, Sask, to the age of 17, and then I went to the University of Saskatchewan for my BA. The farm was just east—the main farm, the one I worked on—was in Elstow, which is east of Saskatoon 30 miles on the CP line and not the--. I forget now. Yes, it was CP. The CN was six miles further south, and the CN line was the alphabet line. So the town immediately south of Elstow was Allen, which the alphabet had already gone through to 26 and there had been--.

NP: I don't know anything about that. Tell me about the alphabet line.

GF: Oh, well the Canadian Northern Railway, when it built westward, it didn't have enough imagination or it had too much imagination. So they named each station after the next letter in the alphabet, and so Yorkton was on one end, I don't know what was there. Viscount, Watrous, X—damned if I know—Y, Young, Z was Zeneta, I think. Then A was Allen, B was Blucher, C was Clavet, and so the towns had to have the next letter in the alphabet's name. That ran right across Saskatchewan.

So anyway, I was six miles north of that in a town called Elstow where two uncles had farms. One eventually moved away in 1953 because it was no longer economically viable to sustain two families on that farm. The other uncle was very successful and continued to expand beyond the two farms and eventually owned 24 quarters, which is quite a lot of land in the 1950s. He

eventually gave it on to his sons, who eventually gave up and moved into cities. The land was redistributed to various people via sale. I owned, with my brother and sister, one quarter section for another while. We actually appealed and got permission from the Saskatchewan government, which was then not permitting these redistributions, to retain the land for another few years, and then we decided it was more bother than it was worth, and my mother could use the money, so we sold it. So, I have a link.

NP: Yes. A pretty strong one. Your family, then, did they originally settle in Saskatchewan or were they in Manitoba initially, and they moved forwards? Because it's a Mennonite extraction.

GF: No, it isn't.

NP: It isn't?

GF: No. So there are two families. My name is Friesen, and those people are not the normal Mennonite, in fact they weren't Mennonite.

NP: Okay.

GF: They were direct from Prussia, Lutherans, who came in 1891. It was a 16-year-old, my grandfather, whose family followed him. So he came and was here for a couple of years before his father—and by then his mother had died—a step-mother came to the same area. He, the Friesen, became a teacher and eventually, because of his political connections—he was a Liberal—a postmaster under the Laurier Government. He got a postmastership in the town of Hague which is north of Saskatoon 30 miles. My father and his eight or so siblings grew up in Hague. My father went to university, got two degrees, BA and BEd, was a teacher, and ended up a principal in Prince Albert. So that's when I was born, when he was in high school in Prince Albert.

NP: Pretty unusual for a farm--.

GF: It's pretty unusual, both the origin of the family in Prussia and the direct migration of a 16-year-old is unusual. Then he married a Mennonite, but they sort of were divided in faith, and the children were divided in faith. My father left the church probably in his early twenties and joined the United Church. So I never knew anything but the United Church.

Now my mother, 30 miles east of Saskatoon in Elstow, was a Stewart, so Scottish name, Scottish/Ontario. Her family came in the 1840s direct from Scotland to Ontario around Guelph and Galt and that area. They came west in 1905. There's a family story that

they were married in ‘04 and grandad--. Peter came west in ’05. And Eileen, the eldest of the family, came in ’06. So we always knew that was how the chronology of the family went.

He, Peter Stewart, and his brother Jack homesteaded but were businessmen. So they owned a couple of businesses in Elstow, including a very large hardware and vehicle implement dealership. They were in a tiny town, solid businesspeople, who had some land that they farmed or had other’s farm. Then that passed on to a son and a son-in-law, and thus the two farms that I mentioned earlier. That became one farm and was sold on.

NP: So as a youngster and into your teenage years, did you pay attention to the politics around the table and how the family was--? So where did they line up in the politics of farming?

GF: Well, the Mennonites I didn’t ever really know, that is the Hague community. I knew my grandparents and my aunts and uncles.

NP: And how is Hague spelled?

GF: H-A-G-U-E. My father went to local schools in Hague, and then turned out to be quite smart. So he was sent to the German and Mennonite college called Rosthern Mennonite College in Rosthern, which is just north of Hague, therefore was never in the farm world, so I can’t comment on Mennonite farm politics. Besides, they were so silent about politics as a family.

My mother on the other hand, her uncle ran for the Tories when Diefenbaker lead them provincially in the 1930s. Her brother ran for the Liberals in the early 1950s. Both were soundly defeated. But politics was in everyone's blood on that side of the family. So there was always lots of talk about the grain trade. The uncle who succeeded to own the entire farm was not just a wealthy man, he was a very well-connected and well-read man. So we learned lots about how the grain trade worked, his opinions on the stock market, because he was a speculator in stocks, and that sort of thing.

NP: So just from hearing what you’ve said, and jumping to conclusions—which you can correct—would you say that that family then wasn’t necessarily engrained in the cooperative movement, which was pretty solid in Saskatchewan?

