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Company Affiliations: N/A

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Summary: Former custom-harvester Peter Spafford discusses his and his family's career in grain farming in the Prairies. He first discusses his grandfather's immigration to Canada and setting up a registered seed plot on a mixed farm. He describes the process of growing and selling grain seeds, the seriousness of keeping the seeds pure, the equipment used for the various processes, and his job as a child in the fields plucking unwanted grains by hand. He then discusses his father's foray into custom combining for neighbour farms and eventually his own operation in custom combining around the province. He recalls his first year combining in very wet conditions, describe the planning process of harvesting crops at different times of maturity, and explains the advances in combine technology. Spafford explains the step-by-step process of growing grain and the equipment involved at each stage, as well as the specialty equipment required for more unique grains. He discusses his other duties beyond simply combining, like moisture testing grain samples, loading producer cars as necessary, and transferring grain into farm granaries. He describes major changes in farming, like increasing prices for equipment, the rise of large industrial farms, and the disappearance of farm communities. Other topics discussed include his grandfather's close connection with the Canadian Wheat Board and Canadian Grain Commission, learning about grain grades at country grain elevators, issues with different farm terrains, memorable stories of combining, and his pride in working with fellow farmers for the betterment of the community.

Keywords: Custom combining; Custom harvesting; Grain farmers/producers; Farming—Equipment and supplies; Combines; Tractors; Registered seed growing; Seed plots; Grain varieties; Farm storage; Seed drills; Discers; Sprayers; Spreaders; Pesticides; Herbicides; Fertilizer; Ag chemicals; Swathers; Moisture testing; Producer cars; Country grain elevators; Industrial farms; Sunflower seeds; Barley; Canola; Oats; Grain pests; Grain diseases; Canadian Wheat Board (CWB); Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); United Grain Growers (UGG); Shilo Farms; Manitoba

Time, Speaker, Narrative

NP: Starting an interview on March 20, 2013, on Oliver Road. This is a special interview because we managed by happy circumstance to find somebody who has moved here from Manitoba and who has a long family history in the grain trade so I will ask him to introduce himself and then we will start the interview.

PS: I am Peter Spafford, and I grew up in central, south-central Manitoba in the Riding Mountain area and lived after that in Neepawa, Manitoba, for a number of years with my wife. We were in the custom harvesting business and the construction industry at the same time for several years.

NP: Wonderful. That is typical farming to have more abilities, especially on a rural Manitoba farm.

PS: Yes. We would start in at best in early August or late July, depending if it was winter wheat, et cetera, and it would end in December sometimes doing sunflowers—custom harvesting sunflowers. When I wasn't doing that, I did construction. That is the tie into make it all work.

NP: Good! I want to go back as far as your memory will take you because you had mentioned to me that your family and your grandfather were involved in the farm. Where did your family come from initially, and how did they get started in farming in Manitoba?

PS: My grandfather moved here from England, and as near as I understand, they started the family farm just south of Riding Mountain where they had a few quarter sections of land. In those times, they basically seeded with horses, seed drills, and then had threshing machines in the fall. Even my grandfather had threshing operation where they had people come onto their farms and assist in the harvesting each year. That was how far back that was. That was done with a threshing machine, with steam on the threshing machines, and then it evolved to diesel powered tractors that ran the threshing machines and the stokers that came in to assist. They would have basically sheaves where they cut the grain and stacked it. Then they would have horse-drawn trailers that took it to a threshing machine located in the field and would throw them up into the threshing machine. They had different crews that came in and did this. My grandmother would feed those people every day. They were very long days from, I guess, what I recall or what they told me about. Eventually that evolved into our whole family getting involved in the registered seed industry.

My grandfather was a long-standing member of the Grain Commission and the CWB and was heavily involved in that for decades. All my life that I ever knew him, that was all they ever spoke about at meals and family gatherings, et cetera. So he was a big volunteer with that, I guess, for his whole farming life. My father was William Stuart Spafford. People just knew him as Stuart, and he never went as Bill or anything, but it was always Stuart Spafford. My uncle Gordon who was Gordon Valentine Spafford was

both in farming. We were very close in proximity to each other in distance. We were all, including my grandfather, involved in the registered grain industry where we had seed plots that were for each type or variety of grain that would be introduced over X amount of time. It was all done for a number of reasons.

NP: Can we come back to that because I don't want to lose track of some of the questions I have of the early days. First of all, do you know when your grandfather started the operation approximately?

PS: He came over from England in the 1930s. It would be in the 1930s.

NP: That is an unusual time to move to the Prairies.

PS: Yes. I obviously wasn't around then. They moved here, and I believe they moved into Winnipeg first and then eventually migrated out to the Riding Mountain area. It was actually called Tobomore, close to the Tobomore school that is gone now but still exists. They moved the school up into Riding Mountain and use it as a community get-to-gather centre. That was the area. We were just on the edge of Riding Mountain where our family farm was. My grandfather when he semi-retired moved into Riding Mountain, and he had land surrounding the northeast side of the town.

NP: I am a bit familiar with the Riding Mountains. There is on the Onanole side of it, and then there is the Dauphin side where is--.

PS: We were in the town of Riding Mountain which is just north of Neepawa. Just north of Neepawa there is Eden and Riding Mountain is the next. We are on the southwest corner of the Riding Mountain National Park where much of our land bordered the National Park, which was my father's land where I grew up. We had 11 quarter sections there and much of it bordered the Riding Mountain National Park where we grew up. It's not the best for farming up in that area because it was stony and small plots.

NP: It wasn't the golden triangle or whatever they call it from the southern part of the province?

PS: No, not at all. My grandfather's original homestead area was much better. It was sandier and so subject to heat and drought because of the sandy conditions. Nevertheless, they made a go of it. They had purchased their property from other places. There was the Thatcher place who owned it prior to them. That is how we knew these different fields. Whoever owned them prior to us are what they were called, which was the tradition back then. My grandfather's property, my uncle Gordon took over and my grandfather lived there. I remember going and visiting my grandmother and grandfather as a young child, and it was the place to go every weekend.

NP: When were you born?

PS: I was born in 1955. All the family get togethers were held down at my grandmother and grandfather's place. Eventually they moved out of there, and Uncle Gordon and Auntie Merle took over that farm, and grandmother and grandfather bought a new house up in the Riding Mountain area and lived there for the remainder of their lives. They had a small little farm on the northeast part of the town.

NP: Did the farm specialize in any particular crop, given the growing conditions?

PS: What we had were all cereal grains. It was hard red spring wheat, barley, oats, flax all those kinds of typical grains. Like I mentioned, my grandfather, because of his involvement in the CWB and his connection, he saw the need for or wanted to be part of the group that would basically be that the grains would be introduced to-- . We would be given small amounts of grain from somewhere, and it would be the farms testing research facilities that were producing new varieties of grain for Canada. It was for rust and blight, et cetera. The ones that I remember were Selkirk Wheat and Neepawa and Manitou, those grains. Those grains were the people who had seed plots. A seed plot was a small plot of grain that had rows in it and very small.

NP: When you say very small compared to a city lot what--? Or a city block?

PS: It would be about three-quarters the size of a city block. It is fairly quite small. It would maybe be smaller than that. Maybe 200 feet by 100 feet wide, and they were that small. They were designed with these rows in them so you would have rows that you went up and down that you could have a garden tiller that you would go in between other rows of grain that was planted to keep them free from weeds. You could go up and down and could check for the growing process and any other things that would be happening with those grains when they were maturing. The grain inspectors that would come out and field inspectors, we had other larger plots—like hundreds of acres in some cases—of grain of a certain variety that had isolation strip around it. They all had to have an isolation strip that we would cultivate or disc as these grains matured to keep any foreign weeds and so forth out of that crop, and any grass and any weeds they all had to be disced every week and a half or two weeks. That is how quickly they grew.

NP: Would you do it in one pass or was it wider than that?

PS: No, it was only one pass. It was 15 to 20 feet wide, this isolation strip around the whole field. That is how those larger fields evolved. The grains that went into those fields for seed were derived from these seed plots. The fields themselves, as young kids growing up, we had to rogue these fields. That is called roguing. We would walk these fields in the morning before we went to school to check for barleys, for bearded wheats or speltoids, all these other foreign grains and anything that would contaminate

those fields. We would pick out and take. We would be given basically a bounty, if you will, on these as young kids—10 cents or 5 cents for every head that you got. You just pluck the heads off or pull out the grain, the whole stock in some cases if it came out. We would be soaking wet in the morning from doing this before we went to school. We would walk into the sunlight because the sun would reflect onto these different heads as they came up, and they are easier to spot. We would go to one end of the field, and we would get in a car and drive around the isolation strip back to the other end and walk into the sunlight again and do that until it was time to go to school. And of course, this was in the summertime, and you would start doing this about 6:00 in the morning and get on the bus at 8:00. That was part of what we did there as young children growing up. There were six children in our family and only four of us boys did that, or maybe three of us because our one brother was a little smaller. Myself and two of my brothers, we would do that on a regular basis in the summertime.

NP: You in the early age then received an education in what different plants looked like?

PS: Absolutely. We knew everything either from my grandfather, or my father they would show us what these were these bearded wheats because they would come up first, so they would be plucked off. The speltoids, which were basically fake wheat, and you don't want that to be introduced into the grains that were going out to customers that would ultimately have all these containments in it. That was all taken off. It was taken very, very seriously. When the field inspectors came out from the government to basically pass or fail that field, it was a big deal to us. The whole family was all worried, "Are we going to get this grain certified?" That was part of the process. The remaining part of the process was when it came to the harvesting. The combines had to all vacuumed out so that there were no foreign grains in them to start with, and that took a day or more just to go through the combine and clean it out. There could be no resting grain on any flat parts of the machine, so that it would get into the combine and thus out to the reeking where it was going having contaminated seed in there.

NP: What about storage of it? Did you deliver immediately, or did you have to store? You had to have separate storage for every--.

PS: All of our grain bins were vacuumed out, and in some cases, they would have plastic stapled to the wall so that nothing could come out and contaminate it again. But typically, that was not a big deal. We would just clean those bins and bang them with hammers and things like that and any little grains that would be held up in the boards on the sides because some of these were wooden granaries. They would be cleaned to the nth degree, and then our grains would go in there that we had harvested. We had a seed cleaning plant, and my grandfather ran that for decades for as long as I can remember. We actually bagged the grain, and we had seed cleaning equipment in there, and it went in there in bulk and eventually cleaned and then bagged and sealed. It was certified grain then, and it had a tag on every bag and bagging machines and all that kind of thing, and it was very small scale but at the same time something we did all winter long. As kids after school, we went and worked in there, and we had dollies for moving

the bags around and stacking them and eventually they got sold to local farmers and all abroad. We sold grain all over Manitoba and Saskatchewan from that seed cleaning plant.

