

Narrator: John Froese (JF)

Company Affiliations: N/A

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Summary: Lifelong farmer John Froese discusses his career in the Canadian grain industry. He begins by sharing his family's long history of farming in Manitoba, and describes how his family's farm size changed over the years. He describes the farm operation, like the mixture of livestock and grain farming, the crop rotation system, and his working other jobs in the wintertime for supplemental income. He recounts the introduction of new farming inputs, like fertilizer and chemicals, and recalls major improvements to farm equipment, like plows, discers, cultivators, seeders, tractors, and combines. Froese discusses other major changes in the industry, like the Canadian Wheat Board quota system, the growth of farms into megafarms, the consolidation of country elevators, and the construction of inland terminals. Other topics discussed include interactions with crop insurance programs, growing issues with rural roads and drainage, changes to grain companies in rural areas, the increasing financial risks of farming, and his pride in being involved with his community.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: I'm so very pleased that you agreed to do this interview, and let's start by you giving me your name and then you can go on to describe how you got into farming which is the way you worked in the grain industry.
JF: My name is John Froese. I started farming back when I bought my first quarter in 1947. I was working together with my father at that time, and we shared the implements. In fact, seeding the first couple of years were still done with horses which became

rather difficult if the tractor was working on the same field and you seeding with horses, which I was doing. The horses had to put it in a higher gear.

EE: [Laughs] Which they didn't do very easily I don't suppose.

JF: No. [Laughs]

EE: So, the farming was sort of almost hereditary. Your father had farmed, his father had farmed, and so as the Mennonites had done for many, many centuries probably.

JF: Well, actually, my father was trained as a bookkeeper, but when he came to Canada that was one of the stipulations was they would be farming. The first couple of years that he was here, he worked for a farmer in Saskatchewan. Then they started farming together with his brother, and do you want any dates?

EE: Sure, dates are great.

JF: Oh, in 1938 we moved to Manitoba and started farming there.

EE: Where did you move to in Manitoba?

JF: The home place where we were--. Well, my son bought that now, it's in the third generation.

EE: I see. So, this is the place north of Elm Creek here?

JF: Northwest of Elm Creek, yes.

EE: How close to them were--. It was 13?

JF: Thirteen Highway, yes, we were three miles off Thirteen Highway. Actually, now it's Mile 53.

EE: West would be the Perimeter.

JF: 53 north of the US border and 27 west of the first meridian.

EE: 27 west. Yes, I've noticed when driving the highways that the roads are mostly numbered and that's a very nice feature. So, you really don't need to go back to, as I do, southeast quarter, 21-9-4 where I grew up north of Culross, not many miles from where you were farming actually.

JF: No, that's very true and it was interesting. A company had owned that farm. A farmer bought the place before, but, as the neighbors told us, he spent money on machinery and not paying the payments and eventually lost the farm.

EE: Good grief. That's a very, very serious miscalculation. So, you've been in this area then since 1938, and I gathered when I was setting up this interview that you are in fact still helping with the farm if not actually--.

JF: Yes. I am still helping my sons. They farm, I actually sold the last quarter to our son the other day, but I still do the cultivating, the harrowing. I actually am back when I started when I first helped on the farm, that's what I could do is harrow and that's what I do now and cultivate. But it's quite different, much bigger machine. Two years ago, when my son put the GPS on the tractor, he gave me a call on the cell and said, "Well, dad, how's that compared to horses?" Well, I thought I had to get back on him on this one, so I said, "Well, you know, with horses I came to the end of the field they knew how to turn around. This thing I still have to turn around."

EE: [Laughs] Yes, horses had their own GPS operating well, especially knowing where the barn is, I suppose. So you have in fact farmed as an independent farmer. One of the questions is for whom did you work? Well, you worked for yourself. After a while you weren't working for the bank any longer or although--. [Laughs]

JF: I guess. Well, we needed the bank. I remember going in the bank once and wanting to borrow money to buy some equipment, and the banker said, "Well, you should buy cattle not equipment." I told him cattle would die, the equipment wouldn't. [Laughing]

EE: Yeah, the horses eventually died too for that matter. Was your farming just grain then or did you have any livestock?

JF: No, my farming was mixed farming like cattle, hogs, and for a while we also raised capons for meat that we would sell in the fall. I preferred mixed farming. Actually, I should put in a little story here about when I bought the home place for my mother after my father had passed away. The insurance company was after me to buy insurance, and I was not in agreement with that. So finally, they said, "Look, here in your contract it says you have to buy it!" So, I ended up buying crop insurance that particular year, and then they wrote me a letter I should explain why I was objecting to farming and I said--.

EE: Or to the insurance.

JF: To the insurance, pardon me, yes. Well, I had three reasons. One was I was mixed farming, so I had not as they say, "All the eggs in one basket." The other was PFRA was still in operation then, and they operated according to township, so I had some land spread around. So one particular year I had a poor crop in one area and a good one in the other. But crop insurance at that time, they averaged the whole thing which, I think now has changed, but then it wasn't. With PFRA I got payment on the one part and not the other because it didn't affect the crop on the other area. And the third reason was very often with the crop insurance the amount of production would be just over the insurable amount and that was one of my objections. You have to pay the premium, but you're so near that you don't qualify. That was my third objection. Well, after that they wrote me a letter that I didn't need to get crop insurance anymore, and I don't think I ever did. Of course, nowadays that's quite different. But the input costs are so much higher, and if people need an operating loan, they just can't get it unless they have crop insurance. So I guess my arguments don't apply for this season anymore.

EE: So you had good economic arguments to make against the crop insurance at the time?

JF: Well, I thought they were, and they accepted that too.

EE: Well, they certainly are. I can certainly understand the logic. How much land would you have been farming at that time?

JF: At that time, I was farming 560 acres. I never became really big as the farmers did.

EE: Section after section, you were near 640 acres, but they were, the quarters were dispersed into several townships were they actually?

JF: Yes, they were at one time, and then I had a quarter next to the highway where we lived before I bought the homeplace.

EE: That's the one I remember before our moving to about two or three miles away from your farm.

JF: Well, we were just--.

EE: Or was it just across the highway and then a half a mile north? Was it that close, actually?

JF: Yeah, we were just a mile over from the highway, and our neighbour, he had bought a quarter north of the homeplace, so we were always meeting ourselves on the road to go to our respective fields. So we decided at one time this was enough. We'd trade quarters, and we did that I believe in '74 or somewhere in there. So then we had all except one quarter right in the same proximity.

EE: Did you go to Land Titles and actually do a transfer?

JF: Yes, we did that legally. [Laughs] At that time the capital gains idea was coming up, and we had to have an assessment of the value of the land at that time.

EE: Sure.

JF: We did also rent some land for some time. My son bought a half a section, and we were farming that together for a while.

EE: How large did the operation with your son then and his land and the operation become? You were up towards a section and a half by that time. were you?

JF: No, it was more. We rented that half a section and another 240 so we were--.

EE: Over two sections then?

JF: Yes, for a while, also farmed together with my son and that's when we rented that extra land. But that was the days when the banks wouldn't borrow you a little money, but they'd borrow you lots. My son got this idea bigger was better, and finally we realized we had to part company because too many fathers just let their sons take over and many of them lost the place. So, I told my son that, "Hey, I worked too hard for what I have that if you're going to go under, you're not going to take me with you." But now, things have changed, and he's back farming again and seems to enjoy it. I guess the lesson did him well.

