

Narrator: James “Jim” Oleksuk (JO)

Company Affiliations: N/A

Interview Date: 10 November 2008

Interviewer: Ernie Epp (EE)

Recorder: Owen Marks (OM)

Transcriber: Sarah Lorenowich (SL)

Summary: In this two-part interview, grain farmer Jim Oleksuk describes his life-long career in farming starting as a young boy. In the first part, he recounts his family’s early history in Manitoba farming through the war years and the Great Depression, and his eventual purchase of the family farm. Oleksuk remembers technological changes over the years from the “horse era” to the introduction of huge tractors and combines, new tilling equipment, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and the introduction of electricity on rural farms. He details the unique struggles of Prairie farms in terms of soil types, weather, and drainage, and he describes the various kinds of co-ops available to the farmer. In the second audio part, Oleksuk describes the equipment he owned when he retired and the tractors he restored as a hobby. Other topics discussed include changing crops due to global warming, returning organic matter to soil, the function of the Wheat Board and the provincial Wheat Pools, the growing size of farms, farm management, and memories of extreme wet and dry growing years.

Keywords: Grain farming; Agriculture; Grain producers; Manitoba; Manitoba farming; Fannystelle, Manitoba; The Great Depression; Canadian wheat varieties; Rural electrification; Farm management; Crop rotation; Herbicides; Technological advancements; Soil cultivation; Soil varieties; Soil zones; Red River Valley; Manitoba Pool Elevators; Country grain elevators; Farmer cooperatives; United Grain Growers; Canadian Wheat Board; Federated Co-Operatives; Farm equipment; Case tractors; Tractors; Combines; Threshers; Grain marketing; Grain pooling; Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; Alberta Wheat Pool; Viterra; Climate change; Grain drying; Farm storage

Audio part one

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, let’s start by your giving me your name, Jim, and describing how you came to be a farmer.

JO: Well, my name is Jim Oleksuk, commonly called Jim, and my family probably farmed since time began. It's not recorded. I'm the last one of the family to have been farming, and I did take over the family farm from my parents as they retired.

EE: And you say from time immemorial, you're thinking of the old country and then coming to Canada, I guess, as well, are you?

JO: Yes. And being in the Polish-Ukrainian area, farming was very prominent. Many, many people farmed in that area. And I'm sure they were farmers there for centuries.

EE: When did your family come to Manitoba, I suppose, directly?

JO: My grandparents immigrated to Canada in 1898 on both sides, and the Oleksuk side settled south of St. Norbert at postal district of Howden on a river lot. And as the family grew to it was eight children when they decided to move to Fannystelle where land was still largely free. It was the end of the world, but they crossed the Prairie from south of St. Norbert all along the Lasalle River by horse steam—horses and wagons—to Fannystelle. And my dad said that it was a long one-day trip to get to the farm northwest of Fannystelle. The landowner developed the farm in 1917, building a house and barn and plowing 100 acres. And my dad who was 15 at the time and my uncle who was 16 wintered at the farm with the horses, and they both said it was an awfully long winter. [Laughs] Their father had told them not to go into Fannystelle, but they said whenever there was a nice day, they would hitch up a horse, and they would go to Fannystelle to break the monotony.

My dad bought a mouth organ, and my uncle bought a shotgun, so on days they would go out shooting rabbits and Prairie chickens. As they said, the sky would darken with Prairie chickens at that time. And my dad taught himself to play the mouth organ. Only having gone to school for two years, he taught himself mathematics that same winter—long division, multiplying—and sufficiently enough to carry on farming. The family moved out in the spring of '18. Everything was loaded onto the train at St. Adolphe, I believe, including a carload of barley by hand, and it was railed out to Fannystelle where it was all taken to the farm seven miles northwest by horse and wagons. And they began farming there, and they prospered through the 1920s. They decided to just let the mortgage stay, paying the interest, and were buying machinery to mechanize the farm. And my parents got married in the fall of '29. My dad decided to buy a new tractor and crunched right into the Great Depression of the 1930s. [Laughs]

EE: What a time to get married! [Laughing] Fannystelle had been established as a French settlement, hadn't it? There were two of these French settlements along what is now Highway 2 out of Winnipeg. Fannystelle at St. Claude, I think, were established by French settlers who came from France directly. They weren't from Quebec. Did your family have much to do with the people of Fannystelle then? You were living, you said, seven miles northwest of the town.

JO: They patronized Fannystelle as the community, including the grain elevator. And at that time, you could get everything you wanted in Fannystelle. There was a blacksmith, machinery dealers, lumber dealer—which is still there—and grocery stores, and the railway station. And they patronized Fannystelle. It was a two-hour drive by team to get to Fannystelle, and the first machine they bought was a Model T Ford. [Laughing] Then you could get to Fannystelle in 15 minutes! That gave them mobility.

EE: Once the roads were in.

JO: Well, the Model T would go through a lot of shit, as they said. [Laughing]

EE: I daresay!

JO: But it gave them mobility to go not only to Fannystelle, but to Elm Creek, Elie, or wherever.

[0:05:06]

EE: You mention the elevator in Fannystelle. Did your family deal with any specific company through the years?

JO: One was Canadian Consolidated, but by--. I think the Fannystelle Manitoba Pool local was established in 1926, and my uncle was on the founding board of that local.

EE: Your uncle, he was the brother of your father who was at the farm. Were there the two boys in the family then?

JO: No, there was--. The last one was born at Fannystelle. There was nine in the family. There was six boys.

EE: I see.

JO: And--.

EE: And did they all farm in the area?

JO: At one time, they all took up farming.

EE: My!

JO: Land was pretty easy to take up. The established farms, well, sold for a very good price in the '20s. Like my grandfather lost his farm in the '30s and remortgaged it three times until finally the sons bought it in the late '30s and with the coming of the Second World War. Grain prices improved.

EE: So they didn't actually have to move off the farm, it's just that he lost--. The first mortgage was lost, and then he had to remortgage?

JO: Yes. They would come back with a lower price and say, "Well, we've got good news. We can remortgage at a lower interest and lower acreage dollars." But it was still absurd. But they didn't want the family to move off the farm. They wanted to stay there and get their rent for their land. No, they didn't move farmers off at that time. If you stayed and farmed the land, they were happy to keep you there.

EE: Your family tradition wouldn't remember the amount of the mortgage back in the '20s, I don't suppose?

JO: I can't recall offhand, but it was easily in the \$50 per acre. It was an established farm with improvements.

EE: Yes. Well, without going into economic particulars, buying in 1917 would mean that he was buying fairly late in that Great War inflation, and it didn't continue without a break. The early '20s was hard for farmers, and that's when the Pools appeared. But the land values will probably have been high and putting money into machinery rather than paying off the mortgage probably made sense in the long run. But the mortgage would continue.

JO: Yes. It made sense, but they didn't see the Great Depression coming.

EE: Who could?

JO: Nobody did. Had the '30s carried on as the '20s, they would have paid for the land also and mechanized. But--.

EE: But as it was, they held onto the farm, they had the machinery, and then they had to endure the Great Depression.

JO: Yes.

EE: Do you have much in the way of family memories of what it was like farming there through the '30s and into the '40s?

JO: Me? No. Just what I was told.

EE: Yes, of course.

JO: I was born in '41 and start to remember the mid-'40s. My dad bought a combine in 1942, so I don't remember the threshing gangs. They were all gone in my memory. I've heard a lot about them, but--.

EE: I guess we might mention that my father farmed a few miles away through those years, so we can probably be comparing experiences at times.

JO: Yes.

EE: I know dad bought a combine together with a neighbour of his that he did a lot of harvesting with for some time, and it was probably about the same time probably that your father had the combine.

JO: Yes. The Second World War caused a great shortage of farm equipment. As the war effort was absorbing a lot of production. So I recall them talking about--. Like one of my uncles had a combine, my dad had a combine, and by 1943, the other three uncles were unable to get a crew to man their threshing machine. So the two combines had to do the whole crop. And I believe it was '43 or '44 where it was a very wet, late fall, and they finished harvesting on the day before Christmas. Fortunately, it didn't snow on them [Laughing] But travelling on the ice with their steel-wheel tractors, and they managed to take the crop off. Prices were good, although, set during the war. But prices were good, and it was a struggle to get the crop off.

EE: Well, you mentioned beginning to have memories from the late '40s. You were in school, of course, through those years, but involved with working the farm, I'm sure, as farm boys usually were.

JO: Yes. I had older brothers, so I wasn't pressed into service at too young an age. I do remember the last of the horses going. And in fact, I remember Arnell's Transfer in Fannystelle with loads of horses on at night going to be slaughtered for dog food. And I asked Frenchie Arnell one time, I said, "I remember you being in Fannystelle at 10:00 at night with a load of horses on, getting the truck repaired." I said, "When did you get unloaded?" He said, "Well, we'd go to Winnipeg, and we'd wait, and we'd get unloaded by 3:00 in the morning. We'd come home, sleep for a couple of hours, and then go for another load of horses." The horse era was over.

[0:10:34]

EE: Wow.

JO: And I regret not being part of the horse era because I liked horses.

EE: Did your family not have any horses at all after that?

JO: We had one chore horse that stayed until hydro came in, and then he was sold off. I remember him being sold off, and I remember our last team being sold off.

EE: Oh, yes. Now hydro came through about--.

JO: Fall of 1948, which would have put me at 7 years old.

EE: Yeah. So the horse--. My father, if I may say so, went to Winnipeg and probably bought one of those horses [laughs] because we had a horse on the farm. He wanted to have a horse on the farm, but hydro had come in in '48 all right and continued to transform life on the farms. Was your family primarily in grain growing or did you have livestock as well? Was it mixed farming or not?

JO: Through the 1930s, they were more mixed, but in memory, the livestock declined, and it was primarily grain growing was the main source of income for sure.

EE: So you didn't have milk cows or--?

JO: Oh, yes. We had milk cows.

EE: And chickens?

JO: And hogs and chickens, yes. At that time--.

EE: Of course, this was when--.

JO: Fifteen dozens of eggs would just about pay your grocery, weekly grocery bill. Or a can of cream. Yeah, we had that.

EE: Did your father have the same view of pigs, mortgage raisers? Bring them up to size and off to market and make the year's mortgage payment, or was that not true in your family?

JO: No, I can recall them quoting the disastrous prices of the 30s on both cattle and hogs.

EE: Yeah. Well, I was thinking of later on in the '40s and '50s.

JO: No, I can't recall him saying that. His income was primarily grain, more so than hogs.

EE: So he--. Well, that's the grain trade is what we're about!

JO: Yes!

EE: So when did you--. Did you work the fields and do those other things that farm boys generally did?

JO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I could hardly wait to get started. We had two Case tractors on steel wheels, and I always envisioned myself becoming the engineer, but by the time I grew up, they were quite obsolete, and I started with rubber tire tractors. Was eager to get out and work the field with the older brothers and my father, and I wanted to farm very much. I was very interested. I knew every bolt in those old Case's bodies just by watching them work.