NP: How was it marketed, or did the people just mainly come to you?

PS: They mainly came to us because we were the registered seed growers. There are very, very few people at that time that ever did that. Of course, you got a premium price for your seed, but I am sure that the amount of work that went into it didn't cover what little extra that was given for the amount of extra money that was gotten for that. I am not sure because I was just a small kid growing up, but it was definitely a lot of work, especially being a young gangling child that was trying to manhandle large 50-pound bags of grain or more. But you got used to it and were taught how to handle it, et cetera.

NP: Were your bags just plain?

PS: They were just plain gunny sacks.

NP: The brown gunny sacks?

PS: Yes, the brown gunny sacks, and they had special tags on them that we were given from, I guess, from the government for putting on these bags. We had sewing devices of those bags. Every bag was sewed and sealed with this special seal and a tag on every bag.

NP: What is coming through to me loud and clear as you speak about this is that there was a real pride that your family took.

PS: Oh, my goodness, yes! That is an understatement. It was a badge of honour to be part of this whole process. It was something to grow up, and it was hard, hard work. And in fact, my grandfather would try to hire other local children or young people in school to come out and pick weeds in his seed plots. Of course, the pay was horrible and that was the way it was back then, and I still bump into school mates that worked for him once in awhile and they were not fond memories about working in the hot sun for very little pay for picking weeds in these seed plots. Even the grain, when it was being planted, the seed drills and so forth were all cleaned meticulously so that there was never any contaminated grain that would get because it would be a travesty if it ever happened, and then you are trying to pick all those out. After the cleaning was done and we were into the next season and re-seeding these fields, if I recall right, the seeds the new ground that we went into had to be summer fallowed the year before. All these fields had to have a year of rest before they got the new grain.

NP: There was a lot of planning work that had to be done here. Did you have a map of the fields at your kitchen table?

PS: I guess so, and I wasn't involved in that side of things. I was just involved in the "do it" side of things. I just recall lots of long hours as a young person growing up.

NP: I am curious about what you were talking about the seed drills which I have probably seen but didn't know what they were, so I don't really know what they look like. So if amongst the pictures that you might be able to get for us if you can get one of the seed drills that would be great. I am wondering about those small plots, the initial plots, because it seemed pretty small, and I think of farm machinery, it is not small. So was that done by hand?

PS: That was done with those same seed drills. They are big iron-wheeled seed drills. The wheels I am going to say 4.5 feet high and maybe 5 feet high. This is the earlier versions of that. That is the only thing that really worked, and they had spacing of the seed about, I am going to say, 3 inches for each row. Then we would block off a certain amount of these, and that is what made the rows. We would block off every so many holes that came out of the seed drill and these went in a very straight row, because obviously the seeds are going to grow up in the direction--.

NP: Pulled by the machinery then?

PS: It was pulled by a small tractor. My grandfather always had a Ford 8N tractor that he used when he was there, but we had larger Massey Ferguson tractors and International tractors and that kind of thing. But they pulled the same seed drills initially, and then we progressed into discers. That was that era that those types of seed drills were common. They worked well down where my grandfather had his land because it was largely sand and sandy loam. Where we were, it ended up being a lot of rock, so they just would get beat up all the time in these rocky conditions, and the discs that were going in the ground would get bent and broken. So it was a lot of repairing, et cetera.

NP: I suspect there was rock picking to.

PS: Oh, my goodness, it was unbelievable. We actually had rock pickers that picked up massive rocks three-quarters of the size of a kitchen table.

NP: There is actually a piece of equipment called a rock pick?

PS: Yes, there were different styles. There was rotary rock pickers and they would basically--. When we would till or cultivate a field or detail a field, there would be a lot of rocks that would come up. Then subsequently depending on the size with a rotary rock it would put it into a row, and then you have another device that had a reel just almost like a very heavy duty reel-rock picker and you just lower it down and it had a table on it that rode along the surface of the ground and a reel that would just basically come around every few seconds and pick these rocks and throw them into a big bucket, and you took them off to the edge of the field and dump them.

NP: Do the rocks come to the surface? Once you have done, it you have done it, or they come again?

PS: They constantly re-surface.

NP: What is happening there?

PS: The frost pushing them up. My father would go out, and sometimes we would have these fields just done perfectly, and he would go out with a deep tiller and down it would go and up would come a whole fresh new batch, and it was very disheartening at times, I got to say. But eventually got most of them, I guess, but sometimes some fields depending on where we were because we were right on the shores of old Lake Agassiz. That is what the escarpment was about. Depending on where we were, there would be tremendous amounts of rock. A small rock obviously from the old Lake Agassiz and shale. Some fields there were a lot of shale. They did very well though for producing grain.

NP: Before I forget the question, are members of your family still farming in that area, or have they all moved on?

PS: No, they have all moved on. My uncle passed away, I am going to say, 10 years ago. My father passed away four years ago, and my mother sold her farm to some other folks, I am going to say, two or three years ago. My Aunt Merle sold her farm shortly after my uncle passed away, and she moved into Neepawa. None of their children were interested in farming as well.

NP: Did they sell to other farm families in the area so that they just increased the size of their farms?

PS: Yes, some of them did, but I am not sure who she sold it to. A lot of the Mennonite people that were down in southern Manitoba were buying land up in our area, and I think a lot of those plots went to some of those folks that moved up in there. That is from what I understand. It has been a while since I have been there.

NP: You are going back in your memory today!

PS: Yes. I just was out there for the first time in December to visit my mom, and that was the first time in three years since I have been there.

NP: Good timing December in Manitoba! [Laughs] Were all of your family that were involved in farming, were they all just growing seed wheat?

PS: Beyond what we did as registered seed growers because that is what it really fell under. We were registered seed growers with the Grain Commission. But we also had hogs and cattle beyond this. In the wintertime besides doing the grain cleaning and all this growing up, we had hundreds of hogs and cattle and that was just the normal farm life and you mix farming. It was long days as children growing up. It was hard work, and we knew nothing but work. We didn't vacation. We worked. That was life.

NP: Especially with livestock?

PS: Yes. We were quite envious sometimes of our friends who got to go to camp in the summertime or vacation somewhere. We did not ever do that. We just worked. It was a different life and that was the way it was.

NP: Do you regret that?

PS: I suppose a little bit, but not really. Work ethics are something that is lacking today in a lot of people. In my own work now, it is something I teach about every week. I speak about that to the construction industry nationwide in Canada and the United States. Ethics is a big thing. You can see the devotion that we had in farming. Part of what I do as an individual right now is trying to instil some of the same work ethics in people in other parts of the construction industry.

NP: I am going to shift gears a little bit here, but it still has to do with the history of your family in business. As you know there have been tons of changes in the industry over the last little while, but I love when somebody like you has paid attention to what their parents and grandparents were doing. To just have them talk about their connection to the co-operative movement or not if they fell on the other side of it and their involvement with the Grain Commission, which is the federal government group and the CWB which is, most farmers will argue, is a farmers' group. Just leave it open to any thoughts that you have about your father and grandfather and their connection.

PS: My grandfather was the most active person in the whole process. He was a very staunch individual when it came to the issues with the CWB and what it was doing and made many trips to Winnipeg and other parts of Canada to promote what was going on in

the CWB. I guess the Crow Rate is what came on, or he was part of, to help ship grain through the port here to reduce shipping costs. And the small elevators, et cetera, that existed out there to have that network remain in place as you know it basically dissolved it. It doesn't exist anymore largely anyway.

NP: Would your family have delivered into Neepawa?

PS: No, we delivered to Riding Mountain and Kelwood.

NP: Who were the companies operating there?

PS: United Grain Growers.

NP: In both cases?

PS: Yes.

NP: No competition?

PS: Not that I am aware of. If I remember, UGG was it for both wheat, and we had a quota on how much you could ship. So every farmer was allowed to take in so much grain per acre over a certain period of time each year. As these quotas came on, there was a mad dash in our family to get the trucks filled and off to the elevator when the quotas came, so that you could have money to live. That is basically how it worked. I am not sure who set those quotas.

NP: The Canadian Wheat Board.

PS: I guess the CWB did so that they would be able to help set the price of grain and keep the flow happening as it was needed across the country. My grandfather's role in that process, I am not sure what it was, but I know that the meeting that they would have with the provincial government and the federal government were on and off all the time and the discussions would be centred around that sometimes at the dinner table when we were there visiting. As a very young person, I didn't fully understand all the talk that was going on. I just knew that it was a serious matter to my grandfather and parents because it affected our livelihood.

NP: Were they as much as anybody can be fairly confident or comfortable with the system, or did a lot of the talk seem to be "This has to be fixed"?

PS: I think there was a constant source of, I'll call it maintenance, to try and work with government to keep them on side because my grandfather was always a big political activist to try and keep the powers that be, I guess. It is just like anything if you have a vested interest in anything. His goal was to keep the CWB operating because, as we mentioned before, it was largely a farmers' organization. There would be these key farmers across the country the key players in this trying to work out things with the government and these quotas.

NP: Do you know whether or not either your dad or your grandfather were elected members of either farm representatives for UGG or for the CWB?

PS: My grandfather would have been. He was on the CWB, and I am not sure beyond that. I don't recall what the relationship was to be truthful with you.

NP: How long ago was it that your grandfather passed away?

PS: About 20 years ago now or more.

NP: He definitely was not part of the real--.

PS: I take that back. It is more than 30 years ago now that he has passed away.

NP: And your father four years ago?

PS: Yes, four years ago.

NP: What were your father's thoughts about all of the changes that were happening? Because in his lifetime, UGG would have disappeared, and certainly he wasn't around for the demise of the CWB, but the discussion of the demise of it.

PS: He was getting out of farming by the time this had transpired, and he had basically leased or rented out his property to other people that came in because he was too old by this time to run and do much of it himself. Up until that point, because when we were in our late teens, I left the farm. I didn't want to get into farming. That being said, that is when I got into custom harvesting when I was 21. But when I was 17 or 18, I left the farm much to the chagrin of the family. They expected us to carry it on, and that wasn't going to happen because I had seen the amount of work that was involved in farming and all the things that went along with

it from the droughts, the floods, the pestilence, and all those kinds of things, the cost of machinery and fuel and insurance and everything that goes along with farming. It was not in my agenda basically as a young person wanting to do that anymore. It was just too much.