EE: He did in fact leave farming for a little while did he?

JF: Oh yeah. He was gone for quite a few years.

EE: Right. That's an interesting experience. Well, the questionnaire has a question, "What kind of work did you do?" And then we get the typical day, so I think this would be a good time for us to explore further what you were describing. We could talk about--. Maybe what we should do is dispose of the animals and that's to say how you got into that, when you got out of it, and then we can

get back to the grain which is, of course, our interest—the grain you were growing and how that changed and so on. Were you in mixed farming from the very beginning?

JF: Yes. Actually, when we got married, I got a cow from my parents and my wife got a cow and one pig from hers, and that's the way we started.

EE: This was dairy farming but primarily for your home consumption or did you sell cream?

JF: Yes, we sold cream. In fact, when we first started, we didn't have electricity, and we cooled our cream in the well, and that was our refrigeration. In 1954 was actually the first year our place had hydro. Then of course things changed. For a while we did quite a bit of milking. I also used to go to the dairies and buy Holstein calves and put two calves on a cow and then sell them later on. Actually, that worked out very well.

Farming too I had a truck, and I used to haul some livestock for the neighbours and myself. Those days there were many farmers laying hens, and they would use shavings for beddings so I would deliver shavings to them, pick them up at the mills in various places in Winnipeg. I know one time my neighbour was along, and he said, "Well, what is it today, John? Calves or shavings?" [Laughing]

EE: The calves would be sold to become dairy cows for others or were these--.

JF: No, these calves would be sold on the market.

EE: So, these were steers in many cases or yearlings, I suppose.

JF: No, they were sold actually. I would feed them maybe until they were about 300 pounds and, at that time, a real demand for those kind of calves. That worked well for a good number of years, but then later on, too, the dairies were fewer, so there were less calves available. We also quit milking cows, so we just changed over to beef cattle.

EE: Having cows to milk is an incredible pressure. You have to milk them morning and evening. It really ties you to the farm.

JF: Yes, it does. It kind of disrupts your day, but the last while that we were living on the farm, we had a cow that we would milk in the evening, and then we'd leave the calf out with her so the calf took care of the milking during the day and the evening, and the evening we'd put the calf in the pen, so our day was not disrupted.

EE: Right, just the one milking in the evening then.

JF: Yeah, no, actually one milking in the morning.

EE: She got the day's milk.

JF: Yeah.

EE: Raising of the chickens, did you sell eggs at all?

JF: No. We did not. Actually, I was turned off on laying hens. When I was young, before I started my own, I worked for a farmer. They also had laying hens and that was sort of a sacred flock. You very seldom got eggs at mealtime. At that time, you lived at the place you worked. Then when it was a wet day, well we had to clean the hen house. So I was turned off on laying hens. [Laughs]

EE: Cleaning a hen house is no fun, especially if it's after a full winter. [Laughs] I won't get into a story or two I could tell from my own farm about the chicken houses. The capons of course were a matter of you bought the chicks and raised them to a particular weight again, I suppose.

JF: Yeah, that used to be quite a good income from that business. There was quite a demand for it, and once people were aware of your name, you had more orders than you had supply.

EE: This was in the area then. You weren't selling to industry?

JF: No, we didn't sell to industry. [Interruption]

EE: We'll just carry on. Farming across the next lot, I guess, eh?

JF: That's my neighbour, he's always mowing our lawn. Should I ask him to--.

[Audio pauses]

EE: Okay, let's get back to--. We were just talking about the selling of those chickens, and I was wondering whether they were selling private. It wasn't as if you were supplying a slaughterhouse or anything.

JF: No, that's right, we were selling to private customers in the neighbourhood, and we had quite a few actually in Winnipeg, seeing we had relatives there that word kind of got around.

EE: Sure. Good chickens were coming in today. And of course, the connection of all of these animals to the farm operation, where this project is interested in the grain trade, these animals were consuming some of what you were growing in the way of the feed that you fed them, I suppose.

JF: Yes, definitely, that was also consumed quite a bit of grain. When we had hogs, which consumed more. At that time there's not too many who would get their ready-mixed feed brought in, but we would do the mixing ourselves. So that limited some of the grain off the market.

EE: Right. That's an interesting point, actually. One of the arguments against the continuation of the Crow Rate in the debate in the early '80s on that of course—and gradually the arrangements did change—one of the arguments was that the value of the grain might increase on the Prairies and more of it would be used for such things such as feeding. But you were doing this, I guess, through the 1970s or even earlier?

JF: Yes, we started in 1950, and we left the farm in 1988.

EE: Would you have moved away from the hogs and the capons and so on?

JF: Well, hogs and capons we quit earlier probably in the mid '70s, and the cattle we kept right to the end. In fact, we still had some when we lived in town. But then that year we got rid of them, the first year, and that was 1988.

EE: My father spoke of the hogs as mortgage raisers. I guess they produce the annual payment on the mortgage through the '50s. Did you see pigs in a somewhat similar way? Raised them for market?

JF: Yes. It was a good source of income, and it spread your income around over the year. Grain trade was a little different then, especially the delivery system on the quota system. I recall in the early '50s when the movement was rather slow, and we lived near town. We could see the freight train coming in. What would happen, neighbours would see it, you would all run to your truck and load a load of grain and line up at the elevator. If you weren't there in time, and if the agent only got one boxcar, well, some of

them had to go back with their load of grain. Now the system is much better that way. They contract out and they only call you in when your contract is due or they have room.

EE: So, the system has changed that dramatically. Farming from the late '40s for about 40 years, from about '47 to about '88 did you say? So that's a period of time that has encompassed quite a bit of change in the industry, too, for that matter.

JF: Yes, there was quite a bit of change, and of course the time when the Canadian Wheat Board came in at the beginning, you could choose whether you wanted to sell through the Wheat Board or on the open market. If you didn't have to sell in fall sometimes it was better to keep it and go on the open market. But for my situation, I usually needed money in the fall. Mortgage payments, land payments came due, payments on implements. So the Wheat Board actually was for my operation a very helpful situation that at least you figured you got a fair price for your product.

EE: So you've been a supporter of the Wheat Board all the way through?

JF: Yes, I have been a supporter. I know nowadays too that's quite a topic of controversy and reading the papers--. And even the other day in the post office lobby there was a bunch of farmers together and one said, "Well, we were discussing the Wheat Board." And one fellow who I knew was absolutely opposed to it, he just left in a big hurry.

EE: [Laughs] In that crowd he wasn't going to have any sympathizers, eh?

JF [Laughs] No.

EE: The farming operation that you carried on was growing what kinds of grain?

JF: Well, basically I grew three kinds of cereal—wheat, barley, and oats. Seeing we had livestock for hogs, barley was a good source of feed for them. Then of course for cattle oats was, and wheat, and also flax. We did have some peas for a number of years, which were okay for a while. But peas are rather delicate. For moisture they don't handle too much. But eventually the market seemed to dry up.

I know when my father farmed in those years the '40s, I remember one year he had 80 acres of sweet clover. It yielded 1000 pounds to an acre and 10 cents a pound. That's the year he finished making his payments on the farm, and it was a good year. But nowadays you very, very seldom see sweet clover. Farming has also changed very much since fertilizer came in. Those days when I farmed—well towards the end—we did use fertilizer, probably only started in the mid '60s, late '60s, but until then in the heavy

land, you would summer fallow in one third of the acreage in order to get a better production. But now with fertilizer, you don't see any summer fallow or very, very rarely.