EE: Did your family do the repair of them as well?

JO: Yes. Not that those old reliables needed a great deal of repair. [Laughing]

EE: No!

JO: But yes, they did. And they learnt to be mechanics that way, as I did.

EE: Yes. Farmers are keen on remembering the tractors they had particularly over the years. You mentioned the two Cases. What were the rubber tire tractors?

JO: It was a Case also. It was a newer model of the same tractor. It was rubberized. It had electrical equipment on it, but it was actually the same model underneath.

EE: So your family was sort of oriented to the Case, J. I. Case, machinery.

JO: Yes.

EE: Was there a dealer that they were patronizing, or was there some other reason?

JO: Yes. The dealer was R. H. Stevens of Fannystelle.

EE: Oh, yeah.

JO: Was the Case dealer.

EE: The lumber yard et cetera, et cetera.

JO: But what really clenched it was that when my dad had bought a new tractor in '29, and he couldn't pay for it, the Case company was going to repossess it. And Stevens went to bat for him and said, "If you repossess it, it's going to sit here in my lot and rust away. But if you let him have that tractor, he's going to pay for it if he can." And the Case Company backed off, and eventually my dad did pay for it. And we stayed with Case tractors, and I retired with Case tractors. [Laughing]

EE: Did you really? Well, that's splendid! R. H. Stevens, of course, the business that he and then the son took over later on, was a real institution in Fannystelle.

JO: Yes, he was. Stevens was more than just a lumber merchant. He was also in the grain trade, and his elevator still stands today. The Stevens Lumber, Coal, and Grain. He was more than that. He was a private banker. People banked with him. He was paymaster for the elevator companies and marriage counsellor and paralegal. [Laughs] he did go around to a lot of the early settlers that couldn't speak English or had not gone to school, and he did do the legal work for them—wills and stuff like that—to see that their papers were drawn up properly. He was a community builder and very much enjoyed his work too.

[0:15:30]

There was at one time—and I was only told this—I believe it would have been in the 1930s, he was robbed because he was the paymaster for the elevator companies and would have had amounts of \$10,000 in his safe, which in the 1930s was a huge sum. My uncles had some cheques uncashed in his safe, and the elevator companies claimed that they should have cashed them and that, “We should not be responsible for replacing them.” But Stevens, again, went to bat for them and said it was their right not to cash the cheques if they so desired. And the company did forward new cheques to them after the robbery.

EE: Did Stevens’ dealings with people in the area mean that he sometimes ended up with farms that were repossessed? Was he a property owner to any extent or--?

JO: Yes. Yes, he owned a lot of property, and this is how he got it. He would mortgage farms or make loans to farmers and would be later forced, because of the Depression, to foreclose on them. And he once told me that towards the end of the 1930s, he was near broke. And he told the bank, “Well, I’m going to throw it all on your desk if you so insist or let me go and I might get through this.” And he did, and he became very successful. Very astute businessman, Mr. Stevens.

EE: Quite a figure. I was living, of course, a few miles away and quite aware of Mr. Stevens in general terms, not in these specifics. Ab Thompson, the general storekeeper in Culross, fulfilled a few of those functions, but he wasn’t anything like Dick Stevens’ role in the Fannystelle community. That’s very interesting. Well, when did you become involved in running a farm?

JO: I first rented land from my uncle in 1964, and it’s a common joke amongst farmers that you should lose your first crop. [Laughing] It tempers the soul! But I didn’t. I had a good crop.

EE: Good for you.

JO: Eventually took over the rest of the land from my dad, and eventually bought it from him. I was married in 1966, and we began buying land from my parents bit by bit.

EE: The land you rented would have been, what, a quarter section?

JO: 240 acres.

EE: 240 acres. Ah, those 240 acres farms. What did your parents have?

JO: 560 acres.

EE: So it was a little short of a section then. 80 acres short.

JO: Yes. But in the horse era, a lot of that farm wasn't cultivated. Part of it was horse pasture, part of it was hay field. The horses ate a third of the farm, basically.

EE: Did they really? It took a third of the land?

JO: I wouldn't say--. I don't know if it was exactly a third, but just about. You needed a lot of pasture if you had a herd of ten workhorses, and you needed a lot of hay. Straw was the main feed too after harvest. But after the horse era and after the Second World War as tractors became plentiful, a lot more land was ploughed up because all this hay field and horse pasture was turned into grain production. And that was a boost in the production of western Canadian grain. The next big boost came with chemicals, which came out in the late 40s. I remember the chemicals coming out, and this was like outer space. [Laughing] You could pass a little mist of water over the wild mustard, and *poof!* It was gone!

EE: Right. So this, first of all, is herbicide we're talking about in terms of--?

JO: Yes.

EE: And in fact, I guess it is herbicides primarily you mean in terms of the chemicals.

JO: Yes, herbicides.

EE: Because, of course, artificial fertilizers appear also, but let's focus on the herbicides for a bit. So you were spraying a crop by about 1950 would you say?

[0:20:06]

JO: I was still a kid. I was watching. Oh, late '40s. My uncle had bought a rubber-tired tractor in '47, I believe, and he did the spraying with it because the other tractors were on steel wheels. And they were putting on four ounces of 2-4D, which is very common broadleaf killer at three and a half gallons of water per acre. But you could make a pass across the field, the yellow was gone! Because wild Mustard was becoming a very serious problem in western Canada. It was a very competitive weed. It would just choke the crop out. That gave a big boost in production.

EE: I remember doing a little bit of spraying myself at some point in the '50s, so part of that same experience. Then that was the main chemical. 2-4D it was for quite a little while.

JO: Yes.

EE: As the herbicide of choice.

JO: We were going after the easy kill group one weeds, they call them today. They were the most prolific weeds, so they of course went after them first. The other group—group two weeds—were harder to kill, and chemicals to control them came later. Because when you take out the group one weeds, the group two weeds spring up in the vacuum. So my experience was with these harder-to-kill weeds more. Of course, you get the group ones too when you go after the group twos. And then the third breakthrough in herbicide was the herbicides that would control the grassy weeds—the wild oats, wild millet, and those types of weeds—because wild oats sprung up with the elimination of the other types of weeds. The wild oats proliferated.

EE: There's always something growing.

JO: Oh, yes. [Laughing] Everything wants to grow! I did many years spraying for wild oats and the broadleaf weeds.

EE: Now, crop rotations and summer fallowing were a standard part of the farming systems through the 50s and onwards.

JO: Yes. I believe summer fallowing was discovered in Saskatchewan at about the time of the Riel Rebellion, when some farmers were unable to obtain seed and had to leave the land lying fallow. The following year, they noticed a big increase in the yield, and the practice got established. Now we summer fallowed too, and you'd seen an increase in yield because of the build up of nitrogen. Nitrogen is created by lightning also. Then as the manufactured fertilizers started to come in in the '60s in a big way and yields were improved by that, the summer fallow began to decline because the farmers discovered that if you added the nitrogen and phosphate necessary, you could keep the yield up on your crop fields. And today here in the Red River Valley—I won't speak for Saskatchewan—there is no summer fallow fields in the Red River Valley today. It is we call it continuous cropping. The crop is put in every year. There is crop rotations, and the types of crops grown in the Red River Valley are changing.

EE: Do you want to sketch the rotations and the crops grown during the years of your experience up to the present?

JO: Well, the most crops grown in my experience were wheat, hard Red Spring wheat, and malting barley was a big one—and it was a good one. Unfortunately, it was killed by the fungus fusarium coming in, and it's a problem in hard wheat too. The fusarium sometimes called tombstone. Americans call it scab. But it's a fungus disease of cereal grains. Oats was another one, flax, and then canola came in. I remember when canola started to come in. It was called rapeseed then.

EE: Sometime towards the late '60s perhaps, or was it earlier than that?

JO: yeah. Mid-'60s, late '60s. And then it was a researcher at the University of Manitoba who developed what he called “canola”—the low erucic acid form of rapeseed—and of course they bred up new varieties. Canola or rapeseed is a plant that seems to work well with improving its genetics. Something like horses. If you want to breed horses up, you breed big ones. You get big horses. If you want to breed them down, you breed little ones. You get little ones. And canola seems to have that ability too. It responds well to some genetic manipulating, whereas I think wheat is a little tougher to manipulate genetically. It's been done too, and great varieties have been developed on the Prairies for the Prairie conditions, because the European varieties of French and English origin were too slow maturing for the short Prairie growing season.

[0:25:47]

Today, crops like winter wheat has come in, and when winter wheat started to come in, I said, “It'll take ten years before you know if it's any good.” It's been about ten years now, and it is good. It too is subject to fusarium. It's high yielding, and it's not a milling wheat in Canada. It's a feed class wheat, but it's high yielding and it matures quicker than spring wheat. Not much quicker though—a week or ten days—so it's taken off earlier.

EE: So the attraction is to grow it for feed use and sell to the US as well?

JO: Yes. The Wheat Board has overseas programs that they ship it overseas.

EE: I see.

JO: Other countries may use it for other purposes than just animal feed. Another use now, of course, is ethanol with the fuel crisis.

EE: Yes. Yeah, the way in which farming has changed over the years. So the rotation that I'm so familiar with on growing up through the '50s is basically a three-field rotation, a very simple, perhaps East European form. A summer fallow, wheat, oats—or perhaps flax, I suppose—some barley was in there as well, and then back to summer fallow. It was really a three-year rotation that

my father followed. It probably wasn't the best kind of farming. I know the McIntyres just down the road who had a lot more land amongst them—a father and his four sons—did a good deal of clover growing and plowing it down. My father never took that up as still another feature of natural fertilizers, I suppose, one could say rather than the chemical fertilizers that were coming in through the '50s.

JO: That's right. My father practiced that three-year rotation too of wheat and followed by barley or followed by flax and then summer fallow. That was the common way of doing it. Yeah, there was quite a bit of plow-down clover, they called it. It's very good for the land. It's expensive to plow down, but someday I suspect we'll go back to that as we deplete the organic matter in the soil. It's going to have to be rebuilt.

EE: We might talk later about the wisdom of continuous cropping, but in any case, that's the kind of farming that developed. And you went to that as well, I suppose, at some point in your experience?

JO: Yes. Yeah, when I started farming on my own, I was still with that practice, and then we got into heavier chemical fertilizer and continuous cropping. Continuous cropping helps with returning organic matter to the soil if you don't burn it. [Laughing] Burning in the Red River Valley had become an issue.

EE: Yes, I see that in the Free Press. [Laughing] The treatment of the stubble and the straw, of course, is an interesting matter both to some extent technically and for other reasons because the threshing machines produced a big pile of straw. The combines opened several possibilities. One was just dropping it in a swatch that could be easily burned or spreading it in a way that might feed the soil. What experiences or thought do you have about this matter of the straw? There was a time in the '50s when in the fall you could look in every direction and see the fires at night as farmers burned their fields off.