I moved into Winnipeg for a short period of time, for five years or so, and just got a job working as a drilling rig operator for subterranean foundations. Because of my mechanical background, I could pretty much run anything, and at a young age of 18 years old, I was the first drilling rig operator they ever had. It was just because of the farming background that I had. Eventually I came back to the custom-harvesting side. It was my grandfather that basically got me started in it. My father already did custom harvesting off and on a little bit in the fall. Then I decided that I might do that, and my grandfather gave me a \$5000 loan, basically a down payment, for some equipment that I had to pay him back in four months, which we did and that was the way it is. It is a very honourable thing, but that is another lifetime. His role in the CWB was a very long lasting one. I just remember for the decades as a young person growing up, that was a big role and big thing in our family in his life that he did that.

NP: Strong supporter?

PS: Oh, my goodness, yes! All of the politicians that came and went in those days, I don't remember many of their names. Tommy Douglas, I think, was one of them.

NP: Way back.

PS: Yes, way back, and that was the times that I remember and him being this activist at the time, slash farmer. My grandfather has his boys—my father and his brothers—working on the farm then, so they eventually took over it and that is where it evolved, and he semi-retired and still remained active in the CWB well into his retirement. Then his sons basically took over his farm because he enjoyed it, and it was his passion as a farmer and activist in that whole time period. It was just the way of life back then. And everyone knew him as T.W. Spafford. That was his calling card. So anyone if you mentioned T.W. Spafford in the Grain Commission or whoever, they knew who you were talking about. His real name was Thomas William Spafford. That was his life in that part, that I recall.

NP: Did your dad move easily into working with his dad and eventually taking on more and more of a role or was he like you, he went away for a while before he came back?

PS: Yes, he went away for a little while a very short period of time and was a cab driver up in Flin Flon, Manitoba, in the wintertime. So my mother and him were up there, and my brother was born up there in Flin Flon, and within six months to a year,

they moved back down, and they bought a farm at Riding Mountain and started farming and carried on from there. They just kept buying more parcels of land around them, and eventually we ended up with 11 quarter sections and families came and all my brothers and sisters were born, and we had cattle, and that was our life.

NP: The custom combining then, how did he get involved in that?

PS: My dad was always an individual who was a wheeler dealer on that side of things. He bought and sold trucks and machinery, so we always seemed to have spare equipment around. We would have these combines that were waiting to be sold sometimes, so why not use them? He started doing neighbours periodically, which is how neighbours did it and still today do it. One neighbour will help another for a fee. He started doing it that way and thought, "This is a good supplement to the farming." So when we were not doing our own, he would go out doing others in the area periodically, and it grew from there, so that we actually did our own crops and then would basically finish those and head out to the Neepawa area and beyond there at Minnedosa, Brandon and work in those areas.

NP: I am going to ask a couple of semi-technical questions about the custom combining, and this is almost like a scheduling one, because of the things when you are farming usually the crops are all coming at the same time. How does it work that you managed to get your own off and still have other crops available that are not gone? Are there certain crops coming up at different times?

PS: Yes, they would mature at different times.

NP: Say a little bit about that because this is all new.

PS: Whether it was wheat or barley, we would be done doing winter wheat. Winter wheat is planted in the fall, and it starts growing first thing in the spring. We would be harvesting those sometimes.

NP: Can I just interrupt here. I watch a field on Highway 61 that is planted in the fall, and sometimes we have a long fall and it is growing, so what happens to it when winter finally does come?

PS: It doesn't affect it. That is one of the things is that the frost will come along, so it just rejuvenates itself in the spring. That is a soft wheat.

NP: So that is a particular type of wheat?

PS: That is soft wheat, which is a different type of wheat. It is not hard red spring wheat. Two different types of wheat. We didn't do a lot of winter wheat.

NP: What is the soft wheat used for?

PS: I am not 100 percent sure. It is just lower grade wheat.

NP: Could it be feed?

PS: No, I don't think it would be feed. We grew durum wheat, which is used largely for pastas, but the majority of the grain that we grew was hard red spring wheat and that is all the new varieties that came out.

NP: If we talk about the combining, then, did you actually choose crops that you grew so that you knew you would have them off sooner and then are able to help others?

PS: Yes. Oats matured a lot faster. Canola matures a lot faster than others, but we could also just scoot back to our farm in a very short period of time and take off these fields and back out doing our thing. But canola that we grew back then—and of course it wasn't called canola back then it was called rapeseed, and they changed it for obvious reasons—that was one of the common grains that we would grow as well in the later years. Initially we never grew any of that. It was wheat and barley and oats. The oats were for the cattle. We never sold many oats from what I recall. The wheat was what was sold because of the registered side of things. Everything that wasn't registered with us, it was either barley or oats and that was pretty much the only thing. We did some durum but very limited amount as far as growing it ourselves. Other farmers would grow those varieties that we would eventually harvest as well.

As I previously mentioned when we did custom harvesting, we would get into other varieties that took us into late fall. It would be sunflowers primarily that would be the main one. But other than that, we did fava beans and barley and wheat for other farmers. I wasn't working on the farm when I started custom harvesting. My father still had his farm. He did his thing, and he would go back with his equipment, and I would just carry on doing custom harvesting. It would be seamless for whomever that we were working for. They wouldn't even miss a machine off the field hardly, and it would be gone and back to work at my dad's place.

NP: You started obviously around where your family farm is and over the years you expanded. Did that mean you had several combines and hired operators?

PS: We had three machines. Initially started with Massey Ferguson. My dad, when he first started custom harvesting, he had a Massey 410, which is a very small machine nowadays. It would just be a ridiculously small machine, but to us then it was a big deal. Then we had Massey Ferguson 510s, no cabs at the time. They were all no cabs, and it was freezing cold and dust and hot and humid, and that was the life at that time. Then eventually we ended up getting Massey Ferguson 750s, and those were all cabs and airconditioned and radios and CDs and all that kind of thing, and that was how they first started. Now they are ultra-modern machines with GPS. But we never had any of that. Eventually when I was doing custom harvesting, we would start with farmers that most of the farmers we custom harvested for had no combines. They never owned a combine. They hired it all done, and we would go in, and we had trailers and our own crew that came in, meaning workers, and we would have recreational vehicles they stayed in, and we had trailers that hauled the headers around for sunflowers and pick up headers.

NP: What is a header?

PS: It is the attachment that goes on in front of a combine to either pick up a swath or do straight combining. It is with a reel on it for cutting sunflowers and again it is another specialized header. It is a normal straight-cutting attachment, but it has large pans that stick out in front of it with a different reel that basically just cuts the heads off the sunflowers and they go into a machine.

NP: I assume that there has been no snow for you to combine, or you can combine in the snow?

PS: We combine in the snow with sunflowers. It had to be very cold though so the snow that was on the back side of the heads because the heads are all tipped over the seeds facing down it would just go through the machine without incident. You would not even know there was any snow going through the machine it was so light and fluffy and dry almost.

NP: The bank must have been a partner in some of this?

PS: Oh yes, absolutely. Back in the day, I recall going into the bank one time because we always prided ourselves in paying things as quickly as possible. I remember sticking my head in the bank manager's office door one time, and I said, "I need \$5000 for a new header for my combine." He just said "Okay." Didn't sign any papers or anything at the time. This is at the Royal Bank in Neepawa. I would go in eventually and sign for this little added credit line or whatever it was at the time. They knew we would pay it as the Spaffords, and that was the way it was. We were pretty much self-sufficient. The way the financing was set up for my combining was that the only thing I had financed was the combines. The initial ones were \$24,000, I think, was what I paid for my first combine.

NP: In what year approximately?

PS: In 1975 that was a Massey Ferguson 510, which was a used combine not brand new. That is the one my grandfather helped me finance basically. He gave me the down payment on it. We had one payment a year. That is how it worked. There were no monthly payments—just one payment in the fall. We had it set up so that you had already been working and gotten paid, so it wasn't very hard to pay for it. That first combine was very problematic. The first year I started custom harvesting, it was a very wet year. We never started combining until the 9th of September in 1975. It was extremely wet which is fabulous for the custom harvesting.

NP: Why?

PS: Everybody had to have it because fall was coming, and winter was coming. We harvested right into January that year. It was so wet. Unfortunately, we ran with rice tires that are how wet it was in some of these farms out near Plumas and Arden.

NP: What are rice tires?

PS: Rice tires are for combines that harvest rice, and they are actually in water. That is how it was.

NP: Where would you get rice tires in Canada?

PS: We ordered them, I guess, out of the States. I guess. My dad got them, and they are self-cleaning. So that the big treads on them as the tire came around it would just kick out these big clops of mud. We would be straight cutting because they could not have swathed the crops because they would just lay it back down into water. This wheat and everything was all standing in water and fully matured and were going to be lost. We had these rice tires, and we would just cut the tops eight inches or so off and leave all that tall stubble there and got the heads. I remember we would go and eventually even the combines still got stuck, and we would just put it into reverse and back out the same track you went and then go back again another one and back out--back and forth and back and forth to cut as much of that farmers property as you could.

NP: Do you remember what year this was?

PS: 1975.

NP: Okay.

PS: 1975. It was a very, very wet year out there. That being said, these machines were not designed for that heavy duty use. So the following year, unbeknownst to me, these heavy drive shafts that were in the internal workings of the combine were slightly bent and they had a very weak clutch system on a fibre clutch system that basically two clutches came together, and they had fibre teeth on the outside. My wife and I changed 14 clutches in that fall, until we finally found out this major it is called a counter shaft was bent. Big heavy duty main thing that had several big pulleys on it was bent. We ended up getting a new one in and that solved the problem. We finished that year out with that machine, and we sold it. We couldn't take any more of the anguish of all the breakdowns.

NP: Was your wife a farm girl?

PS: No.

NP: She wasn't used to this hard work?

PS: No. She worked for lawyers at the time. She was a city girl, but she grew up in northern Manitoba. Her father was a fisherman. She had then moved in, as I mentioned earlier, she worked for the police department in Fort Frances and then moved into Neepawa and worked for lawyers there. She adopted really quickly into the farm side of things. We didn't live on the farm. We lived in town, but we had our whole custom harvesting. Because I am a pilot, we had an airplane at the time as well. We had hangar space out at the Neepawa Airport. All of my equipment was at the Neepawa Airport Hangar, which was the old Air Force hangar at the time. A big hangar.

NP: It was a training centre, wasn't it?

PS: Yes, that's correct, it was.

NP: Did the combines travel on the road or did you transport them by truck?

PS: Both. We had trailers for the combines. But mostly we travelled up and down the highways just on the side because they were only moving a few miles in most cases. I had big tandems axel trailers, et cetera, and we ended up putting big headers on them because they are so wide. You can't travel down the road with the headers that are 30 feet wide, and they had to go down on these trailers lengthwise on the highway. We would make two or three trips to move to some new farmer's location to cut their crops.

NP: This is going to sound very strange because I have heard the term “combine” for many, many years, but I still don’t understand what a combine is. Before you answer that question, a farmer goes into the field to plant. He uses a what?