GF: That’s right, but they recognized--. So let's go back to that. My mother's name is Jean Stewart before she married. She was a teacher. My father was a teacher. They married. They even taught in the same school before they married. So her brother, Wilson, was the Liberal. Eileen, the eldest of the three, married an Andrine, a Swede. He’s the businessman. He’s the one who ended up owning everything and owning stocks as well, but he wasn’t against the co-op movement. He normally shipped through the Pool,

as long as the Pool was the best deal. He had friends at each of the elevators and knew them well. So he knew what the deal would be at any given delivery of the grain. But he accepted the merits of the pool and worked with it.

I would say accepted absolutely the merits of the Wheat Board, and I think accepted the merits of co-op consumer products, including the store. He also had a Co-op store, and I think they were always supporters of it, but then, of course, there were other stores, too, and in a tiny town you would probably distribute your patronage. No, he wasn't a leader of the co-op movement, but he wasn't opposed to it. I think he was a pragmatic man who chose as he saw advantage. He was a capitalist.

NP: So what were the issues then in the farming community as you recall? What would they have complained about?

GF: Yeah, I mean, remember now I'm born in 1943. So I became aware of this stuff in 1950. I am aware of the history of the grain movement there, the grain trade thereafter. So as a 7- or 10- or 15-year-old, when I'm on the farm, what do I know? Well, I know enough to think back at the herbicides we were using. What in god's name were we doing with this stuff that we were spraying? I'm pretty sure it was all 24D-type stuff. So I always wonder how the heck I haven't got some cancer or other as a result of it.

We treated grain in the granaries, so another odd question is, "What the heck is on that grain that you're shoveling?" It became very clear early on that I had a lung condition that was exacerbated by life in the granary. When you're shoveling grain out of a granary, you're standing up there spreading it around or you're trying to get it to an auger, so the dust is incredible. And in those days, nobody had masks. I certainly never knew anyone who wore a mask and would come away from the farm after a couple weeks on and hacking and [inaudible], exactly.

The first thing I would say as a 7- to 17-year-old, what I'm aware of in retrospect is health and safety concerns. What they were aware of was quota. That is the Wheat Board and the delivery and how much grain could they get into the elevator that is plugged. They're aware of the shipping, therefore the rail lines, at how fast they're emptying choked elevators. The price. The China sale under Diefenbaker and Alvin Hamilton was a big deal in 1958 or so. Those are the kinds of things I remember as being prominent. But the most important was always did we get rain at the right time? Did it freeze at the right time? The basic growing of the crop and all the factors that any farmer would tell you are primary.

NP: In retrospect, as you look back now, from what you said you had a very well-educated family compared to what might be the norm at that time in communities.

GF: Yes and no. I mean, they were educated, but then again, I think so were most people. I wouldn't want to say this was an uneducated rural community, certainly the one I knew. These people spoke well, they argued effectively--.

NP: They were aware of both sides of a situation?

GF: Probably, yes, and they argued it. What I remember fondly are things like sitting around on a rainy day in the service station on the highway with half a dozen guys who come in because they can't get on the field, and so they're fixing tires, or they're fixing a motor or whatever, and the nonsense, the bullshit, the talk.

NP: Yes, and that's sort of what I was getting at, that sometimes it's arguments without awareness of both sides of an argument.

GF: Yeah, but you're getting arguments, so there are sides. But whether they are learned or not, as 10- or a 15year-old, I couldn't judge anything like that. I would notice more the personality of the argument than I would the effectiveness of the case.

NP: Did there tend to be blame placed on problems? I mean other than obviously--.

GF: Well, the CPR, I'm certainly aware of the CPR and God not raining properly. And there was always political blame, one side or another. Damn this or damn that. That's just normal politics, and so I look back I would say fondly, but I certainly remember CCF versus not CCF arguments for example. And that's before because as a Grade 12 student, Medicare came in. So, for me as a Grade 12 student, Medicare was a big deal and that was a really hot argument, but not just on the farm. That was everywhere, obviously.

NP: You did mention in your introduction that you had spent time in various places outside of Canada talking about grain.

GF: Well, talking about western Canada and Canadian history so that's right, including grain.

NP: Because of our project if you could focus on grain's influence, impact, or lack thereof, in those presentations what did you tend to focus on?

GF: Well, it depended what people wanted. I gave a lecture in Australia, Sydney, on the grain side of socialist politics because they have a very strong labour movement, but it doesn't have a strong farm component. So they thought it unusual that the CCF should have such a rural, farm-land, ownership-based membership. So they were interested to know how the heck a socialist movement was created that had both farm and labour and middle class teacher-type, minister, social work-type elements in it, and so they specifically asked me to give a lecture that talked about the various components of the CCF.