EE: Right well we could talk about the kind of farming that goes on these days a little later. Let's explore that. So, you had a three-crop rotation basically, the summer fallow, then wheat I suppose the next year, was it?

JF: Yes.

EE: And then oats and barley or perhaps flax the second year for any particular field?

JF: Yes, that was the rotation. On summer fallow, you would see wheat and then second crop barley or oat and flax. Some people were in a rotation of three crops and then summer fallow. My father usually operated that way. His land wasn't quite as heavy, and that worked quite well.

EE: That would be a four-year rotation then, was it?

JF: Yeah. That's right. A four-year rotation.

EE: Of course, having lived in the area, I'm aware of light land and heavy land. Yours was all part of that continuation of--. I guess it's somewhere between the Red River and Assiniboine River is that quite heavy land that we have north of Elm Creek. But northwest there's also the sandier land, the lighter land.

JF: Yes, that's true and the home place on southwest of 34-95 was just east of the ridge. There's a ridge that goes from Elm Creek on an angle to the northwest. On the west side of the ridge, the land is much lighter. On the east side it gets heavier as you get further away from the ridge.

EE: And your farming was all on that heavier land?

JF: Yes. Well, we had some that was a bit lighter on the west side of 34 but it was not considered light land.

EE: No. [Laughs] Well, we won't get into, unless you want to talk about later what can happen on either side of that sand ridge. But you were raising grains then on a three-year rotation basically, and only in the '60s did you become involved in using fertilizers at all. I suppose you were spraying for weeds from early on?

JF: Yes, sprayer came in, I think the first sprayer we had was in 1949. Actually, I had a small tractor, and then the idea was you didn't want much tracks on the grain field, so my neighbour bought the sprayer, and we put it on my tractor. We had an 80-gallon tank at the back of the tractor, and I would spray his land and ours and my father's.

And then, because I was doing the spraying, I could do some custom work. I remember spraying with a 32-foot sprayer for 35 cents an acre. One of the neighbours I sprayed for, it took me about six years before I got paid. But other than that, all the rest were very good customers. And spraying it--. First all, we sprayed for mustard. The talk then was, "Well, once we get a chemical that we can spray wild oats, that'll be the end of all that." Well, it's 2010 now and people are still spraying for wild oats. I guess it will never cease.

EE: [Laughs] Never really kill them. I guess a broadleaf and narrow leaf weeds are considerations and mustard would be a broader leaf and easier to kill, I guess. What were you spraying with? What was the chemical?

JF: Oh, MCPA would come in then and 24-D.

EE: I want to say 24-D in the '50s, because it seems to be what dad was using as well.

JF: Yeah 24-D was in then. I know at first the weeds were really easy to kill, but seemingly over the years, though, they build up resistance, so we'd have to spray a little heavier. But it really paid off. I know one year I made one round around the field. Well, I thought it was not worth spraying. There weren't enough weeds. So I just left it. Well, later on, the weeds came up and on the other stuff I hadn't sprayed. But flax was too far advanced. I couldn't spray because of that. For years I could tell the difference. That one round that I made with a sprayer was much cleaner than the rest of the field.

EE: [Laughs] Nothing like test plots on a paying field, I'm sure, to teach the lesson. We didn't worry very much in the '50s about how we did this—facemasks or whatever. Or did you ever worry about spray? You'd avoid spraying, you know, on a windy day because of course it would--. Or did you? What do you want to say about it?

JF: Well, the effect--. Farmyards were much closer, and you did have to respect your neighbours and your neighbour's garden. I know I was once blamed. I had sprayed too close and the neighbour's garden was affected. I'm not sure. I didn't think it was, but I remember we did have to watch out for wind. If the wind was too high, you could not spray, especially if there was a crop next to you—there was peas or something like that which couldn't handle any spray.

EE: Did you ever worry about the chemical's effect on yourself?

JF: No, we never--. There never was much warning of it, the effect of the chemicals. I don't know if first years I ever wore gloves handling it.

EE: During the first years you did or later on?

JF: Well, later on we used gloves and were more careful and even used masks sometimes. The important thing is not to spray when the wind was up at all.

EE: It killed weeds, not people.

JF: That's right. [Laughs]

EE: So fertilizer, chemicals, that would be the main inputs into your farming operations. The kind of cultivation you carried out, that would have changed over time I suppose. The kind of machinery that you used.

JF: That's very true. At first, we used to plow, do the fall plowing of all the stubble except what went into summer fallow the next year. Usually, you plowed that in the spring. But eventually, with better cultivators made, and that would also keep the stubble and straw above and prevent soil drifting, which was implemented. Of course, nowadays that's a big thing.

Now the equipment is so much better. They got these heavy harrows that now we harrow all the stubble before we cultivate to break up the straw. It does a very good job. Burning is very seldom done, if ever. Although there are still people that drop their swath behind the combine, the straw, don't spread it, and then burn the swath. But that's a tedious job and also very risky that you burn the whole field. That's definitely not good.

EE: I suppose where the fire is really hot, it can almost burn into the humus of the soil, can it?

JF: Yes. I never liked burning and now with the equipment that you have, the straw choppers, which is a big advantage that chops up the straw and spreads it. There are, in our area and when I was farming with cattle, you baled a lot of straw you needed for bedding. And barley straw or oat straw was also a supplement for feed for the livestock which was another reason that I liked the mixed farming. We had dairy farmers in the neighbourhood who had very little, and they would bail straw on our land. so straw wasn't, as a rule, a problem, an odd exception.

EE: It is interesting how things have changed. Growing up on a farm, leaving it in a way in 1960 to go off to university--. But I can remember in the '50s how much burning of straw there was in the harvest season. You'd see fires in every direction sometimes as farmers were burning. But even then, it was not a good idea to do it, really, if one wants to restore the life to the soil.

JF: Yes.

EE: You mentioned plowing initially, and this was honest-to-goodness plowing. Was this a three share or whatever behind the tractor? You were actually turning the soil over after the harvest, were you?

JF: Yes, it was. We had a three-bottom plow. I know the first quarter I bought in 1947, it hadn't been looked after too well, so I plowed the whole quarter. It took me quite a while.

EE: I can imagine.

JF: And that year I only sold 50 acres of oat and the other 105 or so. There was a little bush on that place. I summer fallowed, and I remember harvesting my first crop of oats. I got about 30 bushels to an acre, I believe. Anyway, I hauled the oats out and made a down payment of my taxes of \$50 and made a land payment and went to work in the winter to be able to start farming next spring.

EE: [Laughs] Earn that working capital by--. What did you work at over the winter?

JF: Well that particular winter I went to BC to work. The following winter, I went to the mines. I had been in the mines earlier, and I went back to the coal mine to be able to keep on farming.

EE: Were you in the bush in BC in the first year?

JF: No, I went to the West Coast, and I got a job at a dairy farm. Actually, my job was to deliver the manure. He was a big dairy farmer, and I went with a truck full of manure all over Vancouver to the various gardeners.

EE: [Laughs]

JF: Quite an experience. They had many toll bridges then, and when I'd come up there, they'd hold their nose and tell me how much to pay and get out of here. [Laughs]

EE: And then you worked in the coal mines as well. I mean, that wasn't very common for farmers to end up in the coal mines in the winter, was it?