PS: Back then, it was either seed drills or disc or pressed drills. Pressed drills became part of it as well. To this day, they use press drills, and they got down to zero tillage issues and all the things that went along with the chemical issues and all that.

NP: Then they have to have--. What is their next piece of machinery that is out on the fields?

PS: As the crop starts to grow?

NP: Yes.

PS: Sprayers. Spraying is a big part of the industry, as you well know, for both pesticides and herbicides and fungicides.

NP: And fertilizer?

PS: And fertilizer. We fertilized everything. A lot of times the fertilizer went in with the grain. Right into the seed box, and they had to either fertilizer right in with the grain or a separate fertilizer attachment. Typically, it is a fertilizer attachment, and it just fertilized just so much. It is a more accurate method of fertilizing because it went right beside the grain as opposed to being not in contact or close proximity.

NP: When you are growing registered seed, are you given instructions on what you can use as fertilizer?

PS: No. I don’t believe so. Again, it was going onto ground that had been summer fallowed the year before from what I recall. That rested ground didn’t require as much fertilizer.

NP: What about pesticides and herbicides?

PS: All pesticides and herbicides were used as part of controlling weeds and foreign grains such as wild oats. Wild oats were big thing. Thistles are another big thing. For example, thistles, we had some neighbours that had terrible thistle problems. They would not spray, so all their thistles would blow over onto our property. It was horrible to have neighbours that didn’t control their property like that. So it was not good. Yes, growing up in the farming industry herbicides and pesticides were just a part of life at that time.

NP: They had their spreaders, and then?

PS: Fertilizer spreaders, we would rent those. The Co-op or UGG would have those fertilizer spreaders. You would buy all of your fertilizers from them, and many times they just gave you the spreader or rent you the spreader to do that. It was so bad with our land sometimes, when we had new land that had just been broken, and that means that it had been previously bush and had a lot of stumps and rocks. We would sow our land with a fertilizer spreader. People would wonder, “We didn’t see you out there with a seed drill,” and we would have these fantastic crops. Guess what? It was all done with a fertilizer spreader, and we would just harrow it in. Harrowing became another implement, and harrowing basically levels out the ground and packs it at the same time.

NP: What does a harrower look like?

PS: It is a timed device that basically, after you have seeded, you would drag it over the ground and it levels out the ground, especially if you are discing and that kind of thing. There are different types of harrows. There are tined ones and then basically a large iron peg set up in a diamond pattern on this device, and it just pulls it over the ground and levels out the ground.

My grandfather, he packed everything. You could not pack our property because it was all stones. It would just break the packers. These packers that he had packed the ground and within a very few days the crops would germinate because the seeds were now right where the moisture is. So that was a big deal. Packers, the early ones, were all steel, and the newer packers today if they even use them are rubber tired or pneumatic type of tires.

NP: If you had success with harrowing it in, was that your choice then that you kept doing that or it was still better to use the seed drill?

PS: No, it was still better to use a seed drill or a disc or a pressed drill and that kind of thing. For wet land or for rocky land and stumps, et cetera, the fertilizer spreader was fabulous. We would seed it and look at how much was coming out. “Okay, the settings are right.” You could seed tremendous amounts of area in a very short period of time.

NP: The fertilizer spreader then was a spreader and not a sprayer?

PS: It was a spreader.

NP: Granular?

PS: Yes.

NP: Then after that is done?

PS: The spraying then occurred, and we had all the different styles of sprayers at the time and a very horrible job. I just dreaded having to spray crops. You were breathing it in sometimes, and I am sure it affected us terribly as kids growing up. But you did it, and everybody did it, and to this day they do it because it controlled thistles, pigweed, stinkweed and all the other weeds that were out there and wild oats. Wild oats were like a plague. If you didn't control those wild oats, they would take over because they germinated before the other crop and then the other crops would not mature properly. And, of course, it would greatly affect your yield each year. That was that side of things.

Then when the newer varieties came along, the canola and so forth, flea beetles were a big plague back then. So you had to spray those or these flea beetles would just eat the leaves, and you would have nothing as a crop. That is just one of the things that were done. To this day probably is. I have not been in it for 30 years now, so it has been a while.

Spraying wasn't a fun thing. No one likes it. That was it. And then once the spraying was done, it isn't long before the crops start to turn and then you are into the harvest season. Then there is the option of either swathing it, which is a machine that goes down to the field and cuts the grain and puts it into a row. What that does is that it allows the grain to mature or ripen right in the swath and cuts it off from its moisture source, so if you have green spots in the field, it basically evens out when you go to harvest it. Whether it is wet spots in the field or whatever. Swathing it allows the grain to ripen uniformly in the swath. It is no longer growing. It has been cut off. It is in the swath for about five to seven days depending on what the conditions are like.

Then you come along with a combine. The combine has a pickup header on it, and that header runs along the ground on a set of wheels and has a belt on it with tines on it that quickly bring the grain into the machine and up the feeder chain into the cylinder of the machine, and the cylinder takes and pushes the grain through underneath the cylinder between a set of rub bars, and it is done at a very high RPM. The grain gets threshed out to the biggest degree right there, and then the rest of it, the straw, goes out onto straw walkers and sieves. Those sieves separate the grain from the chaff. A portion of that grain goes back through a re-thresher and gets put back through the cylinder again and gets re-threshed, and eventually in this whole process, you get a relatively clean grain sample that comes into the hopper. The hopper is the big grain bin on the top of the combine that collects all the grain that comes through the machine, and then when it is full you dump that into a grain truck.

NP: Why is it called a combine? Does it combine two services that different machines had to do, or does it just sound like a good name? [Laughs]

PS: I am not sure why they call it a combine. No one has ever asked me that question before. I am not sure why they call it a combine. It is just a name. It combines the process of cutting and threshing.

NP: If you have the swather coming through--?

PS: You can have either have the choice of cutting it or swathing it ahead. You can straight cut it, so I guess it is combining the cutting and the threshing. There you go we figured that one out!

NP: There is a machine called a thresher?

PS: A threshing machine, that is the old days where they had a threshing machine where they would bring the sheaths to that threshing machine, and they would put it in, and it would go through the machine and separate the straw and the grain.

NP: I actually have a postcard of a fellow standing with a grain bag beside this machine and the grain shooting out of a spout into the grain bag. Probably 1910 this postcard, so that was probably a thresher, and the stooks they would have actually had to lift them into this thing, and that was hard work.

PS: Yes, these guys with the pitchfork, that is where the pitchfork came. There was a term, and it was for pitching sheaves of grain up into the threshing machine, and these crews of men doing this all day long in the baking hot sun. From doing that to air-conditioned combines it is a major step in technology when you think about it. To get even people to do that nowadays would be unheard of as far as pitching it. They still do it in the Threshermen's Reunion in Austin, Manitoba, which is just west of Portage LaPrairie between there and Brandon. Every fall they have the Threshermen's Reunion, and they demonstrate the plowing and the threshing and on and on. It is quite a festival that occurs that a lot of that generation has now passed and sadly lost.

NP: I had a question about the area that you covered. Thank you very much for giving a good concise description of the various farm machineries. We really in this project have not focused a whole lot on the farming because we feel that is a different story than what we are trying to tell, but a critical element to it as you can imagine. I was interested in, and I think I started to ask the question about, your area of influence. You started out doing the custom combining work for your neighbours and then how did that progress?

PS: That was my business in the fall. We would go and work for farmers, mostly larger farmers, and some not so large that basically didn't have any equipment and had no desire to have a combine like that. For example, one farming operation that we worked for was called Shilo Farms down near Brandon, Manitoba, and they had many thousands of acres of grain that we did for them each year. Shilo, Manitoba, as you probably know, there is a military base there, and they owned this company, and they bought this property adjacent to it on the west side of it for basically \$1 an acre. Then they put in pivots which are irrigation systems because it is all sand there.

NP: Is one of the partners there from Switzerland?

PS: I am not sure.

NP: Erst or someone or other?

PS: It could have been.

NP: A big operation.

PS: Yes, they were a big operation. We did fava beans for them, barley, peas, and all the other cereal grains—wheat and oats, et cetera—where they had them. They were from Rapid City down to Shilo, and all areas in between. Plus, we worked for many other farmers in the area. But I recall working at the Shilo Farms, and they had a large amount of sunflowers that we did for them. That is where we actually started making money. All of our work that we did up to it came to sunflowers was largely paying for the machinery and your annual expenses and whatever. We got in sunflowers was basically our profit. We valued that portion of what we did quite a lot. We would station ourselves there, and once it is ready to go, you worked as much as you can until it got tough every day. You would start combining sunflowers, as you would any grain, as soon as the grain was ready to go.

We owned all of our own testing equipment for testing of how damp or dry the grain was. The testers that I personally owned were identical to what the United Grain Growers would have. They were very expensive, but I had the confidence in the equipment that it was going to match what happened when it got to the grain elevator. It was the same equipment. It had to be the same. In those days there were all these new manufacturers that came out of grain testing for dampness, and they were not reliable in my books at all. If we harvested someone's grain, and it ended up at the elevator, and it was tough or damp, we would be in big trouble because they would reject it. You could not put that damp grain into the elevator. My dad had those types of testers, and I could not rely on them, and I didn't have any confidence in them.

NP: What was the kind that you eventually chose?

PS: Whatever the grain elevators had, the big scale for measuring it. It was identical to what the UGG had in all of their elevators in the province.

NP: And the same that the CGC used?

PS: Absolutely, it was the same equipment.

NP: A moisture meter?

PS: Yes, it was a moisture meter, but you weighed out a certain weight of sample, et cetera, and that was how it worked.

NP: I am surprised that it was your responsibility and not the farmer's responsibility?

PS: We were hired to take their crop off at the right time under the right conditions, et cetera, and they relied on us to not throw it over. I don't know if you know what that means? If it went through the machine and we were throwing grain back on the ground, that was a big no. They would come out sometimes and stick a shovel behind your machine as it was going down the field and check and see if there is any grain or how much was going out. You could not save it all, but you could save the majority of it. We had these grain-saver devices. It was a meter basically that told us how much if any was going overboard and that was a common one, and they have evolved into very scientific things that are very accurate means of measuring how much you are throwing over. You could throw over tremendous amounts of money in very few hours, back onto the ground that didn't end up in the hopper or the combine. They relied on us for that. For whatever reason, these combines that we had harvested sunflowers like you would not believe. My combine in particular, as fast as it would cut it, that is what it did the best job. Fortunately for me we could do a lot in a day, and these large headers that we had on there we would go back and forth up and down these fields and sunflowers are all planted in rows, these pans went into between the stocks and just the heads came in and so forth.