NP: And how would you answer that in a synopsis?

GF: Well, that’d get you into a complicated story, but the problems of a farmer in an international grain economy being addressed—put it that way—by cooperative marketing and cooperative consumption techniques and eventually by cooperative banking techniques, through the credit union. The idea being that large numbers of members of a movement can make a difference to a situation where you are an individual selling into an enormous global market. Whereas individually, you have almost no control over what happens. If you control half the grain production of Canada or more, as the Pools eventually did, or even more if you have the Wheat Board, then you have some sway in the world market. You have greater control over even the shipping of the grain, if you have the Wheat Board. Those are the kinds of things that I explained.

NP: And that’s how the various aspects, underpinnings, of what we’re looking at, which is how Canada became successful as an international grain trader with so many things that, on the surface, would seem almost impossible to overcome.

GF: We were very aggressive and relatively smart in the way we solved some of those basic handicaps, got over those handicaps that we confronted. The Argentinians, for example, did not adopt our methods to the same degree. They were still shipping grain in bags at a time when we had this enormous bulk movement of grain. And so globally, India, different problem. Russia, different problem. Australia, different problem. So when you look around the world, the Canadian system that developed happened to work very well. Now, it wasn’t just Canadian. The Americans were doing the same thing and showing us, and we were showing them. But the thing is, the North American technologies for mass, bulk movement of grain solved those distance problems that you had to solve if you were to get grain on the water cheaply because once it's on the water, it's a really cheap commodity to move. It was getting it to water that was the problem.

NP: So if we have, obviously a transportation system being required in order to do that, what were some of the other underpinnings that you saw as being--.

GF: A grading system, a trading system, a science system for the actual raising of the crop. Those would be the three first ones that jump to mind.

NP: Can you give a little bit of detail on each of those?

GF: I could. The trading system. So Winnipeg developed a commodity exchange very early on, I think 1887, and that’d be involved in the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, and there were four, at that time, great grain exchanges around the world: Chicago, Buenos Aires, and Liverpool, I think, were the other three. So Winnipeg leaped instantly almost into international awareness as a market. So you could trust the market to deliver a price that was fair. And that’s the point of these exchanges is that you want to be able to trust

what is going on. Therefore, it has to be part of an international communication system. You've got to know what these prices are in these other places. So communication and telegraphic communication is extremely important. And that's why Chicago, and Winnipeg very quickly. CPR was completed in '85, but there was actually telegraphs here as early as 1870s. Anyway, the point is that you get an international system with an awareness of Winnipeg as a marketing place early on, and you believe you can trust the futures market that it has instituted. That's the trading.

The science. Well, basically the Dominion Government set up Dominion experimental farms in the 1880s, which again is very early, and so there what you're addressing is how do you solve the problems of Prairie farming—weather problems, insect problems, early frost problems—all the things that every farmer worries about first. The experimental farms were very valuable and so were the universities, and they all put considerable effort into solving these problems. Therefore, our science was good.

We had a science-led system that by the 1930s was actually like a classroom, going out to meet people. There were these farm trains as early as 1910. They would go from town to town to show people what good grain was. My grandmother. before she married my grandfather, was courted by Seager Wheeler, who's an incredible name in 1910 to '20 grain history because his farm produced world-wheat-champion wheat. The kernels that are carefully selected by somebody, probably Seager Wheeler and his family, on a kitchen table night after night. So you pick the plump kernels and make the perfect selection that the Chicago World Fair, or wherever it's being measured, finds the best in the world. So all of this is part of what I would call science because you breed for the best crops, and then you breed in the resistances that you need. And you pick the best strains. So Marquis wheat is one of the famous ones. But you know it just goes on. That's the second one is the science. Now what was the third?

NP: Grading.

GF: Grading. And so again, early on, the federal government--. And this is an interesting fact is that the federal government is responsible for the Department of the Interior in Canada. So from 1870 to 1930, the Prairie governments did not control land in western Canada, in Prairie Canada. The federal government controlled the land. Therefore, all the immigration activity and all the homestead rules, all the land distribution rules, were federal government—uniform across the entire area. Therefore, could be seen as decisions having been made and one removed from local politics. Now, they're also being subject to other politics. That's for sure. But you could say at the grading level, you've got a national institution doing the job. Again, it sets up a single standard. Now that standard is also based on what is being sold in the Winnipeg Grain Exchange. So very quickly that evolution--.

First of all, there was an argument started in the 1870s. In fact, the American consul in Winnipeg, a guy named James Wickes Taylor, said, "This is the best wheat anywhere in North America." The stuff was coming out of what at that time Red River Valley

and then Manitoba more generally. “This is better than wheat in Kansas. This is better than any other wheat in the United States.” And so that discussion went on for another 15 years, and eventually it settled on No. 1 Northern Hard Red Spring Wheat.