JO: Well, part of the problem in the Red River Valley is it's difficult to incorporate this straw into this heavy clay soils. And the following year, the straw is not broken down in the spring, and you have difficulty working the land, getting another crop in. There's been a lot of improvement in equipment to get the straw chopped finely and spray it and including the chaff.

[0:30:00]

EE: Because there were attachments put on the combines that chopped up the straw, wasn't it?

JO: Yes.

EE: Instead of just spreading it as--.

JO: yes. No, it's chopped very finely now and spread as wide as possible so that it doesn't lie in rows. And of course, nitrogen fertilizer breaks down the straw, but you have to put on more fertilizer. And when the straw is decayed, it gives back up that nitrogen. Another problem is when the farms are burning straw, the smoke drifts into the city of Winnipeg. [Laughing] The fighting is on!

EE: Right. They don't like that in the city. [Laughing]

JO: I myself had the experience of being in hospital one night when the smoke drifted heavily into Winnipeg, and between the hospital smell and the smoke creeping into the hospital, it was the most sickening odour. But I sympathize with the people. I don't like smoke myself and would avoid all burning, but in some cases, it is just necessary in this Red River Valley. But with the improvement of equipment--.

EE: Yes. What were those changes in cultivation, tilling equipment, over the years?

JO: Well, the European farmer and even the early pioneers believed in moldboard plowing, turning the straw under. Now in the days of the separator, the straw was off. It was only the stubble left, so they moldboard plowed. But with the advent of the dust bowls of the Dirty Thirties, they had to come up with a different method of working the land and not exposing it to the wind like the moldboard plow does. So they came out with some call them duck-foot cultivators. It was a V-shaped cultivator shovel that would slip under the straw but leave it on the surface to break the wind and hold the soil in. And we've gone entirely to that now. In the very light soil zones, they're going to what they call zero-tillage. They don't till at all anymore. But in the Red River Valley, they work the land with these cultivators—heavy cultivators—in the fall to break it up but leave the straw on the surface to prevent erosion. And last spring in the spring of '07, we had a terrible dust storm through here that was two days of black blowing soil that filled many ditches. And in the area I live in here, I believe it was \$1.2 million clean up to get this soil out of the drainage ditches and back into the fields.

EE: That's very serious. Now what I ask you in two different directions, but let's stick with tillage for a moment. There were discs—one-way discs—smaller machines than bigger discers that came in between the moldboard plow and these cultivators. Did your family not use the one way--?

JO: Yes. Yes, we did. I cut my teeth on a discer. [Laughing] The discer was made by Co-Op Implements, Canadian Cooperative Implements Limited in Winnipeg. It was a Saskatchewan farmer that invented it, and it was a one-way disc that cut the soil and

turned it over. And they became very popular in the early '50s. Everybody had one. And they had seeding attachments on them, so we all went to seeding the crop with these discers. Only the Co-Op was officially called the "Disker." The others couldn't use that copyrighted name, but amongst the farmers they were all discers. [Laughs]

EE: Like Kleenex and a few other brand names that became generic.

JO: Right! [Laughs] I can't even name another brand of Kleenex. It's just Kleenex.

EE: Right.

JO: But--.

EE: But these were superseded by those cultivators you were describing, weren't they?

JO: Yes. Yes.

EE: Deep tillage cultivators is what they were also called sometimes.

JO: Deep tillage cultivators. And then another thing that came in—and it too was a Saskatchewan invention—was what they called the air-seeder, or air drill. And it was a system of two tanks on it, and the large fan on it that blows the grain and fertilizer through tubes behind these shovels and seeds the crop in that way. They're called air-seeders or air drills.

EE: And they're working in conjunction with these deep tillage cultivators behind the shank on the cultivator?

JO: Yes. They were in the light soil areas, but that wouldn't work in the heavy soil area--.

EE: No, I wouldn't think so.

JO: Of the Red River Valley. So there's a great many people working on developing openers that would work in this clay soil. And there's a great variety of openers that have been developed that do work in this soil. When I first seen them, I said, "It won't work in the Red River mud." But they are working today, and they're working fine. Because of their convenience, one farmer is able to seed a lot more land.

[0:35:24]

EE: Isn't that interesting.

JO: Because you fill up your tanks, and you seed quite a few acres before you have to stop to fill again. And it's not necessary to harrow the land and pack it in behind them. They have packer wheels on them so that when you're finished seeding, you're finished the field. It's ready to grow. So one farmer, one man, can farm more acres today than ever before.

EE: So the Red River Valley, this would be after the initial mechanization then. One of the most important advances in the equipment, I take it.

JO: Yes. It is. Yes.

EE: The soil drifting that I'd experienced in the '50s—as well as you're describing it also at a later time—was not in our area confronted very much by the planting of shelter [belts], I don't think. If you go into some areas—and I was driving around Winkler–Carman to Winkler—earlier this fall—and noticing when you look-- . When you begin looking, you realize that there are still some of these rows of trees dividing fields up, and those trees may conceivably date back to the '30s, I guess, when out of the United States this was emphasized heavily as a way to break up the movement of the wind and, of course, the carrying of the soil. But I don't know that the Culross-Fannystelle area saw very much of that at all.

JO: No, we didn't. When you talk of the Winkler area, that is a very light type of soil. If it does get eroding by wind, it just turns into a desert, and they lose topsoil going into the air. Whereas the heavier soil of the Red River Valley doesn't tend to get airborne, it just gets into the ditch and fills it.

EE: Gets carried to the ditch all right. My brother and I had a bunch of gopher traps along the half-mile south of the farm one year when this wind carried dirt into that ditch. And I guess the steel is still in that ditch down there, unless it's been cleaned out since then. I just don't know. But that was one of those experiences of soil lost to the ditches that I well remember in a dry year. Of course, the farming is so much influenced by wet and dry, isn't it? The vagaries of the weather.

JO: Yes. Yes. I always envisioned-- . I had my farm all drawn out for where the hedges would go, but it causes a problem in the heavy soil too in that in the winter it stops snow drifts, and in the spring when you need drying—which is limited in the Red River because of the heavy soil—it's wet along the hedgerows so you can't work your fields. Also, hedgerows are not a good thing to have when you've got great big wide equipment, and you've got to turn around. So you'll even see them plowing up or bulldozing

up the hedgerows in the light soil zones, and they do control soil drifting with the equipment they use to keep a trash cover, as we call it, on the soil so it won't blow. Fields that are badly prone to drifting is fields that have beans on them or potatoes, as they don't have a heavy residue cover. And it can be a problem in dry years. Fortunately, it doesn't happen too many years on the Prairies, but it can be a problem.

The farmer's best efforts can be defeated. Like last spring, it was two days of a natural disaster. We had one day of very high wind followed by another day of even higher wind. Well, your best efforts are defeated against a calamity like that. And they were. Although a lot of fields did not drift, and that was due to a good practice of keeping the field covered with trash so that the wind can't erode them. And we're doing much better all over western Canada in soil erosion control. The 1930s were a real learning curve for the people that came from Europe in the west and the east to farm these conditions.

EE: Things had to be learned, didn't they? I take it from something you said just in passing that you had a vision of what the farm should become when you took over your parents' farm? You referred to hedgerows and so on. Were there other elements in the way in which you were going to develop the farm once it was under your control?

[0:40:18]

JO: Much more drainage work. My dad would always say to me, "This would be such better land if it had a roll to it and would drain." But what we discovered was it had enough of an up and down to it--.

EE: A slope to it, eh?

JO: Yes. It had enough slope, but these low spots were impounded. You had to cut through a ridge to drain the water out. So we began doing that, and of course, it had to be with the levels of government too. The provincial government had to make the major drains, the municipal government had to make drains going into these major drains, and then the farmers drained their fields. Now when I was growing up in the '50s, I remember a prominent drain by the farm called the Elm Creek Channel—which is still there—and it would drain for a month. There would be big flocks of wild geese and ducks in it. And now, basically, in four, five days it's drained. The water rushes off the land into these major drains and goes holus-bolus towards the river.

EE: So this is fast drainage off the farmland, and that is the key factor you think in terms of the quick drain?

JO: Yes. And it gives you an earlier seeding season and a longer one. And the earlier you put your crops in, the better your yields are. Your crop is established when the summer heat comes on it.

EE: There are very interesting interconnections here, aren't there? I'm thinking of my own experience—my father's experience—not many miles from your farm in the '50s, the relationship between his activities, the municipality, Cameron McIntyre half a mile down the road—our councillor for Ward 2. The back 80 acres at our 240 acres was located right next to 80 acres mostly of bush, and of course that bush held snow into the spring. And so there were low spots in this 80 acres that for years he couldn't farm properly. And then one year he had the help, I believe, of the McIntyres and some of the earth-moving equipment that they acquired. It was a dry year, so he was able to get the ditches cut to the end of the 80 acres.

And then the municipality came along and deepened the ditch along that road. There was no one living for several miles, I think, along that particular road, but the ditch was deepened, and the combination then was that the field—the 80 acres—would drain. The slue was gone, the water flowed into this ditch that had been deepened by municipality, and away it went. And the 80 acres became much easier to cultivate and became profitable for Dad in a way it hadn't been before. And I expect that you're referring to some similar things on your farm or in the neighbourhood.

JO: Very similar, yes. The whole Red River Valley would tell the same story. It's flat, and it's heavy clay soil, and it requires drainage because it just will not absorb the spring run-off. There's been in the last 100 years extensive drainage done in the Red River. And there's some controversy over that. Getting back to hedgerows, it would be better for wind protection, wildlife, but farmers find out that bringing wildlife back is not such a good idea after all. [Laughs] When you get a lot of deer habitat and they eat the wife's garden, the deer aren't too liked anymore! [Laughs] So there is problems with hedgerows that I don't ever see them coming into prominence anymore under present farming conditions. And drainage now, there's people that are saying, "We've drained too much. We've drained all the wetlands." And the Red River Valley was a giant wetland of waterfall territory, and we have drained it entirely. But I think you'll find that all over the world that the good land is basically the wetlands, and when they're drained, they make good productive farmland.

EE: Yes, indeed. They get pressed into service and put under cultivation and so on. You mentioned just in passing the wife's garden. And it's hardly grain production, and yet the survival of the family on these farms to continue grain production often depends on the production of the garden. What was the experience on your farm? Did you and your wife do a good deal of gardening?

[0:45:18]

JO: When we were growing up, the garden was very important, and a lot of it was preserved plus a big bin of potatoes. We were a family of five kids, so that was seven people, and it took a lot of food. And at that time, you didn't get asparagus from California in

January. You relied on the food that was preserved—potatoes, sauerkraut, and carrots in a bin of dirt—for your fresh vegetables. As we were growing up with my wife as an avid gardener, and we had a garden, and she preserved a lot of it too, but it's of less importance today because farm families are small, and they are so big that the garden is not the income producer it once was. Many farm women work off the farm today too and don't have the time to put a garden in.