JF: No, it wasn't, but during the war years, there was an agreement that if you went to the coal mine in the winter you could spend the summer on the farms to--.

EE: So some of this then was before you were married, when you were a young man that you were doing this?

JF: Yes. This working out was before I was married. I did help work for the neighbours after I got married but not away from home.

EE: No. I see.

JF: I also supplement my farming. Those times there were a lot of small farmers that didn't have a grain truck, so I would be hauling grain for them to town. I didn't make big money, but it kept food on the table and the wolf from the door.

EE: Every dollar counts.

JF: Yeah.

EE: And especially in those days.

JF: Yeah, back to the input cost. Farming fuel at that time was not a big expense. The biggest expense was your chemical and then of course when fertilizer came, but it also paid off very well.

EE: You found you did it because it did pay.

JF: Yes.

EE: Wouldn't have done it, I'm sure, if it didn't. When would you have first used discers to replace the plow because I'm assuming you also used those?

JF: Well, the discers came in in the early '50s. Before that, they had the one-way disc, but it was a heavier machine with bigger discs. It didn't work too well. You couldn't do a good job. But when the discers came in, that was really a lifesaver for many, many people.

EE: Would there have been different sizes of one-way discs?

JF: Oh yeah.

EE: The first generation—because it seems to be that my father had one with disks that, I'm trying to remember, would they have been maybe 15 inches or something like that? So they weren't that large.

JF: Well, the discers about 15, 16 inches of their size of discs but the one-way disc which we used to call--.

EE: That's what I was thinking.

JF: They were about 8 feet, but their discs were at least 20 inches, 22 inches and with that circumference in the clay, you couldn't either go very deep or that would be too deep for seeding. So the discers when they came in, that was great help. It speeded up the farming too. One of the problems the farmers had to remember, you don't always go around the field the same way. You throw it back or else you get a ridge around the field and--.

EE: Yes, I remember that fine point to be sure. They kept the field more or less level. [Laughs] You have to be very careful. In fact, I guess you sometimes disc the other way around.

JF: Yes. Especially people that disced in fall as well, they often started in the centre of the field and then threw it back in, which kept the field much more on the level. Another thing of real significance was, in the farming change, was when the changed from power lift to hydraulic, which was a great invention. It really helped you control the depth of your machine much better.

EE: Right. Did the discers become hydraulic as well?

JF: Yeah, the discers--.

EE: Because cultivators certainly did as well.

JF: Yeah, the one-way discs, when they came out, they were power lift, which you pull a rope and there's a mechanism in one of the wheels that locks it, and then lifts the machine up. One of those things was too if you'd get into a wet spot with a powerlift and you didn't pull that rope soon enough, the wheel wouldn't have traction. It would just skid. So you couldn't raise it. You were really in trouble then. With the power lift, well, then you could do that anytime. It worked very well.

EE: These are very fine points of cultivating fields. The deep tillage cultivator came along some point in the 1950s as well. Did you have one?

JF: Yes. That was the big thing. At that time, they were really emphasizing that you really had to work your land fairly deep in fall. I guess the assumption before when plowing, you turned it over completely and now to do that. But over the years that has changed, too, that there isn't that great necessity of going that deep, although it does help if you get too wet a year that it absorbs more moisture if you worked a little deeper.

EE: Right. My father actually built a tillage cultivator because he didn't have the money to buy one outright. So he welded up the—of course he began welding in the '50s—so he welded up the channel iron to make the main unit I think along with the wheels. He had to buy the shanks, that shovels of course that the actual business of it, but he ended up with his own deep tillage cultivator. At some point, I think around 1955/56. Does that sound about right?

JF: Yeah.

EE: It seems to me that was sometime around there that he did this.

JF: Yeah, that's right.

EE: But you're suggesting that ended up being phased out then after a while?

JF: Well, yeah, they are not used nearly as much. The cultivators now have their shanks closer together and do not go as deep but do still make a very good job. Actually, one of the earliest deep tillers was one of the Graham-Hoeme plows which they called. It didn't have power lift or hydraulic at first, so it was by levers. I know my neighbour had one, and he'd work around the field with a marker made on it, so he drove straight. Of course, that's changed too with GPS now. You drive straight. Also, it's a good advantage for spraying. Very often it's too windy during the day to spray but with GPS you can spray at night, which is a great invention.

EE: I noticed some—and I guess it's this power harrowing as I'm attempted to call it as what you're describing—fields that have been harrowed I guess it's diagonally to the road. [Laughs] You glanced at them, and you're true as a die, row after row. So that's the GPS that keeps you on track.

JF: Yes, you can always tell going down the road if the people have used GPS. It's a great invention. I know my boys, I used to tell them we had a neighbour, Ernie Shrine, he drove very straight without GPS. Just recently one of my sons said, "Well dad always told us to drive straight like Ernie." He says, "Now we can."

EE: [Laughs] Well, I well remember the temptation was always to check your straight just by glancing back and that always produced the squiggle because the whole body would move. You couldn't turn just your head and of course you'd turn the wheel just a little bit. But of course, the way to avoid this embarrassment is not to do it---. Straight to the road, the main road [Laughs]. Usually, you have to do it to some road or another but choose your own for which you work.

JF: Yes, there's a story about when we were doing plowing and making a strikeout. You'd have a mark at the other end of the field and one beyond that and this fellow couldn't tell very well what that marker was. Here it was a fellow moving with a load of hay, and that really changed his course.

EE: [Laughs] Yes, I can well imagine. Yes, indeed, what a line that would be. So in terms of the inputs, we've explored those and the kind of machinery, the seed drills used to be used initially for the seeding and then the discers could also be used for seeding couldn't they? And I guess equipment---. Maybe you should say a word or two about those and then whatever developed after that.

JF: Oh, okay, yes. The seed drills and then there was also a press drills which had packers behind the seed drill. They were used very often in the lighter land, the press drills, which was very effective. Also, if it was more on the dry side this was compact the seed in the earth, and it would germinate faster. Usually in the heavy land I just used the natural double disc seed drills. Then the discers came in for seeding. Of course, any change, there's some always reluctant. But what it did do, you would work the field, kill the weeds, and seed it at the same time. With a seed drill you would usually cultivate your field before and then seed it, and this would, especially in the heavy clay, would be a bit more lumpy and would also dry out faster. So, the discers were really a very good invention. Now, in our area, you seldom see one if ever, or the air seeder or the air drill.

The air seeder is a cultivator with narrow shanks and injects the seed behind the shank. The air drill is actually the same machine only it has packers behind the cultivator shanks, which is a big thing. Another great advantage is with the air seeder or air drill, they have tanks at the back which are driven with a blower that blow the seed and the fertilizer into the hoses behind the shanks. It has a bigger capacity of your seed grain as well as your fertilizer. There are two compartments, and you adjust the amount you put on the

acre, and you can seed quite a number of acres with one filling which speeds up the whole process very much. With the discers especially, their fertilizer boxes usually were rather small, and you'd have to stop so often to fill them up to keep going. The air seeder and air drill have really sped that process up by a very high percentage.

EE: The discers were often quite a fair length too. You'd go from a seed drill that might be, what would it be? What, 20--.