So that line, that name, becomes not just a marketing--. It becomes a marketing symbol, but also a guarantee of a particular quality. So that, in itself, is a marketing strategy. The bakers then in Liverpool, or Berlin, or wherever can count on it. So the combination of federal grading, federal elevator rules, the Canada Grain Act of 1900, and the Winnipeg Grain Exchange development of No.1 Northern, all go together to create that grading system that evolves then as well. There.

NP: Excellent summary. It took me years to learn all that. [Laughs] Now, one of our particular interests because we are a Thunder Bay, mostly, based group—not exclusively—is the whole connection to the water, both east and eventually west, and the development of the grain elevator system. So I don’t know how much of what you’ve done in the past--?

GF: There’s a guy down in Brandon named Everett who has made a study of elevators, so I would commend him to your attention. There were, I think, 2,300 places in the Prairies in the 1900-1930 period with a name, almost all of which had at least an elevator or some other commercial thing. There were 57 or 5,800 elevators at the peak I think. So that’s a lot of elevators and that depends on rail lines. So the elevator system, I mean, I can comment on it, but there are people better equipped to--.

The Manitoba government actually tried to nationalize an elevator system at one point, and then the co-op elevator system emerging. You know all that stuff. There are people who can talk to you about it. But co-ops developed early. E.A. Partridge and the Grain Growers Grain Company, which was both an elevator and a marketing company on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, those are all chapters in the story.

The other side of the story is you got to have the rail lines. That is an interesting story because the first rail line into Winnipeg that was going to ship grain out came from Saint Paul-Minneapolis. So that’s the 1878 St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, which became the base of the two great railway empires of the 19th century in western North America: the Great Northern and the Canadian Pacific. They both have their origin and their capital accumulation in the Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railway.

NP: Now how is the CP connection there?

GF: Well, the owners of the Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba included John A. Smith, George Steven, and James J. Hill. Hill splits off from the syndicate that he had been part of at the beginning of the Canadian Pacific and developed his own rail system in the northern United States, the Great Northern Railway. Steven then buys back into it, I understand. I don’t know if Smith bought in

as much. But Steven’s money is both, or is all three of, the Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, the Canadian Pacific, and the Great Northern.

Now the point we made about the railways is this: If you’re a farmer on Prairie Canada, you’ve got four ways you can go with your grain. You can go east to Thunder Bay, you can go north to Hudson Bay, you can go south to Saint Paul and then go either to Duluth or Chicago, or you can go west to Vancouver. So very quickly between 1878 and 1898, those decisions were made. All of them are considered seriously, including Hudson Bay. But in the end, it proved beyond the Manitoba government's capacity to fund a Hudson Bay railway.

It was even—now that we know 100 years later—it was a relatively difficult route in any time, becoming more practical now, ironically. But in the 1880s, it would’ve been a very difficult route. But anyway, they did try to fund the railway in that direction. But the CP was John A. McDonald’s great bet, and it worked and so that avenue, Winnipeg to Thunder Bay, became the number one avenue for exports. But there was always an alternative, south, which had been the first—not number one by 1885—but it had been the first. So the CP absorbed that Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railway very quickly in order to have a monopoly on the shipments east, and did so through to 1887.

Then this enormous political battle developed in Manitoba, and this is something I actually am working on now. And Manitoba government actually tried to fund an alternative route south that would compete and provide an American outlet at a better price. They called it the Red River Valley railway, and eventually it was absorbed into the Northern Pacific system. So that was the next line.

Then as farms moved west starting around 1900 to the Alberta plains and the western Saskatchewan plains, then the Vancouver route became more important. At that point in Canada, Laurier was then in power since 1896, had to decide with his rapid expansion of the Prairies in every direction, way north of up already to Peace River by the 1920s. But the decision was made between 1900 and 1905 whether we needed another trans-continental, and two came forward—the Grand Trunk, which had always been a powerful eastern Canadian railway, and a western, I don’t know, sort of an ad hoc corporation called the Canadian Northern, owned by a man named Mackenzie and Mann. And both those two companies vied for federal support for the next, the second trans-continental.

Laurier made an extraordinary bet and supported them both. So we ended up with two new trans-continentals supplementing the Canadian Pacific, which was one too many. They went broke in the First World War, and that became the Canadian National System. The railway story is absolutely essential to the grain trade story. There are the four directions, and there are the three

national trans-continentals, and Thunder Bay is an important part of the CP story, the Canadian Northern story, and, in a way, what was called the National Transcontinental, I guess.

NP: Well, the Grand Trunk had a Grand Trunk terminal elevator.

GF: Well, that's the National Transcontinental.

NP: They always refer to it as Grand Trunk.

GF: It was the Grand Trunk.

NP: Now, there was this great spread in one of the Fort William newspapers in 1915 that features the history of the grain trade, and reading between the lines, an awful lot of the ads there were saying, "We've got capacity here. We don't need another outlet." Now something sticks in my mind that they were worried about a US outlet. Anything happening in 1915 that--?