At Shilo Farms, I mentioned that it was all irrigated, and these irrigation systems also had liquid fertilizer attachments to them. These big sweeps would come around, and they had a device on these irrigation systems that did the corners sometimes or most of the corners of a square field. If you think about a pivot that goes around and around and makes a big circle, and if you flew over it you would see nothing but a circle in the field. They had these corner sweep devices that did most of the corners. Where those sweeps missed, where there was no irrigation in the corners, not even the weeds would grow. That is how dry it was and that was

how sandy it was there. Where the sunflowers were growing, our cabs were 13 feet in the air. You could not see over the sunflowers sometimes that is how tall these were. They were hybrid sunflowers for what you see birdseed and sold for sunflower seed oil.

NP: With the combines, was there a preference to the height of the crop?

PS: What the height of that crop was determined from the fertilizing of it. But you don't want huge heads on sunflowers. That is not good because they don't dry so easily. These hybrid sunflowers were the size of a small plate.

NP: Like a side plate, your bread plate?

PS: Yes, and that would be the ideal size of that. When we started harvesting sunflowers, we would go 24 hours of the day if possible. You couldn't always do it because in the evening it starts to take on moisture—that is how grain is—so you have to stop your operation, and that is where having an accurate tool to measure the moisture content was critical.

When we were working for Shilo, we never went to a grain elevator with any of that sunflower seed. It went into the truck. That farmer had a siding in Shilo reserved for a train, and train cars there with big hopper cars, and we had to move those cars by hand and fill those cars one by one by one until it was a train full, and I guess off to Lakehead or wherever they took the grain. We didn't really know at the time.

NP: Producer cars?

PS: Producer cars. Those great big hopper cars and off to market they went. We had confidence in the grain that was going in, and the seeds that were going in there, that they were dry, and they never had an issue with us because of that fact. That is why the quality control had to be there right from the time it was harvested because you are sending it to market, and if it got to where it was going and it was tough, damp, or moldy because that is where it would progress to it would not be good.

NP: Were you carrying insurance then on that quality of the crop?

PS: No, we didn't actually have any insurance like that at all on it.

NP: I thought custom combining would come in, but I didn't realize you were responsible for making sure it was the right time.

PS: Yes, they relied 100 percent on the harvesting company to do that.

NP: Were there a lot of your type of companies operating in Manitoba?

PS: No, I am going to say three or four in total. We were one of two operators that worked at Shilo. The Shilo Farms, when we worked with them, they did a lot of corn. Their biggest crops were corn.

NP: That is usual for a Prairie, because that is more a US grain.

PS: It was harvested and into kernels and sadly we don't have pictures. It was one of the most impressive things that you have ever seen in my lifetime for harvesting grain. The amount of harvested kernel corn that I have ever seen in one location in my lifetime and ever will. They had large Quonset granaries, big, long half dome buildings filled to the top inside with corn—two to three hundred feet long, each one, by about 100 feet wide I am going to say. They were separated, and you can imagine several of these side-by-side separated by 100 feet each. Outside of each one of these granaries filled between them with corn and every kernel of this was dried with a dryer. The custom harvester also was responsible for the drying.

NP: Did you have your own dryers or--.

PS: No, we didn't cut the corn. That was a separate harvesting company, and they had their two machines that did all this. They just go, go, go, go, and then dry it and everything was dried.

NP: Industrial farming.

PS: That was the beginning of it, but sadly Shilo Farms went bankrupt right after that. They bought the land for \$1 an acre, and they still went bankrupt.

NP: Why do you think that? Prices take a kicking?

PS: Everything, and the price of grain, which is why I never went into farming. My father wasn't happy with me when I didn't go into farming. He was very upset. I just seen the economics of it, and I didn't want the pressures of it, so I chose not to do it. I could make more money custom harvesting, and that is what I did, and I did that for I am guessing it was eight years if I recall. Like I started to say earlier the first combine I bought was \$24,000, the second one was \$32,000 or \$34,000 and this was a three-year spread in between them. Three years after that the same machine was \$125,000. I said, "I can't do it. I can't make any money at it," so we put everything up for sale, and sold the whole lot stock and barrel, and moved on!

NP: Yes, I remember that time.

PS: It was sad. I enjoyed the work, and it was a lot of hard times because you worked. I stayed in one of my trailers that I set up at a farmer's place. Before I owned home trailers, I would be driving home at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning with my head the window of the truck trying to get fresh air to keep awake, so that I could make it home back to Neepawa from Brandon or wherever I was. You worked so hard to make it happen and that was life. You just did it.

NP: You loved it because it was not making you a millionaire by the time you bought the equipment.

PS: No, you just made a living and that was it. You really did.

NP: You talked about your first machine versus your last machine. Per acre, what were the advances there?

PS: We were paid either by hour or by acre depending on how the farmer wished to have negotiated with us what we wanted to do. With the bigger machines, we were further ahead to combine by the acre.

NP: Why was that?

PS: Because we got a lot more done with a big machine and you could cover a lot of ground in one day. The smaller machines didn't do as much, so by the hour. We were getting paid \$50 an hour I think back then for our work.

NP: Plus expenses?

PS: No. It was \$50 an hour and that was it.

NP: You had to pay for your fuel and your equipment?

PS: Fuel, trucking, and combining. That covered everything.

NP: Can you say that again because I interrupted you?

PS: When we had the 510 combine, for example, I believe we were getting paid \$50 an hour. Actually, I think we got paid \$25 an hr for the combine, and then if we were trucking it was so much extra, \$15 an hour or something—some ridiculously low price. Then when we had the 7540s, it was \$50 an hour, and I think that was all inclusive and that included your trucking. You had to haul it to their granary, et cetera. The farmers supply the augers to get it up into the bins. They had either gas-powered augers or tracker PTO driven augers that we would just dump, and it was within really close proximity at the time to where you were even in the same field sometimes, so it wasn't a big deal.

How that worked was when we were full on the combines, we would either radio, because we had two-way radios, or we just had a light where we would just pull a switch in the combine and a rotating beacon would go on the top and that signalled the truck that we were ready. But typically, we just CB radios at the time and that was the big fad then. You would keep going and not stop the truck would just track along beside you and the truck would fill it and our combines had unloading augers that you could adjust on the fly. That was a big deal with Massey Ferguson where you could move it back and forth and fill the grain box as you wanted. They didn't have to match the speed, so I could move it back and forth over the box of the truck and put it at the back or at the front as that truck was moving along, and then shut it off when I am empty. Then they would go off and get another load from one of the other machines.

NP: All of the controls for this shoot were all in the cab, so it was a one-person operation?

PS: Yes, and you were going at full speed down the field while you did this, and in the middle of the night and it was all lit up. Just unbelievable. There are lights on every part of this machine that you could turn off or shut on. The same thing on the unloading spout, and you would just pull another switch, and it all lights that whole area up so you can see what you are doing. On the back side of the combine so that you could walk around at night and look at what was going on with belts and pulleys, et cetera.

NP: You would have to do a visual inspection at the beginning of the day because different parts of field would be wetter or dryer because once you are working at night--.

PS: Yes, to some degree. You could tell as soon as the straw starts to get tough, the machine starts to sound different, where it starts to groan and make groaning noises because it is starting to toughen up. You have to stop now. You don't go to the end of the row because now suddenly that whole load is tough. It has got damp grain in it, and it is no good.

NP: It is contaminated.

PS: It could rot.

NP: It is like the bad apple?

PS: Yes. It was a big deal. You had to monitor that whole process. In the morning before we started harvesting, you were doing maintenance. Hours of maintenance greasing and changing bearings and fueling and cleaning filters, et cetera, every day. It was an ongoing process that was just expected. It was life in that world.

NP: I am just listening to you, and I'm exhausted! Why did you do this?

PS: A farming background, I guess. It was what we knew. I guess it was ethics. I am going to say that the ethics that are instilled in you as a young person growing up on the farm, as I mentioned earlier the only thing we ever knew was work. When I was in Winnipeg, I was injured in a car accident and had my foot almost cut off. I had a trailer hitch go through my ankle. I would be trying to run behind this combine on a set of crutches, and one of my other drivers or my brother would be driving trying to see how much grain is coming over and setting the machine up for that various crop. It was harder than you even think. But you did it. In order to make a living and to meet your commitments, you did whatever you had to do.

NP: Must have been some satisfaction, too?

PS: Yes of course. I have always been a person who didn't want to fail or be viewed as a failure.

NP: Or let people down.

PS: Or let people down. Never. You would fall to pieces if you think you hurt somebody, or you let somebody down, including the bank, your parents, your grandparents, your children, your wife, or whatever it is. It has just been instilled since day one! You did whatever you had to do, and it was tough because sometimes, as I mentioned, that first combine that we had that was breaking down all the time on the second year. We were so disheartened, and I was ready to give up and drive it into a swamp. I seriously was! How could these people design something that was this bad? But we had abused it the year before, and it was put through more than it should have been. We didn't abuse it because I was never like that, but it was just that it was working in mud, and it should never have been working in those conditions.

I remember this shaft that we had to get for that machine. I mentioned that I am a pilot. Ken Kane Aerial Spraying in Minnedosa, who we use to work for as well, he didn't have a combine, so he flew me and my wife into Winnipeg, and we picked this up at the Massey Ferguson headquarters in Winnipeg and flew it back and installed it the same day. These kinds of long, hard times were

there. People, if you understand, they have hired you to harvest their crops, and if your machine is broken down on the side of the field and the sun is shining and it is the only good time in the last week that you could go, they are not happy campers. There is a lot of responsibility beyond the financial side of things. So they relied heavily on what you were doing to get their crop off in good shape. Other farmers, like the Shilo Farms for example, when we did all their barley, if you can get malting for them—I am not sure if you are familiar with that term—but if you can get malting barley, which is that you harvest it so that it is pristine-- . When you harvest barley, you actually, in order to get malting quality out of it, you had to put the concave away from the cylinder in the machine.

NP: What is concave?

PS: The cylinder turns very fast. The concave you can take it away and separate it from the cylinder so that the grain that is coming between the two is either really squished or compressed in there, or it is not going through. Ideally you could speed up this cylinder and slow it down and open the concave up and close it up tight. By opening it up a little bit, you would get better quality barley by not taking off that germ. You take the beards off, and you would get malting quality. That simple act would either pay for the combining by itself maybe—just by the grade of the grain that they are getting versus what they would get if it was either harvested too harshly or if it was left out too long. If it is exposed to days or weeks of rain, those things start to diminish. The ability to get that quality out of that cut grain is not there. The same thing with other crops, but barley was particularly the one that you were trying to get malting for, and that is what it was termed as. So, if it was called “malting grade” it was good. They get a lot more per bushel for their grain.