JF: The seed drills were usually 14 feet. There were some larger ones, 14-foot drill was a 28 run that had a disk every six inches and the discers were--. Well the first ones came out 12 feet but then there were 15s and then 16s and very often 2 or 3 hookups of discers to your tractors. You got larger tractor, and you'd have the tandem hookup. One of the problems at first was when you would move it was a little bit of a chore, but later on, they improved the whole hitching mechanism. As soon as it was lifted out of the ground, they would narrow a position and trail each other fairly well. So that was another big advantage and a promotion for farmers to get bigger and fewer.

EE: Yes, these things all go together. The size of the tractors, of course, begins to change too. They were more or less the same kind of tractors into what, the 1960s, and then those huge--. Well sometimes 8 wheels, 4 dual wheels, or large tires began to appear.

JF: Yes. That's what you see now, 4 wheelers, dual wheels, and even there are those that have triple wheels, which makes 12 tires on a machine. So if you got a tire going or a couple of tires going, you make sure you got some money in the bank to pay for that.

EE: [Laughs] Yeah. That's something to ask, how much they cost each, but it would be a pretty fair price on them.

JF: Yeah, all those prices of parts increase so very much that I know, checking my record book, that the first year I farmed you would buy some parts for cents. You wouldn't even pay a dollar. Well now, that's quite a different story. With all that mechanization, the costs has improved so farmers do need more land to make it a viable operation.

EE: The multi-tire tractors, are they deliberately designed to reduce the weight of the machine on the land to compress the soil less?

JF: Yes, that is very true. They spread the weight over a large area, and as I mentioned before that when I started spraying, I had this little tractor, which was really good. In fact, I sowed some wheat for my neighbour with it, and he was so impressed that I left hardly any tracks behind from the seed drill. So now you will see people spraying with dual wheel tractors, but the flotation is spread over the weight that after a couple of days you do not see that the sprayer has gone there. Actually, now with the highboy sprayers, you see the tracks much more than you do if people spray with a pole type and a dual-wheel tractor.

EE: Because the sprayers have fairly narrow tires, I guess the question is whether to crush more grain or to compact less soil.

JF: Yes, that is--. There's two different size of tires, I guess. Most of these highboys have. The narrow one is also because of row crop because a lot of row crop is sprayed because we have so much chemical now. Even in row crop, they do not necessarily cultivate, but they spray the fields. So, they use the narrow tire.

EE: Just a second.

JF: Another new invention is now with what they call pre-harvest Roundup. If you have quack grass or green weeds in your crop and you spray if after your grain is ripe or more-or-less ripe, you spray the weeds and wait six days or so. Then you can often go in straight combining. So that's another change over the years. Years ago, we never, or very seldom, did any straight combining, but nowadays that's done quite a bit.

EE: The intention then is to kill anything that might be in there other than the grain, which is already ripe or pretty well ripe. Then you can straight combine.

JF: Personally, I have a little difficulty with this pre-harvest Roundup. I know scientifically it has been proven that it has no effect on the value or the residue for food. Yet the seed growers do not want pre-harvest Roundup grain for seeds. So, in my little mind, I have a little difficulty not questioning whether it really does affect a residue. But that's a personal opinion.

EE: Well, it is a need from my own teaching in environmental history and I would decline to caution. They call it the precautionary principle, hasn't been proven but probably reason to be suspicious. Until you can be absolutely certain, don't do something. So, you're actually following the precautionary principle, I think, on this matter.

JF: Well, yes, and I tell my boys I'm not so sure about this pre-harvest Roundup. "Oh, it does great. We kill the quack, and we kill any other weeds, and you have a clean crop."

EE: Matters of opinion and maybe a bit more. The harvesting machinery of course is the other thing from binders and sheaves and stooks. We actually saw some driving through the Pembina somewhere or another coming back from Deloraine a couple of days ago. Lovely to see some stook grain standing there. But of course, combines have been the basis for years, whether they were tractor drawn or self-propelled combines. They got bigger and bigger too, I guess. I happened to see one this morning with rubber caterpillar tracks on the front wheels and the other wheels behind that, which I think that was something novel—this particular John Deere combine I saw rolling on the highway.

JF: Yes, very true. In this area this year we've had a lot of rain, and also, it's sporadic, like not the same in every area. But the tracks on the combine, they can do the job where even the self-propelled swather cannot go. Of course, the combines nowadays are much bigger and rotary combines which are less moving parts and work much better, as they tell us. Over the years I asked myself with all of the changes that come about, how much more can there be? But who knows in this world of technology, how much more there is to improve on.

EE: So combines were--. I suppose in terms of the works, however they were moved along the field, whether they had their own locomotion engines or not, but I guess it's probably basically the rotary drums that did the threshing of the grain. But that was rotary too. But when you refer to a rotary combine now, that's a different kind of rotary, I guess.

JF: Yeah, the rotary combines, they do not have straw walkers. It goes through the rotor and then kind of a drum where the straw turns around and the grain falls to the bottom. That is less moving parts, most straw walkers.

EE: You should say a bit more. When you said straw walkers as I remember what was inside the guts of a combine but probably you should describe what you're referring to.

JF: The straw walkers were about, well 6 to 8 inches wide and they were side-by-side on a crankshaft that they would not be in the same position to shake the straw out, to pick the grain that had went through the cylinder, come onto the straw walker with a beater. Then it would shake it down. They were on a slope underneath. They were porous. Underneath was a shield that would let the grain fall on it and then it would convey the grain to the front of the machine again to land on the chaffer. Through the chaffer it would go onto the bottom sieve, and what went over the bottom sieve would go through the return elevator that would bring that amount of grain through the cylinder again. What went through the bottom sieve would go into the elevator that would deliver it into the hopper.

EE: Well, that's a very good description of the workings of a combine actually. It makes one appreciate the ingenuity, the thought, and the skill that went into designing a combine, which would do the threshing while the machine rolled along through the field with the grain coming in at the front, across the pickup if it had been swathed by a separate machine. Or as you were saying with the cutting blades, cutting the grains so that it fell, the windrows pulling it in, and dropping it in to go through the combine for this threshing process. It has to be dry of course to do that.

JF: Yes, or at least near dry. That was another thing of harvesting, and which was quite a change from the threshing machines. In the threshing machine, you had your grain in stooks which would not attract the dew nearly as much, or you'd leave a few racks

loaded in the evening, and you could start earlier. Now with a combine and that was quite an adjustment at first to wait until the dew is off because that just didn't work. So it changed the day of operation from late in the morning or near noon to, if there wasn't a dew, in the evening. You would be able to combine very late. Even sometimes you could combine through the night, which was quite a change from the thresh machine.

EE: The lights on and the machine moving through the night out there, picking up the grain. [Laughs]

JF: Yes. Actually, it's quite a sight now with the machines and all the lights they have on. Some of the time you would think there was some kind of castle moving along the field. The other thing of great change is hauling the grain. Of course, the machines are bigger, so they process grain much faster. What they call a grain cart now, that is usually on two big wheels and a tractor that will go alongside the combine and unload the hopper as they go, and which grain cart is a great advantage because they can handle the wet conditions much better. It's also easier on the trucks. You have the trucks at the end of the field and this grain cart has a large unloading auger, so within a couple of minutes it would unload 500 to 900 bushels in a couple of minutes. So it really sped up the harvest. Of course, then we have the municipality to contend with larger loads. We do more damage to the roads.

EE: That part of the farming activity and its consequences always existed, of course. The roads had to be built up or gravelled where the soil was sticky when it got wet. But I guess over time municipal councils become anxious about the size of stuff out there, eh?