GF: Panama Canal.

NP: Okay, so it may have been western as opposed to southern.

GF: Right. See, what the Panama Canal did—it opened in 1914—was cut off, in a way, some of Winnipeg's economic future because grain would then start to ship west as well as east. Therefore Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton, all those cities get a boost. I can't imagine there'd be anything else. There'd be how much investment are you going to put into terminals in Vancouver would be the discussion point of it.

NP: Somehow, I had a sense that it was more south because it was very nationalistic, like Canadian. But then, you know, I just might have been too narrow in my thinking.

GF: Yeah, and I don't know enough about that to tell you whether there was. You know, Duluth would always be a competitor for Thunder Bay. And Chicago, no question about it, is a major global market always. One of the problems with Thunder Bay is you've got the two transshipments that you've got to be involved in because you've got to the lake freighter and then to the ocean freighter.

NP: At that time, in the early times.

GF: That's right, and so you're unloading the grain in Thunder Bay. You're loading it in Thunder Bay. You're unloading it in Montreal. You are loading it in Montreal. And that just costs a lot of money, and that's always the problem. On the other hand, shipping it all the way by rail to Montreal was ridiculous, but they did it sometimes. So if you could do one transshipment, as you could from the western Prairies to Vancouver, then that's going to undercut Thunder Bay.

NP: And markets were the big shift. The shifting markets is what--.

GF: Well yeah, that's a story that spans the whole 20th century. You're shipping to Britain. You're shipping to China. Well, those are two very different stories. And once China becomes a major customer, and as I mentioned earlier that Alvin Hamilton deal in 1958 was a significant deal. I think it was '58. It might have been '59, in that period. That suggests just the changing in the global economy. Then there are all those speciality markets, the International Grain Institute here that holds the seminars to bring people in to show them how to make the many, many products you can make with good grain, good wheat in particular—the kinds of Arab bread, Vietnamese bread, and so on.

NP: Yes, which is an arm of the research that you were talking about earlier.

GF: Exactly.

NP: In all those systems that you talked about from the perspective of a historian, I don't know how far you go back for history. Like does it have to be 100 years ago?

GF: Oh no. To today.

NP: Okay. So what changes have you seen, and any comments you might have about changes?

GF: Well, there've just been infinite numbers, communications, global communications, makes the trade much faster. Changing patterns of climate related to those communications things. So you know what's happening in Ukraine or the other bread baskets of the world that are your competitors. The Wheat Board is an absolutely essential change. The technology of truck and tractor and elevator, those changes are absolutely enormous. The [inaudible] science back to the plant itself.

God, the breeding we do now and the things you put on a seed before it goes in. I visited in Connecticut, when I taught at Yale, one of these extraordinary gene-manipulating labs by one of the big international agri-businesses. They showed us corn that could resist

this and resist that. They would actually change the genetic structure of the seed in order to change the product then. You know, that's absolutely mind boggling. Those are things that matter.

NP: Do you see, or have you seen, implications—positive and negative—about those changes? Or are they so recent that it's hard to say?

GF: Well, climate change, obviously that's a problem. We have to figure out how to adapt. So I don't know if positive or negative is the way I would go with a question like that. I would rather, "How well are we adapting?"

NP: Okay. That's a good approach.

GF: It's more practical, I think. Although, it comes down to in any given day if I have to vote, then you're choosing positive or negative, and you're saying this group versus that group in terms of their policies.

NP: More a question of your prediction versus somebody else's prediction.

GF: That's right, about how to best deal with change. I mean the technology stuff, the bigger truck, the heavier highway, therefore, that you have to build--.

[Interruption]

NP: I'll see how that's going. I think our battery life is still good.

GF: So the biggies are things like climate change and then the grain itself. I mean, the GMOs that we are working with now, they produce huge problems, and I don't have an answer to whether they're wise or unwise.

NP: Huge problems?

GF: Yeah!

NP: Challenge, let's call it.

GF: Challenges, okay. They pose new questions.

NP: So what would be some of the questions?

GF: Well, I'm not the GMO guy to talk to.

NP: Just your own personal opinion.

GF: Yeah. Well, I think canola is better for having been re-bred away from the rape and the erucic acid that it had. So I'm not opposed to genetic manipulation of crops, for those kinds of purposes.

NP: Was that genetic manipulation or just breeding, crossbreeding, and breeding out?

GF: I don't know the answer. I should know the answer. Certainly, they were breeding differently, but I don't know. I'm not well enough informed. You have to talk to somebody who knows those things.