EE: No. No, my mother certainly gardened a great deal in the potato rows and the other vegetables. And the canning, the big, what were they, half-gallon sealers that used to be used?

JO: Yes.

EE: And even meat was canned. I remember my mother cutting up chicken, which would come out of these jars then cold with the gelatin around it. Perfectly good meat. [Laughs] But that's not done anymore either, I don't suppose.

JO: I loved canned chicken. [Laughing] And it was something you could just open up and make yourself a lunch out of. But prior to 1948, we did not have rural electrification or refrigeration, so canning was important. It had to be canned. It couldn't be frozen. Today, there's a lot more freezing going on than canning.

EE: What was the impact of rural electrification in the beginning of 1948? What did you see on the farm?

JO: Well, I say it freed the slaves. [Laughing]

EE: Mainly the boys, and the girls too.

JO: Both. But in the household, you wouldn't believe the amount of electrical horsepower you got working for you. And if you didn't have it, you pumped water. You carried ashes out. You carried wood in. It was all muscle power. It took two women working in the farm kitchen to keep things going. And on the farm, another big factor was safety. I remember us as kids, "No, you can't have a lamp in the basement because of the hazard of the coil oil lamps." But when the house was electrified, well, you just flicked the switch on. And I believe the monthly hydro bills were like \$4 or \$6. [Laughing]

EE: Power at cost.

JO: And on the farm, it allowed power tools. It evolved slowly. You didn't just run to Rona and get all these wonderful power tools that they have today. It evolved slowly. You bought this and that. And in the barn, lights in the barn instead of the hazardous

lantern in the hay. And the fact that you could now plug your Chevy in, and it would start in the wintertime was a big factor. The RM then began to plow roads all winter. Because I can still remember my dad bringing in a load of flour and 100 pounds of oatmeal in the fall, and then the old '36 Ford was put in the shed and the water drained out of the block, and it stayed there until spring. So with the coming of electricity, that ended. You had a block heater on the tractor. You could use the tractor for cleaning snow or horse, whatever you wished, and the car could go all winter.

EE: My life was impacted by some of these things and that transition. I was almost 7 when I started school in the fall of 1948, and I remember my father preparing for the challenge. He held me back—rather my parents did—because my brother was something over a year younger, and he didn't want to be responsible for getting me to school for two years by myself. The following year my brother would be starting in Grade 1 and I'd be in Grade 2. So that was the plan. But what he did to prepare for what he thought would be necessary was to build a caboose, which would be horse-drawn. And I remember him bringing these oak planks home, and in the wintertime heating them in boiling water in order to put the bend on the front part of the plank so that it would be a proper runner. And he did, he built this caboose which sat on the farm north of Culross for years. I don't know that it was ever used, horses pulling it, in the winter for transportation because I think about 1948, I guess, power came in. The McIntyres or the municipalities began clearing the roads. He could get me to town by car and so on, so it was just that sort of transition point that happened in there with this relic of the earlier times no longer needed.

[0:50:33]

JO: Yes. I remember that on our farm too. The horse-drawn sleigh that I went to school with, it got parked and was no longer used. I did go to school by horse in the early years, and gradually the RM began to plow the roads, and it all became obsolete.

EE: Yes. Well, we used the cart later on at Giltedge School when you and I first met.

JO: Yes, I remember that cart! [Laughs]

EE: Fall of 1953 when we were going to Giltedge School, which had been newly opened. My father built the two-wheel cart and the horse, and I guess a half a dozen of us could get inside. We picked up little Yvette Mass on the way by her place on the way to school, and that's, of course, where you and I met.

JO: Yes. Yes, it seems long ago now, and it is. Half a century ago.

EE: It is quite a while ago. Half a century ago and more.

JO: We are now old timers.

EE: So the farming--. We've mentioned the role of the rural municipality in making the life of farmers easier, improving the roads and digging the ditches, and so on. Of course, this was part based on the tax base. The farmers paid their rates. There were other organizations that were important to farmers as well, and I expect that you've had involvement. Well, you did mention your uncle being on the Pool committee at Fannystelle in 1926, was it?

JO: Yes. Yes, in the forming of the Manitoba Pool local at Fannystelle. He was on the board, and they delivered grain to--. The farmers felt—and with some justification—that the private grain trade was not serving their interests. So they established their own grain handling system, first through United Grain Growers [UGG], which was established in 1906. It's interesting reading the first 50 years of United Grain Growers. And then the Pools were formed later in the '20s and became the biggest grain handler on the Prairies.

EE: Do you have a sense of why the Pools were created given that there was Untied Grain Growers and the Grain Growers Grain Company preceding that? So why did the Pools appear, any sense of that? Was it a--?

JO: I can't really answer that. That--.

EE: Was it a comment on the failure of UGG?

JO: The Grain Growers was not a direct cooperative. It was a sort of a corporate cooperative. By patronizing them, you were granted shares in the company, whereas the Pools were a direct cooperative. Profits were shared amongst the farmers. United Grain Growers was not prominent in the Red River Valley. They were very prominent in Alberta and somewhat in Saskatchewan. They didn't come into Manitoba prominently until they bought the Canadian Consolidated Grain Company out. Then UGG became a big player in Manitoba.

EE: I suppose it may have been that other companies came in too early and established themselves at many of these points, and so there wasn't an opportunity. You need the cooperation of the railway company too, I suppose, to have the siding space. Although, the Pools got that.

JO: Yes. Well, that's, I believe, by legislation. The railways do have to serve any customer. But it's possible that Manitoba, being the oldest of the grain growing provinces, had other elevator companies established as there was a great variety of elevator companies in western Canada that have long disappeared from the scene.

EE: Were you involved with the Pool over the years yourself as a producer?

JO: I wasn't involved with the Pool. I got involved with United Grain Growers when they moved into Fannystelle, and I served as local chairman on the board for several years. I patronized United Grain Growers mostly.

EE: Was there any particular reason for your choice of UGG then over the Pool?

JO: They were both good. Sometimes it was just a preference of the local buyer is why I--.

[0:55:03]

EE: The agent, elevator agent, eh?

JO: Yeah. Not that I would say anyone was bad. It's just that you had to deliver to one company, and if the buyer was being good to you, well, you were good to him and delivered your production to him.

EE: Now the good would not involve price particularly because the Wheat Board would be setting that, would it?

JO: Yes

EE: Or were there price differences?

JO: The Wheat Board on the Wheat Board grains would set the price. The company would issue you the cheque, but the grain actually belongs to the Wheat Board. Still does. As services, at that time there was still feed, fertilizer, and chemical still played a role.

EE: So UGG would be selling that as the Pool would as well. Or did the Pool work in cooperation with the Co-operatives? What was the relationship?

JO: Of the retail cooperatives? No. They were separate. And in the early years of Manitoba Pool Elevators, each local was separate. They sort of incorporated under a central board in later years.

EE: Was there a Co-Op store in Fannystelle?

JO: No.

EE: Because I know there was one in Elm Creek.

JO: There's one in Elm Creek, and it's still there.

EE: Which Archie Jensen ran for many years back in my day.

JO: Yes. I also served on the Co-Op board which was an interesting experience. But the retail co-ops are totally separate from the Pool elevator system, which is gone now. But the local Co-Op such as Elm Creek is owned by the shareholders of the local Co-Op. A Federated Co-operative is owned by the retail co-ops and supplies the retails.

EE: I see. So there's a group of local shareholders, then, who have come together to establish this Co-operative store?

JO: Yes.

EE: The one in Elm Creek we're talking about and the others.

JO: Yes, yes.

EE: And they then came together to establish a central, I suppose, buying agency for themselves, in Federated?

JO: Yes. Which is Federated. Yes. It's the wholesaler. I also served on the Co-Op board, which was very interesting because when I got on the board, it was very near bankruptcy in Elm Creek. [Laughs] So very near that Federated was just going to pull the pin on us, which is a farmer's expression. "Pulling the pin." [Laughing] But we got on the board, and we turned it around and--.

EE: When was this? Over what period of time?

JO: That would have been in the '70s, early '70s.

EE: The years of the great inflation of prices and so on.

JO: It was, and it was the good years that got us in trouble.

EE: Was it now?

JO: Managers were too lax on credit. Sometimes it was difficult to get a good manager because there were so many good jobs out there that it was hard to get a good manager. Now when grain prices collapsed and things got tough, it was easy to get a good manager. And we were broke. We were so broke that we even forgave our directors fees which was \$10 a meeting, and it amounted to \$1,000 a year.

EE: But you couldn't afford it?

JO: We couldn't afford it. The \$1,000 went into the Co-Op, and this went on for a couple of years. And we turned it around today. We turned it around at that time, and today it's a thriving Co-Op with full services to the local community.

EE: So this would be one of your satisfactions from farming life.

JO: It was.

EE: Having helped to save the Elm Creek Co-Op.

JO: I dealt with that Co-Op all my farming years. They supplied me with my fuel needs, and it was good for me. I earned a yearly dividend. I earned a good equity out of Co-Op, which was paid out to me when I retired. I always had good service and good bookkeeping, so what more can you ask for?

EE: Well, that's right. And the fuel would be delivered to your farm by--.

JO: Promptly by truck, by tank truck. Yes.

EE: By truck. Who was in competition on the fuel delivery? Was there--?

JO: Oh, there was many. There was more in earlier days. Towards the end, Shell and Imperial Oil were the competition, corporate competition.

EE: Centralized.

JO: Yes. Earlier there was more oil companies just like there was many other companies. There was North Star oil that I recall. There was British American Oil. But it was coalescing to fewer and fewer suppliers.

EE: Become engulfed and taken over by Petro-Canada, wasn't that? I think was how Petro Canada in the '70s developed its system.

JO: Yes, I think so.

EE: Yes. I remember Ab Thompson had the, I don't, tonne and a half truck or whatever, and he would haul those 45-gallon barrels out to the farm.

JO: Yes, yes. Well, the Co-Op did too, started with barrels. Yes. And you--.

[1:00:05]

EE: And then the 500-gallon tanks went up on the farms.

JO: Yes.

EE: On their legs and gravity feed into the vehicle and so on. And then I guess they had to have tank trucks to pump the fuel up into those tanks, I suppose.

JO: Yes, yes. And then what's common is the big what we called skid tanks. It's a tank that's on the ground on skids, and it has an electric pump on it. I had one of those, and it was a beautiful way of handling fuel. Of course, you've got to be very careful with it in the environment today with fuel spills. It's the way fuel is delivered to farms today. At 13 gallons an hour when you're threshing, you need a bit of a fuel supply! [Laughs]

EE: Yes, indeed. You certainly do. Well, a couple of concerns for the later years that you've just suggested in the last moments, of course, the further development of the machinery—larger and larger machinery developing. When you retired in--.

JO: '02 was my last crop.

EE: '02. Six years ago, from our taping this.

JO: Yes.

EE: And what kind of stock of equipment did you have at the retirement point?

JO: I wasn't the biggest farmer out there.