JF: Yes, that is true. Years ago, with the clay roads, if it rained you just stayed home, but now they have access to a gravel road. Each farm site has an access to a gravel road. Not necessarily all roads are gravel. Some of them you can only navigate when it's dry, but you can get out to town or wherever on a gravel road. Not necessarily always the shortest road, but it's the safest road. Over the years, too, they are improving the roads, maintaining them more often. And of course, there still are restrictions on some areas and--.

EE: You're describing Grey Municipality, particularly the policy has been to gravel to every farmer. Then every farmer along Highway 13 for example, or some distance in, would get gravel to his yard then.

JF: Yeah, it will not necessarily be straight out but--. Then there's also the other thing. They keep gravel on the bus routes, so wherever the bus travels those roads are graveled.

EE: And not just to the councillor's yard. [Laughs] I'm not sure that ever happened, and I better not name any names. But I'm thinking of the possibility that a councillor got gravel faster than others did.

JF: [Laughs] Well, that's a good point, Ernie. Sometimes a councillor will only run for one term of office, and it's surprising how much good work is done in a particular area and probably was overdue. Maybe sometimes that's the way to get it done. A problem with grain that I see now is all the trees that are growing in the ditches. That's getting to be quite an issue. When I think back years in the '40s, every farmer had a few animals, so all the ditches were mowed and they made hay. That was a source of feed. Now, they don't have it, so the ditches they do get mowed by the RM but not all the way, just from the top sides. So we have quite a few trees in some areas. It's actually almost like a shelterbelt down the ditch.

EE: Would you want to say anything about the draining of land that was required in order to farm?

JF: That drainage is another issue. I remember very well, just after the war about the meeting about drainage. A professor was out, and he told us something. I still remember that he said, "Be careful when you disrupt a natural drain," Over the years in our municipality, too, and he mentioned that we built roads and built them very quickly and very economically with the elevating grader. But the elevating grader follows the contour of the land, and with that there are times you disrupt the drainage. Once you do that, you got to be careful to have an outlet. With all the drainage that was done each farmer wants to get rid of his water as quick as he can, but we all know it goes east of here and more and more water comes from the west, and going east it can just handle so much. It is usually figured out by the book how much it will handle but when you have a spring with a lot of growth in the ditches that slows the drainage down, which creates problems. Another thing about disrupting a natural drain, I know up in our area they've done that, and they've let it through some light land, and it just raises havoc if there's a very heavy, sudden rain. So, I think this gentleman that warned us about that really had a good point and too often--.

EE: You don't remember his name by any chance?

JF: Um--.

EE: Sounds interesting. Who is responsible? Is it the RM that is entirely responsible for these ditches now or is there any provincial authority that comes in on big ditches?

JF: There's certain ditches that are the responsibility of the provincial government, others are the municipality, and I'm not sure, I wouldn't be able to say which one is which.

EE: So as an individual farmer you were aware that this work was going on, but it didn't actually touch you directly, other than hearing this particular professor utter some wise thoughts.

JF: Yes, and over the years there has been a lot done. Like in this last year where we had so much rain. In fact, I spoke to a farmer the other day, and he had an area where he farmed 700 acres, He said he probably had about 100 acres of crop.

EE: Really?

JF: Now that's east and southeast of here. I've gone through there. It's surprising how many fields are drowned out. But you get more and more water coming in, and it only takes so much that is let out to the Seal River, and it ends up in the Red or Assiniboine. They only handled so much, so it comes in faster but the closer it gets to the outlet the longer it's held back.

EE: I'll just describe two or three things that I've noticed over the last ten years or a little more and just get your reaction to them. I used to map the area [inaudible] the home yard by the quarter. If you knew the area, you know where exactly in the quarter it was. So I did that sort of thing, and one day about ten years ago I was looking at the rural telephone book for this area and was surprised to find that on the heavy land, this was perhaps even more true—south of Number 2 Highway towards Homewood—there seemed to be a lot fewer yards on the heavy land than there were west of the ridge into the sandy land. I thought that was very curious that the land that I always thought of as poorer land for farming—you probably share the prejudice—was the place where people seemed to be living.

JF: That is true, and with fertilizer coming in, this lighter land really produces. It's very productive for corn. There are a number of places people are living and not necessarily making their living off the farm. They're working out. Now that is also a good improvement.

Years ago, they could live there and pay hardly any taxes because it was only the acreage that was taxed. But since a number of years, and that's quite a few years ago already, that has changed where they assess the buildings. I have arguments with these people. They say, "Oh no, now we got to pay taxes!" "Well," I says, "you only have a few acres, and you pay that little amount of tax. But you have the benefit of all the roads and the school system and everything. So I think it's a fair assessment that our buildings are assessed." And now I'm sure some people will say that's not so, but you got to look over the whole picture and that makes really sense because they have the benefit of having a small acreage, having a rural residence, and make living in this area. There's quite a few people that drive to the city every day for work.

EE: To Winnipeg?

JF: To Winnipeg.

EE: I see, so there's bedroom suburbs, if you will, as far out as Elm Creek, eh?

JF: Yes, and there are others that work in Portage Laprairie or even to the south type of thing, so I think that was a big improvement and--.

EE: I suppose the other half of it is the way in which farms have become large, so that one person may farm one, two, three sections or whatever. So there's one yard for all of that land where there used to be perhaps a yard on every half section or even more.

JF: Yes, that's very true because the farms are so much larger, the acreage that they work. And with the equipment that they have you can move from one place to another. My son, he farms around 1,500 acres. Well, he farms his father-in-law's, his father's, and rents a bunch of land beside. There's a spread of 14 miles between the places. But with the equipment you have you can move quite easily.

EE: There was a time when I was growing up, half a century ago, when the family had that kind of acreage were the McIntyres north of Elm Creek and Culross. But there was the father, the parents, and the four boys. So there were four, even five yards, I suppose, that went with that land. So it didn't appear the same way.

JF: Yes, that's true and even you have farmers now that live in the village and farm quite a bit of land. Another thing is west of the ridge we have a number of dairy farmers, large dairy farmers, and they buy up a lot of that land to produce feed for their animals and also a disposal of the manure. They have to have a certain amount because there's regulations, which are good, that you have to have a certain amount of acreage if you have a certain amount of animals, which is good. But this also increases them to have more productivity.

EE: Sure. Now what was I going to ask? The dairy farming, then, would involve corn, I suppose, as silage is it in many cases?

JF: Yes, the corn as silage. There's a number of them they have alfalfa in silage, and they also buy a quarter of oats and cut that in silage if they haven't got enough. They really have a sophisticated setup with three different silos with three different types of feed in there. It's all computerized. You press this button and that button and augers it into a conveyor into a feed hopper and from that feed hopper it goes into your feed tank, which you then deliver to your animals. It's quite a sight to see. In fact, some of the dairy farmers, they have robot milkers. They're visiting in town, but their robot is milking. He has a mechanism on him that beeps to him if something goes wrong.

EE: And he runs back out to the farm to see what's gone wrong I suppose.

JF: Yeah, it's quite--.

EE: Quite the life.

JF: Quite the life.

EE: Yes indeed. The other change—well there may be some other changes we can talk about—but one of the most obvious changes to anyone driving through Manitoba or across the prairies is the way in which the grain handling has changed from all of those line elevators, every town, every village. [Laughs] Culross had the two elevators until the '60s I guess. Anyway, you can tell me how that changed, and what its impact was.