So where were we? We were talking about the changes. The Wheat Board, I regret the loss of the Wheat Board because I think it gave the individual farmer who was farther away from the rail system a fighting chance. And what the loss of the Wheat Board will mean is the increasing corporatization of Prairie agriculture, and so you'll get giant industrial conglomerates essentially owning the land. I always thought it was always a great virtue of Canadian agriculture at the beginning, as John A. Mcdonald thought when he created the policy, that individual family homesteads were better. Now, of course, over time, those had to give up, and so my family's own evolution is an illustration of how many members of the family are weeded out and one corporate, essentially, smart guy became the farmer. And then interestingly his children weren't able to adapt or chose other careers. Some did. Therefore, the farm moved in somebody else's system.

But I'm not a--. I just think this sharing possibilities that the Wheat Board enabled farmers to have made the entire range of geographic space in the Prairie production area more equal. And I liked that. We're just marketized everything more with the loss of the Wheat Board. You know for the guy who is able to deal with it, they'll be fine. But there's a penalty if you're farther away from the rail line, and you've got to truck your grain further and so on.

NP: It depends upon, in that instance, the strength of the market, then. Because if you have a really strong customer base, then the farther you are away from the system, you'll still be able to sell your product because there's enough of a market there to absorb it.

GF: I don’t see it that way because it’s an international business. The product is more or less impersonal, and what they’re selling is tens of thousands of tonnes normally. So the individual farmer, very, very--.

NP: I’m just thinking about those that are farther away from us—from the elevators, let’s say—that if the market is strong then there’ll be--. The extra cost, they might be able to absorb it because there’s a stronger market.

GF: That is true.

NP: If it isn’t, then they will be the last to sell, if at all, because they have to have a higher price in order to break even.

GF: Yeah, so they’re always going to have a smaller margin. That’s what you’re saying, and I agree with that. And the Wheat Board equalized those margins across the Prairies, creating a much more cooperative outlook by definition.

NP: Speaking of the cooperative outlook, I had a chance to go across the Prairies a couple of summers ago to interview people who were involved previously in the co-ops and had been part of the--. Probably many of them had gotten out of their positions just before all of the amalgamations and the eventual collapse. A number of them made a comment that the whole ethos—is that the right term?—of cooperation that was a part of the Prairies, certainly shortly after they got developing and led to what we talked about earlier, a successful development, had eroded.

GF: And I think that’s true. That’s why I’m saying it’s a more of an individualist and capitalist and corporate system in which farmers now work. That's just the way it is. That is how we have evolved as a farm economy, farm society.

NP: And I can recall—I worked for the Department of Agriculture in Manitoba for a few years when I first graduated from University of Manitoba—the big push there, philosophically, was for support for farm families. It goes back to the point you just made about thousands and thousands of farm families that are actually disappearing. What difference does that make? It’s just change.

GF: It’s change, and it affects the number of people who live in rural Prairie Canada. What were once lively communities with X-number of people are now very small communities of X-minus, most of them. Therefore, the community in which you live is not a six-mile community, it's a 50-mile community. So that affects your children on the school bus, and your emergency medical care, and all these other things that we know about rural Prairie Canada now. And that’s just fewer people increasingly. And they’re not necessarily owners anymore. There’d be many more wage labourers and fewer people who own the unit of production, and that

makes a huge difference too to the way they see themselves. If you're bargaining for an hourly wage and so on, it's different than gambling on the annual crop and the annual price.

So these are just changes in the grain industry that we've absorbed, adapted to. And we don't have to say that it makes a better community. We can say, in fact, it makes a less happy community or a less vibrant one than existed before. And I think that happens to be likely to be true, but I don't want to underestimate. People adapt in 2014 as they did in 1914, and they find ways to make their life interesting and so on. Their community is vibrant, but it's a different geography, a different distribution of population.

NP: I learned so much about the whole western Canada economy, social circumstances, and so on from being involved in this project, and one of the things that I'm interested in you commenting on that struck me was in those early days, maybe earlier, but where I really seem see an influence was around the 1910s when farmers really had a voice, and a lot of the things that you were talking about related to grain handling and maybe even the research, I'm not certain, but certainly grades and fair practices and so on came into being with the Grain Act. What happens over history, and the reason they could have such influence, was because they made up most of the voting population, so if you didn't give them what they wanted, then you weren't in. So your political futures as a politician--. And many of them were farmers. Now, over time, what implications are there for farmers?

GF: Well now they're just a much, much smaller portion of the population therefore much less powerful in influencing political decisions. There's money involved in the grain trade though, so to that extent as there is in any particular industry, let's say the auto industry or the coal mining industry or the pharmaceutical industry--.

NP: Petroleum industry.

GF: You name it! There are sectors of the economy, and the farmers are simply much less important than they were in 1900 or 1910. And that, too, is part of the reason we lost the Wheat Board and have gone to a more corporate, individualist system because the world around us is simply governed more by those principles than it was 40 or 80 or 120 years ago. Ironically, when you go back to 1880, that was a very capitalist period too. So there's been a kind of cycle, or pendulum if you want, and we've swung from one way right through to another extreme, and now we're heading back again.