NP: Those beer drinkers are very precise!

PS: They are very fussy.

NP: Yes, very fussy. [Laughs] Anything else that you want to say about that whole custom-combining operation or business?

PS: I think as you drive around the country and you see these people doing this-- . We never went to the States. There are some people from Manitoba that migrated down to Texas, and they started in May in Texas and worked their way up through all the Great Plains and ended up in Canada. That used to be the case, but I am not sure if that still is the case because of restrictions on trade. We were going to do that and decided not to, and just as well we didn't as it might have been a really tough life. You look at some of the farmers and their ability to harvest their own grain—and you don't have to drive very far down Highway 61 here—and it just eats me up inside to see the rows of green in the fall that have come up after they have harvested their crops, and they have thrown it all over. All of that grain was completely salvageable in the machine, but the farmer doesn't know how to set the machine. That

was a lot of cases, and it was and is this day on the ability of a farmer to know how to set the machines to save a certain variety of crop without throwing it right back out onto the field and have no idea that they have done it.

The custom harvesting, if nothing else, almost paid for itself in some respects in that way. We could save tremendous amounts of grain that they would throw over—that their older machines would throw over—that they couldn't get their work done because they just had old equipment. So, they are better off to hire it out, and that is where we provided that service and did so for a number of years for many farmers. It was just something that we did for them.

NP: Sounds like there is a little opportunity for a seminar here because there is more and more attempt here especially in the Slate River Valley particularly I guess out in Murillo? I think I know the farm that you are talking about. I love watching that field as it goes through the different seasons. There is more and more attempt for the local food movement here.

PS: I would really love to stop in and talk to that farmer and help him because they throw over more grain in one year and they could plant two or three crops.

NP: I actually thought they were planting. That was the one I thought they were planting.

PS: Is it in rows?

NP: Yes.

PS: That is not planting.

NP: Okay.

PS: They have thrown it back over and the geese love it.

NP: Yes. We can look that as a positive side. [Laughs]

PS: There is an upside to it absolutely. [Laughs]

NP: If you don't mind, I know somebody in the local food group here.

PS: Sure. There is a friend of mine who just bought a combine here last year and he lives out in the South Gillies area, so we have been out there and helped him. He has a little hobby farm there, so I helped him set it up. He comes over and we sit around this same table, and we talk about farming. I have known him for a number of years, and he didn't know that I came from custom harvesting and farming background. So we sit around and talk a lot. He is just a young man starting out with his family and loves what he is learning from the whole farming side of things.

NP: From the wiseman from the west! [Laughs]

PS: I wouldn't go that far. Again, it was a tough life. When the price of equipment changed so dramatically, we just had to abandon ship kind of thing and change gears and do what we are doing now.

NP: You fell back into your winter--.

PS: I started doing contracting then and didn't like it. That's when I started getting into building. I was very interested in building performance energy savings, et cetera, and started doing that. I started working out of Thunder Bay area here for the National Energy Conservation Association and Ontario Hydro, at the time, selling energy conservation upgrades to electrically heated homes. Whether it was air sealing and replacing a window, siding and cladding, windows and doors.

NP: Actually doing the work?

PS: No. Selling the services for Ontario Hydro on an Energy Conservation Program, and they were subsidizing air sealing was 100 percent and insulating was X number. Then these homes were all monitored to determine how much if any savings were derived from any particular called ECU Energy Conservation Upgrade. These homes had called these RIM meters, Remote Interrogation Meters, put in them for a year prior, and then it was up so someone, and in this case me, to come in and try and sell this upgrade to a homeowner that had this RIM meter. The rest is history from what I do now.

NP: When you were doing your work or working on the farm--. I have a question here about your connection with the other segments of the grain industry, which we touched on a little bit. But I am just going to give you the list and ask you if in your career you had personally any connection with them, other than you were talking about your grandfather and your father. We know you had a really close connection with other producers. Did you ever have to have any contact with the railways?

PS: Not really, no. The only time when we filled grain cars directly out of an auger into grain cars and other than that the railways came to the local elevators in Kelwood, Riding Mountain, and Eden were the three primary ones that we went to at any given time

to put our grain in. At any one of these times, they would give so many cars to an elevator, and that would open up quickly. You would want to get your grain in there from the family farm as soon as you can as soon as the elevator was full, and that was it. Everybody shut down again.

NP: That seemed to be perennial problem, car allocations.

PS: Yes, it was always the case. Eventually it was hopper cars, but at first it was grain cars with the big heavy planks and the doors and that kind of thing. That is as far back as I can remember anyway. I do remember when I was a child watching the steam locomotive go past just east of our house pulling grain cars. The big black smoke coming out, and that all changed to diesel. The elevators had their sidings, and then they would fill the cars. When the cars were full, the train would go by every week or every other week and pick up these cars and eventually make its way to terminals and ultimately through Thunder Bay and to the grain terminals here and off to distant foreign ports.

NP: That is a nice lead into my next question. Were you aware of Thunder Bay, when did you visit, have you ever visited a terminal elevator?

PS: When I came to visit my aunt and uncle back in 1975, which is when I just had got hurt with my leg, I was here for a couple of weeks, and they took me on a tour then of the area here and looked at, and I was very impressed and making the connection to where all the grain came that we harvested. That was a nice connection.

Then my sister married a young guy here and his father was a grain inspector for his whole life, Rollie Ploss, and Rollie now lives in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. He moved to Neepawa from here and then moved out there in the last few years. He is still living, and his connection with the grain elevators was a little more than usual because he was very artistic and drew the inner workings of all the elevators here and in Churchill and in all the other ports in Canada and would be a very interesting person to speak with about it. He worked out of Thunder Bay here but travelled extensively drawing all of these inner workings of the elevators in every location in Canada.

NP: Did he keep them?

PS: I am sure he has. I believe so.

NP: Maybe you could make that connection for me. I would be thrilled!

PS: He is a very interesting person to speak with.

NP: How is the last name spelled?

PS: P-L-O-S-S.

NP: You know, I think I have him on my list.

PS: Do you? Rollie Ploss.

NP: Ro?

PS: Rollie, I think, or Rollie or something.

NP: Okay. Wow!

PS: Hopefully he is coming to visit me here this summer.

NP: Perfect!

PS: We are going to see, as his wife was not doing too well. She is suffering from Alzheimer or dementia.

NP: Did he grow up here as far as you know?

PS: As near as I know, he did. He lived over here on St. Claire and worked in the elevators. He continued to work there until about 1989 or 1990 I am going to say. He retired and moved to Neepawa. His children have moved out to Neepawa, so he wanted to be closer to them thus he moved out there. It is another nice connection there.

NP: Wonderful.

PS: He would tell us all kinds of stories about his life working in the grain elevators here and his role because he was creating with that. I just forget exactly everything he did. You had better set aside about six hours when you talk to Rollie.

NP: Great! I love that. [Laughs]

PS: Because he has never been at a loss for words.

NP: That is wonderful. That makes a great interview!

PS: Yes.

NP: I think my longest interview, not all at once, was with a person by the name of Frank Rowan who spent most of his career with CWB. The stories and the information that would have otherwise been lost are just great. Any connection then with the grain inspectors or the CGC in your role with the combining?

PS: No. Our role was pretty much just doing the harvesting. Either it went to an elevator, but primarily they went to grain bins, and then the farmer would then transport it to an elevator. Sometimes we took it to an elevator, but we never really had anything outside of that realm at that time.

NP: How did you learn your testing?

PS: As a child growing up every week, when we went to the grain elevators and watched them doing it. Of course, there are instructions with the equipment when we bought it. That was one of the things that let me sleep at night when it came to the grain that I harvested—was it okay? If it went to that elevator and it didn't match that was a big deal.

NP: Did you ever have any bad news cases, or you knew your stuff?

PS: No, we knew. You could tell sometimes by just holding it in your hand, but it was never a good test.

NP: Unless it was really bad, it was a good test?

PS: Yes. My father had all these testers that came out every year, and they just were never matched what was in the elevator. I could not take that pressure of guessing. There were relatively inexpensive compared to the one that ultimately was the same as the elevator. We are talking 1975 here, and it was in 1976 that I got the grain tester, I guess. At that time, it would have been \$1,200 to \$1,500 for this tester, which was a big amount of money. But think about the security you get from not worrying about whether some farmer's grain is damp or tough. If it went in damp or tough, they got docked that.

NP: I think that especially would build some amount of suspicion of what the elevator was doing if your tester wasn't matching up with their tester and turned out to be a question of the quality of the tester?

PS: Our credibility was at stake as well. That never became an issue ever. What we did was legit. People could rely on what you were doing. We had repeat customers, and most times we had to turn away customers every year because we just could not handle it. You had to do good work. There is only a short season, so you fit it all in.

NP: Do you recall if the tester was made in Canada or imported from somewhere?

PS: It was either from Canada or United States. I can't tell you. You could go to this day in some of these grain elevators and look at the exact testers.

NP: The problem now is the Grain Commission office here.

PS: They would have the exact tester. It came with a scale and metal basket that you poured out a certain amount of grain into and weighed it. You weighed it, dump it into a cylinder that your trip, and that trips it into the moisture meter part of it, and it determines the moisture content of it.

But I think the harvesting part of it that might have been a missing part of the equation part of it here. It is such an integral part of the whole process, where this grain comes from, where it was grown, how it is handled before it makes it to market is a big deal. I remember back as a young person, our granaries were full, and we had to store grain outside and cover it with tarps. We would put big tarps down on the ground and large piles of grain all tarped over, to try and protect it until it made it to the elevator.

NP: Mice come to mind.

PS: No mice were ever an issue in that part, but mice and granaries were an issue. Mice on the outside were never an issue.

NP: They didn't like it outside either!

PS: No, it was too cold. But we would also store grain outside in large piles. We would purposely cut it damp because the season is over, and we would cut it, and harvest it, and pile the grain, and then dry it as soon as we can. It would be sometimes steaming.

These piles of grain were smoking and steaming and eventually starting to smell until you got it dried. That would only be feed grain then, as you could never sell it otherwise.

NP: As I mentioned, some of our questions get asked as we go through it but again just to allow you to add information. What were the major changes you saw in your job over the years on the farm and in the custom combining that you haven't already dealt with?

PS: The size of the equipment was one thing, and the technology that went into it. Some of the early combines that we started with when I was young were just little tiny devices in size that worked well enough, but small and fragile. Picking up stones and stumps, et cetera, and running that through a machine would happen regularly on our property. They just couldn't handle it, and no machine can handle it, but they just destroyed the inside, and it was never good. But as technology changed, you were watching the pickup all the time. For example, it would pick stones and stumps, and you had a button that you never let your hand off of, and you would hit it, and it would stop that pickup. It would never make it into the machine. All those things were the little pieces of ingenuity and technology that prevented damage.