JF: Well, that is a very, very big change, and it affects different areas of the agriculture. For one thing, now the farmers have to have larger trucks to deliver the grain because it's further to go. It's really sophisticated. Like here to get your grain sample it used to be you used to have to take a sample as you dump. Well, now they have a vacuum that you unroll your tarp, and you drive in this place, and they put a probe down a couple of places in your box. By the time you get into the elevator, they've got this sample there and assess the grade and the dockage and everything. So the whole process and moving of it has really speeded up.

The other thing is with the larger grain elevators, fast output as they call them, they have more tracks so they can load more cars at a time and a longer track so they can handle as much as 100 cars on their site that they can put through the elevator. This is another thing that I know when, here in Elm Creek, we still had a small elevator and the big one. The big elevator would get the hopper cars. At that time, we still had boxcars, and the small elevator would get the boxcar, which is harder to load and more inconvenient. You got to close up the doors and board up the doors and all that type of stuff. So that whole thing is changed now. I remember once being in the elevator here, and he got a call and the elevator said, "I don't mind taking my [inaudible], but when I see you sorting out the hopper cars and sending it to the big elevator and taking the boxcars and giving it to me. That's enough."

EE: Who's was the small--.? Was it Manitoba Pool, the line elevator here?

JF: Yeah, Manitoba Pool was the--. No, it was Paterson actually! Yeah, we had two small ones operating in it, but Paterson--.

EE: So there was a Paterson elevator in town here as well.

JF: Well, there were three at one time: Ogilvie, Paterson, and Pool elevator. Now we have Cargill and the Pool elevator's there, the building is there, but two farmers have bought it and use it as storage. This is another thing that has happened over the years. I know one farmer just north of here, he bought the elevator in Oakville, and this really puzzles me of the transportation of grain. I know years ago we lived halfway between Elm Creek and Oakville. Oakville would get the cars and Elm Creek wouldn't, so we'd be hauling to Oakville. Now they haven't even got an elevator. It's on a double line.

EE: There certainly could be, but the big companies have certainly made their decisions. The Cargill throughput here was one of the first in southern Manitoba, was it not?

JF: Yes. Yes, it was and it's doing a good job. But it's surprising how far people haul grain. I have a relative, he lives north of Brandon, and he hauls to Carman.

EE: To Carman?

JF: To Carman. Now I think that's a special crop, possibly peas. But this is another thing. It's really hard on the highway with all the trucks. Well, I noticed this here, a lot of the semis without the trailers, like the semis they have put the third axle on the back wheel to be able to handle that better and not as much--.

EE: Distribute the weight better.

JF: Yes, distribute the weight.

EE: Yes, these two-trailer semis are quite the thing. I remember photographing one in Saskatchewan a few years ago, and I think that same symbol on the side of the trailer is one I've been seeing. In fact, I passed I think a couple of them coming out of Number 2 Highway, coming out of Winnipeg this morning.

JF: Yes.

EE: Do you know what company--. Is that one company that has the--.

JF: No, not necessarily. There's a number of them that have what they call the B-train, and there's a Super B which takes a little more. Another thing a lot of the farmers have a--. [Train honks]

EE: Nothing like a train coming through town when we're talking about grain. That's the right sound.

JF: And really this train only goes to Rathwell, which has a large--. Oh, you got it off now?

EE: No.

JF: A large terminal there, and that's as far as it goes. You will see them take the empty cars there, and if they haven't got full cars to pick up, you'll see the locomotive go to Winnipeg and come back just empty to pick up the cars when they're full. Very interesting phenomenon.

EE: Yeah. It's one of those harsh realities of the grain trade that there isn't much business for hopper cars coming back. So I guess like the unit trains carrying coal from the Rocky Mountains to Robert's Bank south of Vancouver, it's a load down, empties back, load down. Then in this case, the grain is being hauled, well we like to say, to Thunder Bay.

JF: [Laughs] Yeah.

EE: I might say it's incidentally that this project is funded in large part by the Paterson Foundation.

JF: Yeah, I read that.

EE: Out of Paterson Steamships, of course, the shipping line rather than the line elevators. I think the foundation is the guys in Thunder Bay, and they were sort of a sister operation obviously with their cousins out here with the elevators. Was there any reaction in the community when Cargill built this throughput? Did people--. There were those who belonged to Manitoba Pool. I presume they were members. Were there participation dividends and so on and so forth?

JF: Well--.

EE: Or was there not very--.

JF: Yes, oh, I think there was and rightfully so. Another concern that I had about Cargill was with a standard elevator you drive in on the scale. You weigh your truck. Now with Cargill, you dump the grain and then it's weighed in the pit. So maybe I'm a little bit of a doubter sometimes. I said how do I know that there isn't a hole that drains it! [Laughs]

EE: Yeah, you're really dependent on the--.

JF: Integrity and the honesty of it, yes.

EE: Of the company itself.

JF: But personally, I've always had the opinion that if I don't trust the operator that there is no point in arguing with him. It's better to change.

EE: Go elsewhere.

JF: And I think even with the traditional elevators, that there was a change too before. At the beginning, they weighed the grain, and then would write down on the ticket what the scale said. Well, now that has changed already. You would put in a piece of paper, and it would punch it so you would always get it accurately because you could make a mistake of not writing it on paper what necessarily was on the scale, type of thing. But the other thing is the marketing of your crop, that's another really dicey thing. When do you market and what will the market do, which is really quite significant in farming and to hit it right type of thing.

EE: Sure. And this is where farmers from 1935 on or so onwards depended on the Wheat Board to make those decisions, I guess.

JF: Yes, yeah.

EE: Sort of consign their crop to the Wheat Board and let the Wheat Board then--. The system of advance payments, you mentioned quotas early on in terms of how much a farmer could sell and distribute to the selling over all the farmers. Advance payments came in at some point I suppose. They weren't there from the beginning, or were they part of it?

JF: Well, they came in, I forgot what year, but I think it was in the '70s where they came in that you could take a certain percentage of your crop after you had harvested. You had it in storage and then when you delivered, they would take over, I forget just what percentage, but it was way over half of it to get their payment back. Now, I think that was a good thing because you couldn't move your grain, and you needed the money. As input costs and that were increasing, the banker would like to see some money for his operating loan.

EE: Did the Diefenbaker Government do some of that back in '57/'58? Do you remember anything about that?

JF: Like advanced?

EE: Yes.

JF: Well maybe it was. Maybe I forgot the years. I better not be quoted, maybe it was earlier than I thought.

EE: It seems to be the '57 election involved some of that in '58.

JF: Oh, well that--.

EE: Sort of before my time, a little bit, I was in high school at the time, but I remember. I know in reading back--.

JF: Well that very well could be, so better not take me on that.

EE: The Liberals hadn't trusted the farmers, John said. So Conservatives would trust the farmers in terms of how much they had--.
[...*audio skips*] Concern of mine, too. Well, John, we've discussed so many of the various aspects of farming in quite specific terms. If I were to ask you what you would like people to know about the work that you did and what might interest or surprise people most about what you did, would you have--?

JF: Well, like I said before I was a small operator, mixed farmer, mixed farming, But I think it's kind of a tossup how aggressive you want to be, and you have to risk a certain amount but not risk too much. I mentioned that earlier about the time when the bankers wouldn't borrow you much, wouldn't borrow you little but much. I know a neighbour of mine who had three sons. They all wanted to farm, so they went that route. Well, it ended up now there's none of them farming. The fellow still owns his original land and rents it out now, but none of his sons are farming, and I think that was a big mistake.