NP: Yes. That's what I've thought. That it took 100 years for things to cycle. Any other things that I should have asked you for your comments on relative to--? Again, going back to the focus of the project is development of Canada as an international grain trader and the development of the infrastructure in order to accomplish that both east and west, even though we are a little biased towards the east. [Laughs]

GF: Okay, well, nothing jumps immediately to mind. I mean, we've talked about the basics of the grain trade.

NP: Amalgamation.

GF: Of what?

NP: Well, the Pools, initially, I guess.

GF: I hope you talked to Paul Earl about that.

NP: I have.

GF: Okay, because he's the one who's actually studied that process most closely. And he interviewed all those people in the Sask Pool absorption of the Manitoba and Alberta Pools, and then its eventual transition to this new corporation now, and the loss thereby that entire cooperative approach. A man who died last year who was a very close friend of mine, Ian McPherson, was the scholar of the history of co-ops in Canada, and his papers would be out in Victoria at the University of Victoria. He founded a co-op institute at the University of Victoria. So McPherson--. But as I say, he died last year alas, and so he's the number one historian of the co-op movement in Canada. And then Paul is the historian of the grain amalgamation of the companies,1990 to 2007, roughly.

NP: What's your philosophical summary of a 140, almost 50 years, then?

GF: Well, it depends on if you're talking to me as a historian or are you talking to me as a political partisan?

NP: I'd like both.

GF: I don't normally talk partisan politics. My wife was a politician, so I don't have to be.

NP: Yes, Bob was mentioning and then I remembered the name.

GF: Bob?

NP: Roehle, who I had breakfast with this morning.

GF: Right.

NP: He provided me with a lot of names of people I could talk with.

GF: Right. Well, in history terms, I think it's one of those amazing stories of humans adapting to a new circumstance and some people being left behind, I might say, and being treated unfairly. I'm thinking here of Indigenous peoples. That was a really terrible policy chapter within the development of Prairie society, so if it were ever left out it would be unfair.

NP: I'll step back here because that's, even in Thunder Bay, we see implications for the development--. I'm thinking of Grand Trunk. The city of Fort William gave away property when it really wasn't theirs to give away. Eventually, they compensated the First Nation that shouldn't had to have been compensated in the first place if they hadn't taken it away. So on a broader perspective, then, all of this nice development of grain on the Prairies, what implications did it have or what did it do to the Aboriginal population who lived there?

GF: We basically started our conversations in the 1870s and '80s, and that's the very period when Indigenous people were supplanted or moved off their land and lost their crucial resource. So for the buffalo on the plains to disappear, which they almost did, is an extraordinary natural resource disaster that no society could sustain. But the Aboriginal or First Nation story isn't just the loss of buffalo—that's also a Metis story—but then there's also the implications for mid-North and Northern Indigenous peoples who suddenly are swept up willy nilly, like it or not, in the residential school system for example. That disaster that well-meaning politicians and church people imposed upon a civilization and undermined it. So what do I say? There was an enormous social loss in the economic and social gain of the creation of the grain economy.

NP: Was it possible to develop one, being a farming, to the extent it was developed and at the same time mitigate the loss, the damage, to the others?

GF: Well, everything we did worked to the detriment of the Aboriginal people. There's a book by Sarah Carter called *Lost Harvests*. She teaches at the University of Alberta now and was a student of my wife here in Manitoba and did her PhD, and that's her PhD thesis on how the federal government put obstacles in the way of Aboriginal agriculture. And then there's the broader story—simply the selling off of Aboriginal reserve land for farms that, had it been left in Aboriginal hands, could have become a revenue-producing source for the band. So we made many policy mistakes in that period. Could it have been done differently? Of course!

NP: Possibly to mutual advantage, not where one had to--.

GF: Even if it wasn’t mutual advantage, even if it cost--.

NP: If it was fair.

GF: Yeah, and that’s what Aboriginal people have been saying ever since.

NP: Could you repeat the statement about fairness because I said it and I prefer that you say it because I don’t want it to be--. When we pick out snippets it won't be snippets of me if I can help it. [Laughs]

GF: Well, the policy choices the Canadian government and the Canadian people made hurt Aboriginal people in almost every respect. And I’m thinking of the reserve system, of the treatment of agriculture, of the pass system, of their failure to subsidize, in an appropriate way, the transition from one way of life to another, from a hunting and gathering way of life to an agricultural way of life. Our policy choices were cheap and mean in the sense of--. How do I put that? I don’t mean “mean” in the sense that you’re mean with your fellow. I mean “mean” in the sense of you’re not putting out the money that would be fair to put out if you were to assist the people to change, and you’re requiring them to change. It’s not as if this is an option. There's going to be a new way of life coming. When they sent teachers in, the Aboriginal people said, “Yes, we want a teacher, but we don’t want your religion with it. We’ve got our religion.” So all the policy choices we made may have been well-intentioned, but they were disastrous! So what we can say looking back 125 years is we’ve made huge mistakes that we are still being too cheap to rectify.