And just not being out in the elements with the heat and the cold, and having cabs on the machines that kept you more comfortable, that was a big change because it was just brutal as a young person in the same day wearing down to no shirt on and just jeans and no shirt to a parka at night and being covered up. If you can imagine now all the dust and stuff that was on your body from the day—barley and oats were the worst. It was like working in insulation if you can imagine. That is how bad it was. It was terrible and itchy conditions. Pretty much that was gone with the advent of cabs on the combines, et cetera. You had a filtration system and air conditioning in your cabs that filtered out 90 plus percent of that. It would still get a little bit dirty in there but never like the old days to us at the time. It has been 35 years since I quit harvesting.

NP: What you have told me takes away any preconceived notion that you sat in the combine and read a book?

PS: No. Just running the controls all day long, it was almost hypnotic when you are going back and forth or around and around these fields because some fields were large, wide-open expanses where there is a quarter section and straight rows back and forth, and then the next area are all swamps and sloughs that you cut around. It was just a tapestry of patterns on the field that you followed.

NP: When you went out to a field, then, when you first decided whether you were going to take it off or not, did you in your mind have a travel path?

PS: Yes and no. It depends on who we chose to work for at the time. At first you would take anybody as a customer obviously to get work and then within a year or so you just stuck with the people that had good habits on how they paid you and their property whether it was level enough. Because getting on really steep side hill issues was all changed how the machines ran and how safe it was to even be in the cab. On some of these places, it was dangerous to be on some of them. There would be steep side hills or up and down.

NP: Did you ever have close calls with those?

PS: Oh yes, absolutely. You would be feared of tipping sideways in some cases. More on our own property, but it was on others as well.

NP: You learned to make those choices?

PS: Yes, and you are doing this in the middle of the night sometimes. You are in fields where you could not even make it back. You were lost in the field. I remember recall up in the Minnedosa area there were some of these fields that your grain hopper would be full and now you had to backtrack for 15 or 20 minutes or half an hour back your route because it wasn't taking you full circle in the field. It was taking you in this pattern in the field however the farmer had cut it. That was frustrating sometimes because you were there trying to make money, and if you are doing it by the acre, that would lead into how much you got down during the night.

NP: Did you become better over time to actually make a combining plan on where you were going to start and where you were going to end?

PS: Yes. At the end we would have, I am going to say, only three or four customers, and that was it. They all were big enough that we could not have taken on any more anyway. You may find this very hard to imagine. I was on my own because my father would do sometimes his own as well. I recall I would actually work for the Hutterites. If you can imagine Hutterites hiring out their custom harvesting, but that was the case. They had John Deere 7700 combines, and they had several of them. They had 1,000 acres or slightly under, I guess, and this is the Spring Hill Colony near Neepawa. They would hire me to cut their sunflowers because their machines could not harvest it without throwing it over. They could not set their machines. I even tried to set their machines, and I could not do it. It just wouldn't keep the sunflowers. They hired me on an hourly basis I believe it was, and I would cut their sunflowers. It would pay the amount that I would save them in their lost grain easily have paid for my machine, I guess. We would work for them as one of the customers. That would be the last customers in the year because it was sunflowers. Again, Ken Kane Aerial Spray in Minnedosa, I worked for him for a number of years, and Shilo Farms over near Brandon, and then another big farm over near Brandon. Between four, five or six that we would do. Sometimes we would take on somebody just if it was a week or

less, then we would get them done in no time. Other than that, it was four or five customers, and we would set up our schedule and be there as soon as we could because money talks, and it is that you had to be there.

NP: When you think back on your career either on the farm or as a custom combiner are there any special incidents that stick in your mind that are--.

PS: Yes, there are a few. We had people working for us, one of them was my father's friend. His name was Lorne Freeman. He was a trucker is what he did for a profession, but when he wasn't doing that, he was working for us driving our grain trucks. That is what he did. We were working this one night over near Brandon for a farmer that had big, tall granaries. He had his own enormous auger run by a big International tracker with a power take off on it, and you could back up to this auger and dump your load, and it wouldn't even slow down. It was like it went into a hole in the ground almost. This grain bin was getting full, and the farmer was up on the top—and this is in the middle of the night—and he yells down to Lorne at the truck and indicates about two or three feet at the top of this bin. Lorne quickly shuts off the flow of grain coming out of the box into the auger. The farmer wasn't thinking that this auger is still full of grain going all the way to the top. By the time this auger got shut off it had burnt the belts off because it is a PTO, plus a belt driven system.

NP: PTO? Power takeoff?

PS: Power takeoff on this auger running a belt drive system that turns the auger. These belts completely disintegrated, and they started smoking and burnt off because the grain was no longer coming out at the top and it just plugged up the whole thing. That wasn't good, and that was one of the things that we recall.

NP: Not something you want to happen in the middle of the harvest?

PS: No. It was in the middle of the night and the belts are burnt off this auger, and we were shut down, and that is it. You are done. Another time we were moving between farmers and driving the machines up the side of the highway going to a new farmer's place. These clutches that I said were so temperamental on this Massey Ferguson 510s, they were located in a very deep pulley in the back and very hard to get at the part of a pulley. Dust would collect in there during threshing. This clutch was always moving. Unless it was engaged the machine would not turn over, meaning it would not start the threshing part. This dust that would get in there would heat up to the point where it would start to smolder and catch fire. We had machines in this one case caught fire. That was another time that they had to get that all doused out with water.

NP: Do you travel with a fire extinguisher?

PS: Yes, they had fire extinguishers. But we had to go and get water, because a fire extinguisher you could extinguish it, but there is so much fine grain dust in there that it would just keep smoldering away, and you could not get it out. You had to throw water in there and wash and flush it out. In this process Lorne was riding with my dad, and they had gone ahead in a pick-up truck to a local farmer to see if they could get some water. My father, who was petrified of dogs, leaves the door open on his truck, and Lorne is sitting in the passenger seat, and there is a hedge between the house the truck where they are parked in the driveway. My dad just makes it through the hedge, and this Lorne guy starts imitating a dog barking. Well, my dad was back in that truck with the door closed before you could imagine. Then the lady of the house comes out to inquire what was going on there, and my dad said, “Well our combine is on fire up the road here, and we need some water.” Meanwhile they are both laughing their heads off in the truck. It was a whole story that stuck with us. [Laughs]

NP: Meanwhile the farm woman is wondering what kind of nut she is dealing with.

PS: What kind of people are laughing about their combine being on fire up the road? [Laughs]

NP: I think it kept you sane, right, to have that sense of humour?

PS: Right.

NP: Was there much damage done?

PS: No, nothing. It just smoldering and smoking away.

NP: When you think back on your career in the grain industry what are you most proud of?

PS: The integrity and our commitment we had to the customers and to the whole process. We never lost sight of that for a second. Anytime we were either working on our own farm or seed plants and fields from a child picking foreign grains that were in there, it was almost like it was a life and death situation. If you missed this little head of grain, it was a big deal. From that point on to working for other farmers it was like it was your own. There was no question that you were going to do your level best to get it done properly and move onto the next person and keep integrity. Integrity was, and is, such a big thing in my life and what we were doing then. A total commitment, I guess. It was handed down from my grandfather to my father and so forth to do it right!

NP: That's good. I don't know if you ever thought of it, but I will ask a broader question. I knew very little about the grain trade before I started working on this project, and I have been constantly amazed and continually amazed by what was accomplished in a big, cold country with relatively few people to become a world renowned and respected grain producing nation. From your early family history through to combining, what do you think your family did to contribute to that international reputation?

PS: My grandfather travelled abroad to England and everywhere to talk about some of these things, and he was such a big advocate of everything he was doing. He made sure everybody knew who he was. There is so much pride in it. I don't know everything obviously that he ever spoke about international, but I remember it was a big deal when he went over for the inauguration of Queen Elizabeth, and at the same time was there meeting with family but also undoubtedly talking about the CWB and to all of his cronies over there that he knew. That was his life. My grandfather, you would not think by looking at him that he was a farmer, seriously. He wore a top hat and a jacket and slacks and dress shoes his entire life. He was more of a politician and an advocate than he was a farmer because his sons did the farming. He was a businessman to that length, I guess. He drove a tractor a little bit, but it was only to be in a seed plot or something like that or doing a bit of harrowing. He was always the voice for what he was in favour of with the Grain Commission and the CWB and whatever he was speaking against or for. That was his whole existence. It really was.

NP: A really close connection to our reputation. He was the personal face of it. Also, I recall people saying the success of an army--. They say the success of the army is not that they are fighting for the country they are fighting for the comrades. That is where they really kept the strength to continue through really tough things. From what you said about the farm, it is really that as well even if you don't think of the bigger thing, you are working together for each other.

PS. Yes, absolutely. The connection between all of this, none of anything outside the farm matters if the farm is not working. If you are not producing grain, if you don't have that side of it, everything else is lost. What people don't recognize or seldom recognize earth wide is that the backbone of the country is what starts with the food chain in the country. Grain and all those things whether it is an oilseed or grain or whatever is what allows people anywhere and everywhere to enjoy the things that we have in our supermarkets. The farmer, to this day, is what makes that happen. It has largely changed. I have friends that are farming still and struggling terribly, and in fact in some cases the farm was willed to them, and they are still struggling because of the costs of fertilizer, chemicals for spraying, and so forth. Fertilizer in one year increasing hundreds of percentage points, and they are trying to compete or keep growing grain under these circumstances. It is just such a struggle for them. I feel so badly for them because the anguish of it. And that is just one thing of many—the weather and all those things—that are working against the farmer. They are trying to grow a crop that is usable in the marketplace. It is very hard. You look at the faces of the people that are doing this, year in year out, and you see the anguish and the frustration that's there, but also the commitment. They would not almost have it any other way it is just their lifestyle. I guess it is like anything, once you are into something that is the way it is and you accept it because it is too late to change horses now.

NP: And there is satisfaction!

PS: Yes, there is a tremendous amount of satisfaction each year growing all this stuff. The maintenance and the cost of equipment and on and on and on, the things that the common, everyday farmer has to deal with is very, very hard thing to do and to simply walk over and buy a bag of grain or a loaf of bread, or whatever it is, seems like a very easy thing to do. But the path that it took to get there is long and arduous sometimes. I think that you are seeing the advent of these massive commercial growing operations is a systematic evolution of what the reality is going to be even more so in the future because the common, small farmer can't make it anymore. It is done on such volume with these farmers. Between the Hutterites and the big operators, that is who is going to be the backbone of what was once the small farm, they are largely gone. They have been taken over by these types of organizations.