EE: You were farming how many acres by then?

JO: 800 acres.

EE: 800 acres.

JO: A gross of 800.

EE: A good Red River Valley farm.

JO: Very, yes. As I check the auction sales in the farm papers, so many farmers with almost identical equipment to mine are being auctioned off, and Bill Klassen is the prominent auctioneer in this area.

EE: As Ken Johnson used to do it out of Carman.

JO: Yes, yes. Today it's Bill. And he's a good auctioneer. I had him for two auction sales, and he did a very good job of it. But that size of farmer is going out. And today, I don't know, a land base of 2,400 acres for one farmer is almost getting small.

EE: So that's four townships, or four sections rather. 640, a bit over four sections.

JO: Yes. Yes.

EE: Or a little under. Because that would be 1, 280--. 2,560, I guess, would be four sections, would it? In any case, into that range.

JO: Yeah.

EE: How much equipment did you actually have when you retired?

JO: I ended with two Case tractors—one with 110 horsepower and one was 130–two-wheel drive with dual wheels on them. And I also did ten years with a Russian combine.

EE: Russian?

JO: They were imported from Russia. They were called Don 1500s. I was looking for a bigger combine, and they were cheap. And I thought, “Well, I’m really sticking my neck out buying this because I don’t know nothing about it.” And it was still a lot of money, just under \$70,000.

EE: Who was selling them?

JO: There was a dealer north of Winnipeg that had a--.

EE: Who was importing them?

JO: who didn’t stay there very long, and I bought it. And it was a thresher, and it could thresh, and it was fuel efficient. I still say the Russians know something about fuel efficiency that our guys don’t. I would burn six to seven gallons an hour where my neighbours were saying, “Well 10, well 11.” And I would keep up with them.

EE: Yeah. Six to seven gallons?

JO: Yeah, per hour. Yes.

EE: Yeah. And the machine worked well?

JO: It worked well. I did blow a motor out of it though. That was the big problem with it. A wrist pin went on one of the pistons, and I had to put in a rebuilt motor. And then I just continued threshing with it until I finished farming. It had a lot of good points. The basic threshing machine was good, but it needed some North American finesse on it. The Russians are rough. [EE laughs] I even talk to them, and they say, “Well, why do you want that?” “Well, just make it a little more streamlined.” [Laughing] They don’t seem to think that’s necessary.

EE: Something to square lines, eh?

JO: Yes. Yes. A good aesthetic improvement of the machine would have made it look more appealing.

EE: Sure.

JO: But the basic threshing machine was good. It threshed good, and I threshed with it for ten years.

EE: And this was a self-propelled combine like the others?

JO: Yes. Oh, yes.

EE: Because, I guess, every one was self-propelled by the ‘60s.

JO: Yes. Air-conditioned cab on it, and yes.

EE: Both of your tractors had air-conditioned cabs on them as well?

JO: Yes. Oh, yes.

EE: When did that come in?

JO: That would have come in around, well, it was getting very common by 1970, I would think. Now, there was cabs earlier, but they were poor. They were metal cabs with no air-conditioning systems in them, and they were noisy and dusty. But once the sealed air-conditioned cab came in, it became a joy to be out there in the field.

[1:05:14]

EE: It kept the dust down.

JO: The heater on cold--.

EE: The heater keeps you warm.

JO: Yes.

EE: Or air-conditioning for cooling.

JO: You're so immobilized when you're sitting on a tractor that you just freeze on a cold day because you can't move much more than your fingers. But when you had a heater, I think that's why a lot of farmers farmed even though they were older because of the air-conditioned cab and the heated cab.

EE: They could survive the actual work, eh?

JO: Yes. Because as you get older, you aren't as tough.

EE: No. Of course, farmers did in decades past, they'd be retiring by 50 or whatever. As soon as the boys were old enough to take over, the old man would slide aside, I suppose.

JO: Yes, yes. But in my generation, there were a lot of farmers that had small families and sent their kids to university or to the colleges to learn a trade. The boys weren't interested in farming, so it became less that the sons took over the farm.

EE: Yes, and that of course, keeps a man farming longer too because he farms it out and then sells the farm. That's his pension, I suppose, at the end.

JO: Yes. I know my grandfather—well, I don't think he could've understood what the word "retirement" was. As he got older, he just fell to the lighter chores, the chickens, the garden. But as far as--.

EE: Yes. And then the son was taking over.

JO: Yes. The sons did the heavy work, and he did the lighter work as he got old.

EE: Yes.

JO: But today, many farmers have no son that's going to take over the farm, so they do sell out, and the neighbour buys it or rents the land as I rent mine. Fortunately, I have a couple of young fellows who are farming it and doing a very good job with it.

EE: The equipment would include--. I'm thinking of the cultivator we've talked about. You'd have a mid-sized one of that, I suppose.

JO: Yes.

EE: And the--.

End of audio part one.

Audio part two

Time, Speaker, Narrative

EE: Ok. So, Jim, you've pulled out an artifact here, a souvenir of your farming experience. The auction bill for the sale on the 25th of April '03. And there's the machinery illustrated. Very good. There's the smaller Case tractor up there, I guess, is it?

JO: Yes.

EE: And then you had this earth moving equipment here?

JO: Yes. That's actually a little caterpillar scraper that I used for making drains on the farm.

EE: So you had one of your own?

JO: Yes.

EE: And this gave you--. Did you use it not every year I don't suppose?

JO: In the beginning, yes, every fall I would be making drains. But towards the end, I'd sort of worked myself out of a job with it.

EE: Yeah, I can imagine. But you kept it until you retired?

JO: Yeah. It went--.

EE: Always available.

JO: It went to Gretna, Manitoba.

EE: Did it? And then here's the--.

JO: Those are discers.

EE: The big discers.

JO: That I seeded with. I never did get into an air seeder. It ended for me before.

EE: Right. So you kept on with a discer. There, of course, is the big Case tractor down here. I think I've got them--.

JO: Yes.

EE: Yeah, that is the bigger one.

JO: Yes.

EE: And this is your spraying tank?

JO: Yes, yes. That was made by the Versatile Company here in Winnipeg. 800-gallon tank. At 10 gallons per acre, I could spray 80 acres in approximately an hour and a half. It was a nice machine. And spraying, it's not so much time as timing. You've got to get

out there at the right time, and if it's too windy or too cold or too hot or late or too early, it's not good to spray. [Laughing] So that machine would go out and do the job quickly.

EE: And you'd be pulling it with the little Case tractor?

JO: Yeah.

EE: You never used one of these sprayers in one unit on the big wheels and so on?

JO: No, they came in--. They were coming in, but they were kind of coming in after me.

EE: I see. And then we have a--.

JO: That's a grain auger there. That's a Manitoba product.

EE: Right. Sure. The grain--. There used to be elevators once upon a time and then the augers came along--.

JO: Yes. Then they went to augers, and that one there--.

EE: To move the grain more efficiently.

JO: It has a swing auger on it. You just swing it out and back the truck up to that. It transfers into the main auger.

EE: Oh, yes. I see. And--.

JO: That's a grain vacuum to empty bin bottoms.

EE: Oh, really?

JO: It's basically a large vacuum cleaner like your household vacuum, and on that particular model, the auger carried it up into the truck. So the beauty of that was no dust when you were in the bin shovelling. There was no dust with that.

EE: Now these are the steel, circular bins we're talking about?

JO: Yes.

EE: Which became so common. The old granary was gone and--.

JO: Yes. Every--.

EE: Grain was stored in--.

JO: Yes, every farm has big steel bins on it now. Yeah.

EE: And because of the conical bottom to it, it would largely drain without any labour.

JO: Those we called hopper-bottoms, yes. But the flat bottoms use these.

EE: Oh, yes. Yes, of course. These are the ones that sit on the ground.

JO: Yes.

EE: I'm thinking of the ones up on steel, on the legs.

JO: Hopper bottoms, yeah. Oh, those are beautiful bins. You just pull the slide and out comes the grain.

EE: I suppose they're fairly expensive, are they, compared to the other ones?

JO: Compared to the flat bottoms, yes. And today, they're building just like 10,000- 20,000-bushel bins as farms get bigger.

EE: And then we have obviously the farm truck.

JO: Yeah.

EE: The grain box on it.

JO: Yeah. That's just a GMC truck.

EE: Right. There's the cultivator.

JO: Yes, that we talked about earlier.

EE: Yes. And is that a harrow?

JO: Yeah, that's a harrow bar.

EE: So you would still be harrowing fields?

JO: Yeah. Behind the discers you had to harrow, yes.

EE: I see.

JO: And I would harrow again in the fall, spread the straw. And there's the Russian combine.

EE: That's the Russian combine?

JO: Yes.

EE: Could have been Massey Ferguson, but that's good old Russian Red, eh? [Laughing]

JO: Yeah.

EE: And--.

JO: Made in Rostov.

EE: In Rostov on the--.

JO: On the Black Sea, yeah.

EE: Yeah. And what is that?

JO: That's a swather. Self-propelled swather.

EE: Oh, the swather. Yes, of course.

JO: From the back, eh? It was in the shed.

EE: Right, yes.

JO: And that was made by CCIL in Winnipeg. And it has a Russian air-cooled motor in it.

EE: Does it really?

JO: Yeah.

EE: Well, well.

JO: And it was a good motor. I liked it. Four-cylinder air-cooled.

EE: Well, this is a splendid souvenir.

JO: Yes, it is.

EE: And you don't have any other copies of this auction bill, I don't suppose?

JO: I don't know. The wife is the paper person here. Whether we have any left or not--.

EE: It would be great to get maybe a photo scan of this in colour for our collection, but thanks so much for pulling that out, and giving me a--.

JO: I'll ask her.

EE: We'll talk about it later on.

JO: Ok. I have one more here. I don't know if you want to talk about it now. This concerns my hobby. I restored farm tractors as a hobby.

[0:05:05]

EE: Did you now? [Laughing] I've got a cousin-in-law, if you will, in the [Sanford area who's beginning to build his collection of John Deere tractors, and I see you've got four of them lying out there.

JO: Yes! [Laughing]

EE: So were these all your own equipment?

JO: No, no. I bought them here and there and everywhere.

EE: Yeah. But I mean they became yours?

JO: Yes.

EE: Right and--.

JO: They were mine at the time of the sale. Yes, I had restored them all.

EE: And you sold them all off too?

JO: What I had done is in total, I had done 14. And what do you do with them after you're done? That's the sad part. [Laughing] So as I moved here, I didn't have a place to put them here. And I'm thinking, "What am I going to do?" So I started adding up and putting it together and just called Bill Klassen, and I have to let my babies go. [Laughs]

EE: Yeah.

JO: So I did.

EE: Well, let's focus for a few moments on the oldsters down here. You've got two of them on steel.

JO: Yeah. Well, the Case we talked about earlier. There it is.

EE: Is that--.

JO: My dad had two of them.

EE: Is that's you dad's tractor?

JO: Yes.