NP: Another broad question or daydreaming, if Canada’s west had not developed the way it did—setting aside the Aboriginal component or including that—if we had stayed, as Argentina did, and not put the infrastructure in that developed as forward-thinking people, or thinking people, what would Canada have looked like?

GF: Oh, the reasoning in history is called counterfactual. What you do if you take the next most likely alternative line, so what are we going to eliminate here? We are going to eliminate mass shipping of grain by bulk, is what you’re saying, I guess. Is that what I’m understanding? So we would ship it because we see there’s a global market requiring grain, there’s land here that can produce grain, there are many people who believe agriculture is the way to develop a civilization, and so the policy would inevitably under John A. had been, “Let’s get some western farms.” Are you assuming railways--?

NP: I’m assuming if there hadn’t been the National Dream.

GF: Right, but you’re assuming the technology of railways existed?

NP: Yes, but not the fight to get it actually--. And the sacrifice to get the rails.

GF: The next alternative to a CPR is the American rail system. So we would have created branch lines running down to an equivalent of the Great Northern or the Northern Pacific system. So that's the first thing. And Ken Norie, who I think I actually mentioned to you, actually did some econometrics studies on what the next best alternative would have been, and how much it would have cost, and what the freight rates would have been and so on. So it would be interesting to talk to, I think. Did you find him? I think he's in Hamilton, but I wouldn't swear, at McMaster. But I am right that I did mention this.

So anyway, the next best alternative. Well, we would have developed much more slowly. The Prairies would have developed much more slowly, and fewer people would have come. It would have been expensive to ship, and so we wouldn't have had nearly the grain economy that emerged so quickly. What you can say is that was a very rapid development, basically from 1880 to 1925, say, 45 years. And you've gone from almost nothing to a giant new society, which, ironically, over the next 10 or 15 years goes into a kind of stasis, and then we dismantle from 1945 on that entire vast network that we had created between 1880 and 1925. So it's an extraordinary story of change in the way I depict it. End of story.

NP: So would Canada have existed as it is?

GF: That's a really tough one to--.

NP: Would it have ended at the Ontario border?

GF: It's conceivable. In 1870, Manitoba joined and the Northwest joined, and in 1881 or so, the British gave Canada the northern islands of the Arctic. So those three steps Manitoba, the northern island—I should add British Columbia 1871—create absolutely and certainly a political alternative to the United States. Now, could it have been sustained when all those immigrants moved north via the States only, rather than a Canadian system? It's not the railway so much as—well it is the railway really, I guess—it's the political sentiment that emerges, I think, in western Canada by 1878-9 that makes Canada viable. Then they fight over the nature of that viability for the next 30 years or so. By 1920, Canada's a solid thing. It's going to work. The shaky part is the 1870s and 80s. So if there was going to be an alternative, a counterfactual that was the Wwest leaving Canada and joining the States, it would have been the '70s and '80s.

NP: And that's the push for a solid connection?

GF: Of the railway, absolutely. Absolutely.

NP: And the railway to be viable required a sustainable economy in the Prairies.

GF: Yes, absolutely so.

NP: And some would say for our eastern Canada to remain viable, they required a market from the west.

GF: It certainly made growth possible. Eastern Canada would have been viable in some other way because it had enough people, and it could have traded across the border, and they were shipping. I think the largest single export from Ontario in the 1890s was cheese, and it was going to Britain. So, you know, the alternatives would be different, and the nature of the country would be different. Ontario and Quebec might have become one of the world's great dairy enterprises, but who knows.

The ‘70s and ‘80s is the period when Canada is the shakiest. I don’t know what you’d say about the product. You’d say that MacDonald, by sustaining the CPR and solving those political problems one way and another—often underhandedly—sustained the country. So I recognize John A. as a remarkable builder of Canada. I don’t disagree with that. He was also a class warrior, in my opinion, against poorer people. He made mistakes in policy, residential schools being one of the biggest, and so on. But that’s another story.

NP: Not all good news, but critical to us being.

GF: Yes. Creating who we are, good and bad.

NP: Thank you very much. It’s been an interesting interview and, what I was hoping, a really nice overview pulling together a lot of sort of more specific pieces, so thank you. Perfect.

GF: Okay.

NP: So thank you very much.

GF: You’re very welcome.

NP: We have a list of people who are interested in our project. Can I add your name to it?

GF: Sure.

NP: Okay, great. I’ll make a note of that. And I’ve got the names of the people you’ve suggested, so that’s good too.

End of interview.