EE: Pretty sad, really.

JF: And there's another thing of caution that I would say is always a toss-up of buying new machinery and having capital cost allowance or paying interest or the other question, keeping the old and repairing it. This is I think something very important that people really know where they're at in regard of debt and the other side of it is with the volume that they have enough to keep their machinery in good shape. So that is one of the cautions I would like to pass on that that is very important.

EE: Words of wisdom, really, from a lifelong farmer.

JF: Well, you know, you can get too optimistic and get in too deep. I know this happened when the interest rates went to 22 percent. Different people lost their farms. And I think the other thing is, and I know speaking to the younger farmers now, if they don't get a bumper crop every year, they think it's kind of a disaster. Well, that's not true to life. We don't always get a bumper crop. So I think you got to be cautious and also optimistic and keep that balance. That's very crucial.

EE: That's a real challenge. The bankers were eager to loan a lot through the late '70s I guess. Was it after the resource boom and the high prices that grain went to around '73/74, would that be the period?

JF: Yes, well even up to the early '80s.

EE: When the interest rates went crazy.

JF: Yeah, they were still that way, you know? All you heard was bigger is better, bigger is better. Sure, you can be too small, but you can also be too big, and your efficiency drops quite a bit too. So there is a--. And the other thing is what do you want to live for? If that's all you want to live, to acquire an awful lot and leave to your family or whoever, that's one thing. And the other thing is--. And there are many that do contribute to the community. I myself spent 19 years on the school board, which I do not regret, but it gave you a broader outlook of the whole life of a rural area.

EE: It certainly does. I stepped over to the school to photograph the sign there, the contributors to the playground equipment, is a real story to be written around all those names, company names, and of course some individuals as well. You can really give me footnotes on that particular picture I have no doubt.

JF: Well, they have had a fundraising year for that special equipment, and they just put that up this summer.

EE: Looked that way.

JF: There's much more done for the public. The homes used to do a lot of that. Now it seems to have shifted to the educational system and that is good, in part. On the other hand, I think it is maybe not the best training all the time, that maybe they should get at the home.

EE: Well, I can understand that. What are you most proud of in the work that you've done over the years?

JF: Well, [laughs] humbly proud of.

EE: Right, we are Mennonite in origin, so we have to be proud in our humility of course.

JF: My life in the community, and actually what I'm most proud of is the time spent on the school board before I became a member. That was in the '60s when they were closing all the little schools in the area with the understanding that you come to Elm Creek, and that'll be it. Well, that happened and then they wanted to close the high school here, so I was on a committee we called Actions Committee, trying to preserve our high school here, which we had very good support from the community. It still is operating, which we are thankful, although I did get a black name when I first came to the board meetings. The first couple of times I opened my mouth, they shut me down because I was that bad guy from Elm Creek.

Sometime later I was really kind of confused at the board meeting. The partner I would go home with I said, "What was this about?" "Well, I don't know." I said, "How come everybody voted for it?" "I don't know." So I started asking questions. So this one day the chairman said, "Well, John, keep on asking questions, then we all learn." So I was the scapegoat to plead my ignorance. But we all benefited, and actually it turned out very good. They say it's a thankless job. Well, I can say that when I quit after 13 years on the Midland board, and I have been six years on the consolidated school board in Wingham, the community had an appreciation afternoon and that was really, quite moving. I'm proud to have been part of the community.

Another thing I'm quite proud of, in our town we have a senior home and it's on the site where the first consolidated school of Elm Creek was. I was on the board at that time when the changeover came, and we bought the school site with the condition that within a couple of years we would have a senior home there, which turned out very well. Again, the public was very supportive. A certain amount we had to put up ourselves. It's supported by the government, and it has been operating now since 1986. I was involved with it from the beginning right up to 2006. Then I thought, well, maybe it's better to get the old man to quit before they say they don't want that old fellow around anymore. But it's still operating very well, and now they have congregate meals there five days a week. So it's really served our community well, and it's kept our seniors in the community. So those two things I'm quite happy with.

EE: Are some of the residents in this home old farmers too?

JF: Yes, there are some residents were farmers. There's a number of widows whose husbands were farmers. We have a fellow who was a businessman, Mr. Orr, Fraser. He lives there, so it has served the community very well.

EE: So Fraser Orr is still alive?

JF: Yeah, he's still living. He's in that home. His wife isn't very well but--.

EE: Well, you tell him "Hi" from Abe Epp's son next time you see him. The only prize dad ever won, I think, was a lamp he won at Orr's Hardware once upon a time, back in the '50s. [Laughs]

JF: Yeah, actually, he'd probably be sitting at a table. They have a meal at noon, and he and his wife are usually there.

EE: Well, well, well. John there are questions about changes and challenges, I don't know whether you'd want to--. I suspect we've been through most of that with the things you might say.

JF: I think the biggest challenge is, one of the biggest challenges is, the marketing. I think that is a very crucial thing. With the Wheat Board that was more or less a settled issue. Personally, the Wheat Board which I was--.

EE: Or a more settled issue. Less reason to be anxious.

JF: One of my points regarding the Wheat Board was I often thought if the agents that were selling the grain, if they were on a commission basis, rather than on a salary, if that might've worked a little better.

EE: Made them hungrier, perhaps, eh?

JF: Well, I don't know but--. And I think the other thing maybe in this area I feel not to get too big, because the bigger the farmers get, the fewer people we have, the fewer students we have. So it all reflects in that way too. So you got to be a certain size, but not too big.

EE: Having driven out as far as Deloraine on Tuesday and then back to Winnipeg on Wednesday, of course, I was thinking of the fact that from Winnipeg out to Elm Creek and Carman and the towns are five miles or a little bit more along Highway 3. But when you get further west, boy those towns are far apart out there. The services are, of course here too, Fannystelle and Culross, Starbuck, they have a limited amount of activity in them these days.

JF: Yes, and that is another challenge regarding the implement dealers. They're further away and fewer, so all those things and in the grain industry too it pays to shop.

EE: I suppose.

JF: It's not necessarily your local one that is always giving you the best deal, and you notice that with different grains people go different places. So that's something. You got to be a real good businessman to operate now, as well as just brawn.

EE: The industry has changed immensely over the 50 years, or 60 from the middle of the 20th century as transportation, whatnot. There's so many changes that I can well imagine. I notice that in your front yard, you're a John Deere man.

JF: [Laughs]

EE: Is this through and through and with whom would you deal there? Enns Brothers in Oak Bluff, the people you would deal with? Or were there dealers closer?

JF: Carman has a John Deere dealer, but like Enns Brothers too they own it in Portage, and they own it in, I think, Morris. So you know there's--.

EE: And there's Power Sports on the north side of the city, I think, or northeast. We came in from [inaudible] and I think I saw Enns Brothers Power Sports on Highway 59. I guess it's there.

JF: Yeah so--.

EE: Big operators.

JF: The competition is less, I think, between the different agents, so you--. With whatever trade you're dealing with or brand, it pays to shop around. But there is good service now and really good equipment, so it is really a pleasure to work with.

EE: Yeah. Well, I'm glad to hear that too. Well, I think John we've spent almost an hour and three quarters at it, you've done a great job about telling me about the farming, and it's been great. So, thank you very much I think we'll push the button here that's required to stop. I think that's it.

End of interview.