EE: It sat on the farm? Of course, there's no market for it when you went to rubber.

JO: Oh, no. That wasn't his tractor, but he had two like it.

EE: I see.

JO: This one I picked up, and I'll tell you whose it was. It was old Burt Bass's tractor, your neighbour.

EE: Ok. Well, well. And this other one?

JO: This one I got from an uncle that lived at [Lac de Bonny].

EE: And what--.

JO: That was the bigger model Case. That was an L, this was a C. Yeah.

EE: Oh, it's also a Case. I see. And then this is a--. Would this be a Massey down here?

JO: No. That's the back end of a John Deere Model D.

EE: Oh. Someone's slapped--.

JO: It's unrestored there.

EE: Oh, that's rust, is it? [Laughing]

JO: Yeah, that's rust. It's unrestored. That's an example of--.

EE: Because my father started with an old D, I think it was.

JO: Model D.

EE: Would it have been D on steel? [Laughing] And put in on rubber and whatnot and made other changes so that when he sold it in the early 50s to buy his first Fordson Major, which I think--. Did he buy that in Fannystelle? Or he may have bought it in Winnipeg. The fellow who was taking it was thinking about it for a train. I guess he took it. Didn't believe it was a John Deere D because of the various things Dad had changed on it over the year. [Laughs] It was no longer stock by any means.

JO: The D was the longest production run of any American tractor.

EE: Oh, was it? It was a splendid piece of equipment.

JO: From '23 to '53.

EE: 30 years, eh?

JO: And then the International Farmall Cub was very similar.

EE: I see. And that's--.

JO: This is a little Allis-Chalmer.

EE: Oh, yes.

JO: You see, I would just--. If I could buy them, I would buy them and restore them. Like they were all rust buckets when I got them, you know?

EE: Did this require welding things up and so on?

JO: Not very much welding. A lot of cleaning.

EE: Because obviously you were referring to becoming a mechanic earlier, and obviously this requires a good deal of machine shop work. You had quite a machine shop on the farm, I suppose.

JO: Some. Yes, I did. I did. Some were absolute wrecks, and some like this one here, I virtually just painted it. But the fellow I got it from, his son had it into the Vocational School in Steinbeck and rebuilt the engine on it. So there was no need to do it again.

EE: No. In other cases, you were opening the engines up and repairing them?

JO: Yes. Sometimes hammering the pistons out with a sledgehammer and an old piece of oak. [Laughs]

EE: This is winter play, I take it?

JO: yes, it was winter play. Yes. [Laughing] Something to do on the farm in the winter. You get good at it. I did this one first, and when I had it all apart on the shop floor, I thought, "I'll never get this thing back together again. But by spring, I did have it together, and it actually ran.

EE: It would be an enormous satisfaction to do the first one and--.

JO: It was.

EE: To realize that you could in fact do it.

JO: Yes. Yes.

EE: Yeah.

JO: So I did auction them off, and they went. The furthest one—this one—went to Ontario.

EE: Did it?

JO: And the others stayed. These two stayed right--. Our neighbour bought them. And the others stayed pretty local. One went to North Dakota. That was the furthest.

EE: When they stayed local, this isn't that farmers were going to use them for their work.

JO: Oh, no.

EE: They were buying these as toys in a sense.

JO: Mostly it was the farmer's said, "I had one of these when I was growing up, and I want one now." As I sort of did.

EE: Sure. Yeah, yes. Well, if I were anywhere close to a farm, I suppose an old Model D and maybe one of those first Fordson Majors would be the sort of thing that I can certainly understand buying, restoring, and having as a lovey reminder.

JO: You identify with them, yeah.

EE: Yes, indeed.

JO: That old Case, I knew how to service it and everything just from watching them do it.

EE: I see. [Laughing] Well, that's marvellous. Well, Jim, I think we might move--. We've done a good job of exploring various aspects of your farm life. I might ask what you'd like people to know about the work you did over the years as a farmer? What should people—city people, people who have perhaps never been on a farm—know about the work that you were doing?

[0:10:33]

JO: It's unfortunate that we're not communicating with the city people as most of the people in Canada today live in cities. It seems like one generation just loses it completely. We're not getting through to the young people what a farm is and where their food comes from. They think it comes from the stores.

EE: Well, that's where they get it from, of course. But how did it get there?

JO: And all they hear about farms is trouble. Farms are losing money. Farmers are burning straw and smoking them out. It's unfortunate that we can't communicate better.

EE: Yeah.

JO: It was a great life. I wanted to farm, and I did, and I have no regrets. There was adversity, but when you like what you're doing, you'll put up with the adversity.

EE: I've heard farmers talk about being their own bosses.

JO: Yes. You are your own boss, but you have to boss yourself. [Laughs]

EE: You've got to be a good manager for sure.

JO: Yeah, management is the big key, definitely. You don't go golfing when it's time to thresh.

EE: No, indeed.

JO: You have to boss yourself. You have to say, "I have to stay out here until 10:00 or 11:00 tonight." You don't go home early.

EE: No. And you restore the tractor after the other machinery is in shape for the spring, I suppose.

JO: yeah. Well, that was my winter project, restoring tractors. And I liked doing it. If you don't like doing it—because it's 99 percent work and dirt, one percent show—but if you like doing it, the winter flew by. It was the way I had of eliminating winter. [Laughing] Open the door and doggone it, it's spring already! I'm not quite finished!

EE: Manitoba winters are worth getting over all right, no doubt about it.

JO: Well, I think they're getting milder. I might be wrong. Is it global warming? But three crops that they're now growing here are winter wheat, which wouldn't grow here before. Partly that was the lack of drainage. It would flood out and freeze out in the spring. Soybeans, which were unheard of, and corn. Quite a bit of corn. Now those are American Midwest crops, soybeans and corn. They're now growing them here successfully.

EE: Yeah, and this is corn that they harvest. This isn't being cut for silage.

JO: Yeah. Harvested corn, yeah. It's--.

EE: Because one can always silage corn while it's still green, I guess, for that matter.

JO: Yes. No, no. There's that grown too by the dairymen, but this is--. I know they're late this year because we had a cold, wet spring and corn is a heat-loving crop.

EE: Yes. Well, I saw a field between Carman and Winkler that was still standing there in late September, and I said to my son, "What's going on here?" But clearly part of that problem of the late season.

JO: Yes. There's a quarter section just down here. As they're trying to grow it on this heavy Red River clay now, whereas Elm Creek and Carman is sandy soil so that they get more heat units there, and corn loves heat.

EE: Oh, yes.

JO: But the soybeans are being grown successfully here. They're satisfied with their yields, and of course, the researchers are developing improved varieties to bring the yields up. Edible beans will not grow in the Red River Valley because of the clay soil. The edible bean cannot take excessive moisture. The Winkler area grows a lot of edible beans.

EE: I see.

JO: Because it's light, loamy soil.

EE: Clearly for farmers as a group or over a region, soil quality and soil differences are very significant determinants of what one can do on a farm, aren't they?

JO: Oh, they sure are. They sure are. The soils are extremely variable and very different as to what crops they'll grow.

EE: You said something earlier about soil quality, whether it might be necessary to go back to rotation, did you actually suggest, as the soil becomes depleted?

JO: Well, as we lose organic matter--. It's the university professors and that that talk about organic matter, and I once asked one, I said, "How much organic matter have we lost since we broke up this soil?" And he said, "About half." So we've got half to go. Now, if we can't get organic matter back into the soil, it becomes hard and lifeless, and water won't transpire through it. So by plowing down green crops like sweet clover, you're putting organic matter and lightening the soil up again.

[0:15:28]

EE: Yes.

JO: When you use chemical fertilizers, you aren't. But returning the straw is another method of--. Rather than burning it off is another method of returning organic matter. Like it took 10,000 years to build up the organic matter in our soil.

EE: And we got rid of half of it in a century or so or less.

JO: And--. Yes. You see we're still sort of new here.

EE: That's sort of haunting. [Laughs]

JO: We're still new as farming goes. It happened in the US southeast with their continuous cotton crops and that. The soil--.

EE: Terrible erosion resulted and all the rest of it.

JO: Yes.

EE: Yes. They sometimes talk about soil mining rather than farming in some circumstances.

JO: We talk about it too. The farmer is forced to mine the soil because of economics. The almighty dollar speaks the loudest. And the farmer would prefer a better practice, but because of economics, he's got to take the most economical route to produce a crop.

EE: And of course, crop wheat prices, for example, have been very low for so much of your farming experience too, I expect.

JO: Yes.

EE: The high prices of the early 70s were--.

JO: Short lived.

EE: Very brief. An experience of paradise which turned out not to be, as you were saying with the Elm Creek Co-Op.

JO: Yes.

EE: It could have its problems.

JO: Yes.

EE: Difficulties.

JO: There's the problem looming right now when the prices in '07 shot up very high. The machinery companies are back-ordered on new combines and tractors and prices are down already. But those tractors and combines are coming.

EE: How does a farmer commit himself to a purchase of a combine? What does he do? Sign a contract, a bill of sale?

JO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

EE: Put money down.

JO: You're talking \$300-350,000. [Laughs]

EE: Oh, I know. I'm talking about a bank involvement, I expect.

JO: You've got to sign a contract with the company that you're buying that machine and probably put money down, and then they'll build it. They don't have a stockpile anymore.

EE: Is that what's happening with combines? They're being built to order?

JO: Pretty much, yes.

EE: For the farmers.

JO: Like, the major companies are sold out of equipment, tractors, and combines. Because it's just too much inventory sitting around if it's unsold. It comes to millions of dollars, so they're--.

EE: Yes. What kinds of government programs have been important to you over the years in surviving as a farmer? If that's not pressing the point too far.

JO: I received subsidies when prices were low, and I didn't like government subsidies. I would rather have gotten a good price for my grain and not bothered with the bureaucracies of getting your subsidies. But you had to at times. Now one important program is crop insurance. I farmed with for 40 years, and they sent me a statement of my account, and I think I owed them \$2,000 or something. [Laughs] They had paid me, and I had paid premiums, and in the end, I owed them \$2,000. I came out \$2,000 ahead.

EE: So do they ask you to pay that in when--?

JO: Oh, no, no. No, they just sent me a statement. But what it was was security. I never got a lot of money from crop insurance, but the times where the crop would fail or something, it did pay out, and that was security.

EE: So this is a reminder to the farmer to be grateful at the end of his career then when they tell him how he fared.

JO: It's a good government program. Government programs are out there, sometimes they miss the mark.

EE: Because that one's provincial, isn't it, the crop insurance?

JO: Yes, but it's federally funded too. Federal picks up a share of it.

EE: I see.

JO: And it's provincial.

EE: And then the operations of the Wheat Board, of course, over the years.

JO: I'm a Wheat Board supporter. You probably hear a lot about the Wheat Board, and even our present government is not pro-Wheat Board, but I am. It served me well over the years. The Wheat Board will not get you high prices when prices are low, but it will get you the best price it can. It's a pooled price so that you can deliver your grain at any time and get paid if there's a profit to be had and be returned to you when the Wheat Board--.

[0:20:28]

EE: The Wheat Board with its establishment for good—there was an earlier one in the Great War—in 1935 or so, I suppose served for the whole industry what Pools in the various provinces had been aspiring to do from the 1920s onwards, and maybe the UGG before that, in which they tried to persuade all the farmers to pool their product together so that a central agency would then sell it. The Wheat Board took over that function and was given the force of law to boot.

JO: Yes.

EE: And so, the grain companies that were operating were really providing services within that in terms of receiving the grain, and the railways shipped it, and then in Thunder Bay or other ports there were the grain companies again—very largely the Pools and others—with the terminal elevators. Have you seen changes in that system these last years or not? When Cargill came in, for example, and they built that big throughput elevator at Elm Creek. This is one of the first on the Prairies, I think, as a matter of fact, isn't it?

JO: Yes. Yes, it may have been. I don't think it was a big a change as Cargill hoped for. The Pools and United Grain Growers continued to handle a lot of grain. In fact, the Pool elevator in Elm Creek handled a lot more grain because some people weren't satisfied with what Cargill was going to give them. They just went over to the Pool and dumped their grain there. So--.

EE: So Cargill actually built up Pool business in Elm Creek?

JO: [Laughs] Yes, it did! But I guess the system had to change, and the companies all went to these big concrete elevators. I say they went too far too fast.

EE: Why would you say that?

JO: Well, the Pools got themselves deep in debt by doing it, and I don't think that it was necessary to sell off the Pools as was done. I think that debt could have been managed and paid off.

EE: The Viterra development ultimately you mean?

JO: Yes, yes. And they swallowed up United Grain Growers and the farmers lost their cooperative grain system. They're now--.

EE: Did the going to Bay Street, selling stock, was that a matter of trying to acquire capital to offset the debts that had been run up? Is that what actually happened? Saskatchewan Wheat Pool in particular did that, and Manitoba Pool may not have. Do you have a sense of that or not?

JO: Now run that by me again.

EE: The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool sold stock in Toronto on the stock exchange, became a publicly traded company rather than being a farmer's mutual or whatever you want to call it. Do you have any sense of why they did that? Or is that just something that would happen elsewhere.

JO: Why they did it? Ah.

EE: If you don't have an answer, don't worry about that. I'm just wondering.

JO: I don't think I can answer that.

EE: No. Because you were mentioning the debts run up, which drove them--.

JO: Yes. Well, they were borrowing money. Where they were getting it from, I'm not sure. But I think, like, Manitoba Pool, the debt was manageable and could have been paid off and remained a cooperative system. I myself hope that the Prairies Pools and United Grain Growers would have amalgamated into one super co-op and be in the hands of the farmers, but it didn't.

EE: Yes, instead of becoming what is now a publicly traded company, I guess, but it's certainly not in the farmers' control any longer.

JO: Yes. You can buy shares in Viterra or Richardson or whoever you want, but it's not a farmer controlled cooperative anymore.

EE: Do the farmers feel the issue keenly? You've indicated your own support for the Wheat Board with its long-standing policy, place in law.

JO: Oh, if you want to debate, just go to the coffee shop. [Laughing]

EE: The farmers will--.

JO: The Wheat Board's not mentioned in the coffee shop because it'll flare up pretty quick. There's pro-Wheat Board and anti-Wheat Board, and the debate will be on hotly.

EE: You want to characterize both sides briefly? Why you're pro-Wheat Board? You may have already have said that in a sense, but why are other opposed to the Wheat Board?

JO: Why I'm pro-Wheat Board is because the Wheat Board gets you the fairest price possible. The private grain trade works for the greatest profit possible. So how do they get the profit? If they can buy the grain at the lowest price possible, there's a profit margin there. So who are they working for? Whereas the Wheat Board--. And some farmers will not or do not understand that the Wheat Board is not competing with the grain companies, it is merely a selling agency. They are selling the grain, deducting the costs of marketing this grain, and returning the money to the farmer. And they sell for the world price, which is set on the Chicago Board of Trade. That's where they draw their price from.

[0:25:50]

EE: Sure.

JO: So they can't get you a high price when prices are low. They get you a fair price, a fair pooled price. And it's a pooled price. If you sell high and the wheat goes way up, you'll get a return of that. It's a pooled price. So I support the Wheat Board. Many

farmers don't. And there have been a fair amount of anti-Wheat Board propaganda going around by non-farm interests that, "The Wheat Board is part of your problem, and if we would get rid of this Wheat Board, you'll be in a more profitable position."

EE: When private grain companies make that case, their self-interest is obvious, and the farmer should recognize it.

JO: Yes.

EE: They're planning to make money. Someone's going to lose some.

JO: Yes. They should. If the Wheat Board is so bad, well, just leave it there in the corner and nobody will deal with it. But it's not happening.

EE: No. Farmers are still eager to deal with it. Well, Jim, I'm glancing over questions. Here we still have some time left, but would a question such as "What might interest or surprise people most about the work you did?" Would that bring any thoughts to mind? Or is that a question not worth--. Or what are you most proud of in the work you did over the years? Maybe that you survived as a farmer, first of all.

JO: There's a great deal of pride in the farm community. [Laughing] Farmers are always portrayed as being not too smart and kind of dirty overall, but they're not that at all. There's a lot of pride in farmers and in what they own. They own their farms. They're very proud of that, although that is slipping away from us now too. It was a great place to live, great place to raise kids, and I'd certainly do it again.

EE: Did you have a sense of continuing a family tradition in being a farmer? Is this something that your ancestors had done from time immemorial one might say in Europe and--.

JO: I guess it wasn't too deeply ingrained in me. I always thought that I had a son and, yes, he'll take over the farm. But I always thought that if he didn't want to farm, that that would be his option. I would not try to force him to carry on the family tradition.

EE: No. But it was a tradition you were conscious of yourself, that you were doing something your father, grandfather, and ancestors had done?

JO: In the past, we were much more farm oriented. Farming is very specialized today. In the past, you farmed every day, year-round, and today it's very seasonal. There's the spring seeding season, shortly after that there's the spraying season where you go, go, go, and then there's the harvest season.

EE: And with haying gone, what came in between into July was the haying season once upon a time, but that's largely gone. So it ends up being just those--.

JO: Yes. The spraying season.

EE: Well, you're right. Spraying wasn't big in those days. So it can be combined with other activities, of course. Did you know many farmers who had paid work and farmed on the side, or was that not common in your experience, people you knew?

JO: Yeah, there is. There is particularly around Winnipeg. There's farmers that have retained maybe just their small farm from their father and work in Winnipeg.

EE: Well, a small farm here could be 240 acres, I suppose, or something like that could it?

JO: Yes. There's many of those around Winnipeg, especially on the east side. They work in the rail shops, they work for Versatile Manufacturing, and have retained their small farms. And as you go west, I think you find less of that. In Saskatchewan they're big, big.

[0:30:00]

EE: Yes. Farms grow thousands of acres.

JO: And even in this--. Yes. West side of the Red River Valley, most farms are big. Some farmers work out too or to start with. I once counted in the northwest area of Fannystelle 30 farms that were there. Today there's only three that live in that area. Others come in to farm, but there is only three farmsteads in that area where there was once 30.

EE: That's reduction! And increase in the size of farms.

JO: So you can see--. Yes, yes. And you can trace that back to every generation of tractor. Every generation that came out had more horsepower so it could farm more land. First, when I started—took over for my father—the 240 farm was disappearing fast. At that

time, the average Prairie farm was 240 acres, and I was farming 800. When I finished farming, the average Prairie farm was 800 acres, and you would really need 24 to be viable.

EE: Those are incredible changes.

JO: Yes. Yes. And big tractors are responsible. And here in this Red River Valley with the big square miles, the big tractor works well.

EE: You just work the whole length either way.

JO: There's many full-section fields today. Full-section, half-section.

EE: As against which, well, my own memory of a farm, a farmyard in the corner with a pasture attached and then the field around that that was the first 80 acres. Then there were two 80-acre fields after that, and those would have to be divided up appropriately to get in the three-crop rotation. Two crops and a summer fallow.

JO: Yes.

EE: My, to think of a field that is a whole square mile in size, with the next one probably being another square mile farm.

JO: Yes. Yes, there are many square mile fields today.

EE: Yes. Incredible changes. You suggest the tractor as making it possible, more powerful tractors. I suppose it was the price of the product, wheat prices particularly, that were another factor in that. Did farmers feel they needed to grow more in order to realize the income? Or do you have any thoughts about the way in which sort of the cost of production related to the price of the product and the economics of the farm?

JO: Yes. Your return per acre is lower, so you counter that with more acres to pay for that big tractor to get over these acres.

EE: But that's to pay for the tractor. Now, did you need the--.

JO: Well, all your expenses, we'll say.

EE: Yeah. Or all the expenses, yes.

JO: Because your return per acre is lower, so you need more acres. You got more acres, you get a bigger return.

EE: So the tractor, despite it's great cost—leaving the combine aside now—is more efficient, is cheaper per acre at work it does actually?

JO: Oh, definitely. Yes. Tractors of today are much more efficient. They do much more work than their predecessors and faster. So you swallow your neighbour to--.

EE: Yes. Hopefully at the right age to retire and the away--.

JO: See, when you buy this big equipment, you have to have an economy of scale. You have to have the acres to make it productive because if its sitting in the yard, its not producing for you.

EE: No, no. And of course, that's one of the haunting things of that combine. It sits there most of the year to serve for a week or ten days.

JO: Yes, yes.

EE: And yet it isn't easy to pool the work. Farmers couldn't share the combine because the harvest season is short, I suppose, and you've got to have your own equipment.

JO: That's right. That's right. Particularly in Canada, the harvest season is pretty short. You'll see a lot more custom harvesting in the United States—like Kansas or Nebraska—where it's hot and dry for three months. But here we got basically just enough weather to get the crop off in good condition. And if you don't get it off in good condition, you take a big discount in your grades.

EE: Yeah. Did you know anyone who did this custom combining? Would take a machine perhaps as far south as Texas and then harvest his way north for months on end until he got up to Canada as the wheat ripened. You knew someone who did that?

JO: Yes. There was a few that did it from here. That's an interesting story, you know. The advent of the custom combiner and the Massey Harris Company at that time. You see, in the Second World War with the manpower being swept away, they needed a more efficient way of getting the crop off. And Massey Harris had been experimenting with a self-propelled combine. So the

Canadian and American governments gave them the go-ahead to develop this combine, whereas the other companies went into war production. So at the end of the war, Massey come out with a good, viable self-propelled combine, and they would form these big harvest brigades to harvest the crop because there'd been a lack of equipment produced during the war. That was the 21-A combine. It became the 27 combine, and they harvested the crop with that. Gas motor, red-hot manifold, and four miles an hour top speed. [Laughing]

[0:35:51]

EE: My father bought what he understood was the first self-propelled combine in the Elm Creek district. Someone had bought it, I think, in the late '30s. This would've been one of the pioneer combines.

JO: That would have been a 21. There wasn't many 21s around.

EE: And that was galvanized steel outside, and I think a farmer name Ivie, I think, had owned it.

JO: Ivie, yes. I recall the Ivies.

EE: And Dad bought that combine after the war and into the '50s, I think. And he combined with that for years.

JO: The galvanized sides is the dead giveaway. That was the 21 Massey. That was the first one out, which soon evolved into the 21-A, which was painted red.

EE: And this was the one after the war? Developed through the war?

JO: Yeah, yeah.

EE: That is quite a story!

JO: Yeah, it is.

EE: And these Massey Harris combines then were, I suppose, state or the art as we say in the academic community.

JO: Oh, God, yes. And they were so far ahead in developing a self-propelled combine that it took the other companies 20 years to catch up to them.

EE: That's quite a story.

JO: The story of grain harvesting from Egyptian times on is interesting.

EE: It is indeed, and just over 100 years in western Canada from the old binder drawn by horses and the threshing machine through to these self-propelled combines.

JO: The change that occurred.

EE: And the sophisticated combines that developed. Yes, it really is quite a story. Well, we've talked about all kinds of changes, challenges, I suppose. Other challenges? One of just surviving in the business, of course, but were there other challenges you faced as a farmer?

JO: Oh. No. Not--.

EE: Or that the industry faced perhaps if it's more than yourself.

JO: Uh--.

EE: I suppose one of them would be surviving lean times and good times. [Laughs] Dealing with--.

JO: Yes. Yes. Management.

EE: The cycle of the grain industry.

JO: Making the farm successful was management. I kept a graph all the years that I farmed—income and expense—a line graph. If income would drop, expenses would drop with it.

EE: You would have to.

JO: I always kept that blue line above the red line for 40 years. Sometimes it was close, sometimes they would both drop drastically. So obviously I was quick on the cutbacks when grain prices would fall.

EE: Sure. Did you take any farm management courses?

JO: Just one. I did take one. It was sponsored by the government at a time of very low grain prices in the wintertime. And it was a good course. I learnt from it. And I think the agricultural diploma courses are very good. What you learn there--. And sometimes it's bad. Sometimes you learn too much. But you will learn it in the field. You're what I call a field-trained general. He's a hard guy to beat. But when you go to take two years of agricultural diploma course, they run by it all for you there, and then you've got to get out and put it together as any university course is. You've got to take hold of it and make it work.

EE: Sure.

JO: But I think it's a good thing to have, and most farmers today do take it.

EE: And bright farmers of course—or bright professors—trying to be farmers can lose their shirts too, I understand.

JO: Yes. [Laughs] We had that experience in Fannystelle too. [Laughing]

EE: You want to tell me what you understand about that particular operation? Because I remember driving out to visit my neighbours the McIntyres once along Highway 2, and there was this great spread of bins and granaries and what not and augers and all the rest of it. And I got them and said, "Incidentally, there's this big operation on the southside of Highway 2 near Fannystelle. Whose is that?" And they said, "Oh, that's professor so-and-so." Forgotten his name from the University of Manitoba. "He's gone bankrupt there." [Laughing] Ok, you want to let that go?

[0:40:13]

JO: Kill it. Completely kill it.

[... audio pauses]

EE: Just slide the record lever. If I were to ask you what some of your most vivid memories of being a farmer are, what could you tell me?

JO: One would be what I call the mud years when we had extremely wet harvests, and it became very difficult to harvest the crop. And this seemed to occur at the same time as low grain prices. So there you were fighting the mud and piling up this damp grain which is out of condition and not going to keep very long and getting a low price for it and having to dry it at the same time. Mud always wins. You don't win against mud. We tried everything. Farmers would buy track-combines, try to put tracks on their swathers to float on the mud and at great cost. And it wasn't too effective. So the mud years are a vivid memory, and I had three of them—1968, 1985, and 1993. I have no trouble naming those. [Laughing]

EE: That's something. So '68 was one of those years? My father sold the farm in '69, so I guess he--.

JO: Is that right? He went through the mud. I know what he went through. Prices were low. Sales to Russia collapsed in '97, which produced a beautiful crop. Prices tumbled down. There was no sale for wheat.

EE: You said '97?

JO: Oh, I'm sorry.

EE: '67?

JO: '67.

EE: '67.

JO: In 1968, prices were very low. I had mounds of this damp grain in the yard. What to do with it? I ended up drying quite a bit on the farm.

EE: Because you could buy grain dryers, machinery?

JO: Yeah. Dryers were available. They were propane heated and dried the grain.

EE: So that's an expense?

JO: It's an expense, and it's difficult to remove moisture from grain. It is difficult. It's a slow process. You would spend two to three hours depending on the amount of moisture in the grain to get it out.

EE: What the sun does at no expense to us is difficult to duplicate, eh?

JO: It's expensive. You're burning propane big time. It's a big burner. And your diesel tractor running all day long. And then we'd bin it because there was no sale for it. So that stands out in your memory.

EE: I'm sure. And then you said '85 and '93 were similar years, were they?

JO: And '68, yeah. The three years.

EE: '68, '85, and--.

JO: Yes. Mud years.

EE: Only three over 40 years. That's not too bad in the way of odds, I suppose.

JO: Yes, I believe '79 was a bit wet, but the price of grain was high. And I would go out and I would thresh some mud holes and take a three-tonne truck to the elevator and get \$1,000 for it. So it wasn't so bad. You'd go home and clean the mud out of the wheels. [Laughing]. But yeah, three out of all those years wasn't so bad looking back.

EE: Were you ever hailed out?

JO: Yes, twice. Never completely, but hail damaged twice.

EE: Hail damaged. So then as far as the real vagaries of the weather, of course there were the dry years as well. How many of those?

JO: There wasn't many dry years.

EE: It's the Assiniboine River Valley, eh? Moisture there is a real--.

JO: I'm thinking 1980 was. 1980 was severe south of Number 2 Highway, and I had half a crop. And I think 1988 was a dry year, about half a crop again. The difference with the dry years--. I always said if I had to lose a crop, I'd rather use it to dry than wet because you go out there, and you clean it up quickly, and it's usually No. 1 grade, and it's over. But wet, you fight with it for two months or more trying to get it off, and it's usually low quality.

EE: My father maintained a good relationship with the manager of the Bank of Commerce in Elm Creek. Is a bank important to farmers? Was your experience and the experience of other farmers in terms of financing the operation?

[0:45:01]

JO: Yes, it is. The banks and credit unions. A lot of farmers deal at credit unions, which is a banking cooperative is what it is. They obtain operating loans. And largely, I think, equipment loans are done through the companies themselves. They have their own finance companies. But the banks provide a service in borrowing money to farmers.

EE: Has the sort of national and sometimes international business cycle in its financial ramifications affected you much of the years? Let's say, of course, the terrific inflation of the early--. You're a commodity producer, so I guess '72, '73, '74, those were boom years. The early '80s, the interest rates were drawn up so high by the Federal Reserve. In the United States, Paul Volcker's attempt to bring the dollar under control. Did those high interest rates impact the farmers particularly?

JO: Oh, yes. Greatly. If you--. Fortunately, I had a mortgage with the Farm Credit Corporation, and at that time interest was pegged. But shortly after, interest floated, and anybody that got caught in the high interest rates, sure, that impacted them. That hurt them. I was very fortunate to have a 25-year mortgage at pegged interest. Financing is a--.

EE: In the early '90s, again, when John Crow was trying to end inflation in the country, and this on top of the Goods and Services tax and NAFTA or the FTA, did you experience impacts from that on the farm particularly?

JO: Yes. Interest rates, of course, affect farming very much. And their suppliers and the grain companies are all affected by--.

EE: So the low interest rates running in the very last years that you farmed, I suppose, were a pleasant contrast.

JO: Yes. And at that time, well, I wasn't borrowing money. I was done. I was sort of successful. I was done with paying interest, but they were lower.

EE: Did you have a sense that it was a good time to sell when you got out of farming around '03? Were people ready to buy the farm, take it over, and there were people ready to come to your auction sale and get good prices?

JO: Yes. The auction sale brought good prices. We didn't sell the farm. We still rent it.

EE: Oh, I see.

JO: It would sell at good prices right now, yes. Farmland is in demand. But the decision to sell- -. I was 62 years old, most of my equipment was getting on 20 years old, and at that age, you're not going to buy a new big tractor and take on more land. It's--.

EE: It's a lot of life cycle—your life and equipment life and so on—that goes into these decisions.

JO: Yes. Yes. So it was time to get out.

EE: And of course, you want to get out in a way that allows you to enjoy your retirement--.

JO: Yes.

EE: Because the farm is largely the basis for your farm income.

JO: Yes. Well, I say, I think we farmed successfully. [Laughs] We own the farm, we own this house, you know? We did okay that way.

EE: I think that's success.

JO: Didn't get rich.

EE: Looking around, that's success! [Laughing] Do farmers have money in the CPP, the Canada Pension Plan, as a rule?

JO: Yeah, we paid into it. Yeah.

EE: You paid into it?

JO: Yes.

EE: So you get that old-age security is available to you as well.

JO: Yes.

EE: EI is never--. Of course, that would be for employees anyways, so you were never a part of Unemployment Insurance anyway.

JO: We paid the whole thing. Your employer pays half, and you pay half as an employee.

EE: Did you employ workers over the years?

JO: No. The wife was the employee.

EE: I see. I see. [Laughs] Yes, of course, when she was providing important functions on the farm, of course.

JO: Way back in '75, we decided we'd buy a microwave oven and a dishwasher so that would free her up in the kitchen. Like, she'd drive tractors, combines, everything.

EE: Oh, I see.

JO: Yes.

EE: So she was fully a partner in working the farm?

JO: Yes. Oh, yeah. Yes.

EE: Splendid.

JO: So we didn't hire anybody. She helped out in the busy seasons, you know, through the--. And then the--.

EE: Well, a concluding question—we've actually got just over a minute left—are there any questions that remain that I might have asked? Any thought, anything that we could have dealt with? Or have we covered the waterfront as they say in another industry?

JO: I think we did a pretty good job.

EE: We've been over all the acreage? [Laughs]

JO: I think so!

EE: Well, splendid. It's been a great pleasure to sit down and to learn about your life after these many years of only seeing you once between almost '57 and '97 maybe. Was that the Centennial, '98, in Culross? When you were driving the tractors and so on down the street in Culross.

JO: Something like that.

EE: I think it was about ten years ago.

JO: Yes.

EE: And here we are again. Well, splendid. Thanks very much on behalf of the Voices of the Grain Trade project for giving me a chance to come and talk to you.

JO: Oh, my pleasure. I enjoyed the interview.

EE: It's great to have done it. So I guess I can push stop, can I?

End of interview.