NP: Because you have friends that still farm, what are their comments about the major changes that have occurred? The Wheat Board has disappeared, and the farmer co-operatives are over with. Does that bring them hope or despair or a combination?

PS: Some of the comments—and I am just speaking from off the cuff here—is that the larger like Monsanto and some of these other major corporations that the small farmer would have contracts with for canola or whatever the cash crop is because they buy into and have to produce so much or they guarantee so much either works for them or against them sometimes depending on weather conditions, et cetera. It is a constant struggle, and sometimes a farmer makes well in a certain year, and then they struggle for the next eight kind of thing. It is feast and famine. Having known them for a long time some of these farmers, they struggle. It is, to me, beyond what any person should be able to endure, and yet they somehow keep going. The financial strain on the families is tremendous, and it is almost unfathomable. I don't know how they take it. The suicide rate of the small farmer, at least a few years ago, was absolutely horrible because they just could not take the pressures. It was just amazing how many people that you hear of were driven to that length, and it was very sad. They were very hard-working individuals that no matter what they did, they could not succeed.

NP: Changes would not necessarily make a difference?

PS: It is harder now even. The price of fertilizers and fuel and grain and taxation on property and equipment prices has just skyrocketed, so that in many cases it is only the larger operators that can afford these big combines and tractors and seeders and sprayers and on and on. When I was doing custom harvesting, just at the end of it, I started working for a company that did aerial spraying called Aerial Spraying Charter out of Neepawa, Manitoba, and we worked out of the Homewood area down near Carman, Manitoba. Gordon Murray was the owner of it, and Bob Hill was the other pilot that worked there. When we were not spraying

with Aerial Spraying, we were doing line patrol. That was our connection there. Again, it was the spraying stuff that I didn't like it. So I got out of it.

NP: We don't have anything on your spraying career. That is where the commercial pilot license came in, I guess?

PS: Yes, it was.

NP: How long did you do that?

PS: I only marked fields for them. I wasn't a spray pilot for them, but I flew their line patrol with Bob.

NP: What does that mean?

PS: We flew line patrol for Manitoba Hydro, and I did it for them off and on for three years as a back-up.

NP: But the spray part?

PS: I did that for only one.

NP: Was that for weed control on the lines or this was for farm spray?

PS: No, that was all farm spray for potatoes.

NP: Crop dusting essentially?

PS: Yes, called crop dusting. But it was actually spraying for weeds, herbicides and pesticides.

NP: Why didn't you like it?

PS: The chemicals and the pay were horrible and horrendous. Sadly, I had to part company because what I was promised as a worker didn't happen.

NP: They were living off the fact that flying was fun!

PS: Yes, and it wasn't going to happen with me. They didn't know who they were dealing with. [Laughs] I owned my own airplane at the time. That is how it was, and I flew back and forth to work, so I wasn't really starving.

NP: There is more to life than work!

PS: Yes, and I ended up selling everything there, and we moved to Ontario down to Thunder Bay. We like the outdoors and started work down here for Texaco and working with them and doing contracting because I did that for [inaudible]. I have such a bad leg that I can't walk very far and so ended up doing construction and couldn't do that anymore. I was doing that part time when I was harvesting as well, and it was very hard, and I couldn't do it. I got into the consulting side of it. I worked in Neepawa for Strone Construction when I wasn't harvesting for a number of years, and that is how I started in construction, then moved on from there, down to here.

NP: I talked to you before we went on tape about the project that we are working on to try to get a grain industry interpretative centre set up that would focus not just on the past but also on the present and to whatever extent on the future. When you think about your experiences as a boy and a young man and working on the combines, what do you think might—and especially when I think about the registered seed—what do you think could be featured in such an interpretative centre related to that piece of the grain industry?

PS: I think that it is something that is not well known. That it is an integral part of it because that is where the seed originates. It was developed in a laboratory, tested plant by plant in a laboratory to the point where it was germinated and matured and harvested in a lab to overcome some of the things that are common in the farming industry with grains, whether its rust or blights or whatever is wrong with it, drought resistance and all those kinds of things. These few small seeds eventually make it into a small plot that makes it into a larger field that makes it into other farmers throughout the country being able to purchase this grain that now is part of our food chain every day. From its infancy to its proliferation, all across the nation. That, at its small beginning in Canada, in rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan and so forth, and how it has evolved into where we are today, I guess, and different grains.

NP: I don't know if you have followed the industry well enough to even want to comment on things. The genetic modification of seeds and the ongoing battle against having control of the seed as opposed to opening the market to say seeds from the US as an example that are good volume producers but not necessarily quality producers. Do you have any comments to make on those issues?

PS: I sure do because it affects me every day of my life. It affects millions and millions of other people every day of their lives. That is the genetic modification of grains to end up having gluten sensitivity in our bodies. I am gluten sensitive, and I have to have special breads. I can't eat anywhere, any pastas anymore. I can't eat any normal breads or anything, and it all from what I understand genetically modified grains and that is where it has gone because they are high producing, and sadly that is where it has gone. You never used to hear of these types of sensitivities. When I was a young person growing up, I never heard of that kind of thing. Almost every other person you speak with has some sort of sensitivity, and in a lot of cases can be traced back to gluten sensitive. I absolutely believe that we need to go back to some of these different grains, so that it is not being a burden affecting people and a burden on the health industry. It is a snowball effect, as it affects people and their health and welfare of a lot of people because of what they are producing, what they have modified has made it out into the marketplace, and they are struggling to come to grips with the remedy to this.

NP: Some of that, over the time the seeds being produced, there is always an attempt beside the disease resistance and rust resistance you were talking about to increase the protein content, which has an impact on it. So, the move not so much on the Monsanto kind of genetic modification but just the production of improved yields or whatever without taking genes that is part of it, too.

PS: That is part of it, yes, so the yield has obviously been the big deal with the advent of new varieties, and that is where we are today. The price per bushel—to try and make money and try to survive as a farmer—with the price of grain versus the cost of doing business to run a farm, it just doesn't match. The only way to succeed is in volume, and it doesn't matter if it is the grain industry or livestock industry, the ones that are surviving are the big producers. It is a very calculated method of coming up with a success story basically, and it is done with high volumes and numbers and a very low return rate on the investment.

NP: A final question, if your prediction comes true the movement from—as has been predicted for years and years now—from the family farm to the industrial farm good, bad, or neutral impact on, let's say, Manitoba because we will just pick that province? It is on a whole ethic, I think.

PS: I will start by saying that when I was young growing up, the number of students going to schools in any given area was quite significant. Many of those schools have closed now. The towns have almost closed up shop and moved away because of the size of the farms. Even though the same land mass is there, the number of farmers that are farming those areas are few and far between. Like I said, it is the Hutterites or larger commercial operations, and so it has affected the whole entire economy in that way. So the negative is that life is not simple anymore on the farm as it once was. Many of those homesteads are long gone, and the people are not there. The small-town America or small-town Canada is largely gone away. In Manitoba, from where I was anyway, and the

economies out there have suffered greatly and the people that are left there, the baby boomers that are left there, are there by themselves to a large degree because their children have moved off to the bigger cities.

I am a prime example of that. I walked away from the farm and farming prospect because of those escalating costs that I didn't want to saddle myself with for the rest of my life. I somehow saw that I can't do this. I have watched my parents struggle year in and year out doing this. So I think that the change from the small farm is inevitable, and that it is going to go away because you can't compete with the bigger corporations that are doing this with the costs of machinery and all the things that were mentioned before. It is a huge negative because people don't know what they are missing if they could grow up on a farm with animals and the grains and working with the soil. It is just a different way of life that sadly is largely lost because the people that once grew up there are now living in cities and have jobs working and living and doing things that are still reliant on the farm, but fully removed from it.

I know my children, when we drive out to the Prairies and they see a combine going down the field, say, "What's that dad?" I grew up doing that, and they don't even know what it is. At one point, they didn't know what it was. They do now, but that is the way it is. It is changing, and I think it is sad that it has gone away and that these big corporations who are hiring very few people to be able to manage these large tracts of land and do the work because the equipment is so large nowadays to do that type of thing that you need very few people to do it. There are tractors and combines and everything else all run by GPS, so you sit there and watch it work all day long almost that is how different it is.

NP: Like a robot? It is almost like a robot?

PS: It is almost like a robot. So sadly, it is going to go that way, and I am not in favour of it by any stretch of the imagination because I think that there is a lot of missed opportunity. I think that if things carry on the way they are that very few people will be acquainted with the farm and the farm life and where it started, and it will just be a recipe for disaster at some point.

NP: Why do you think a recipe for disaster? What does the lack of that knowledge or the closeness and what is the danger?

PS: Because few corporations going under suddenly can have a collapse of the whole process of this happening. We talked to some of these bigger operations, and they are teetering on the brink of collapse. Because of the economics, they are struggling. I am sure you will see the prices of everything escalating immensely to try and match what is going on in this industry. Hopefully we don't see it, but there is a chance that that is what is going to happen.

NP: You know when you mentioned that—and I don't want to end on a sad note—but that is one of the charms of the Thunder Bay area is because we are small, there is no chance of having those big fields because there are not enough of them around. There is a chance of maintaining that closeness to the land and really doing your best for the land in a small self-contained area.

PS: Yes. Once you start talking to the people that are there, or were there, you start realizing the close connection that humanity has with the land and with the substance that you get from it. It is an important feature that can't be lost. The closer we are to where our grains and where our food comes from are critical. Whether it is fresh vegetables or fruit or cereal grains or whatever it is, and the integrity of that food is critical. Like I said, I have never been a fan of pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, and all the things that go along with it. To go back to a more natural method of farming, I am all for it. There is a very select few that are able to do that and be successful at it. My hat's off to them because it is a very tough thing to do. It is very hard to be competitive and be successful in that, but there are more and more people that are looking for organic food sources.

NP: The bigger you are the less you can afford to do that.

PS: Absolutely.

NP: Because you are taking such a big chance.

PS: Absolutely.

NP: It is interesting to have this conversation with you because it gives me new appreciation for aboriginal people.

PS: Absolutely. To go back to the basics is what we were designed for and to have that close connection. If you think about, even in our city, how few people have their gardens anymore from when we were young people growing up. Everyone had their own garden. It was a pride in the family, their garden.

NP: It was also a necessity.

PS: A necessity, absolutely.

NP: To have food for the winter.

PS: Even we growing up, we had gardens. My mother was a great gardener and so was my grandmother, et cetera. They don't do that anymore.

NP: They are starting to, and that is one thing I like that Thunder Bay is doing. It has a food initiative, and it has just received a great grant from the Trillium Foundation to hire somebody to work on that in-depth for the next couple of years.

PS: Great!

NP: I have gone beyond your two hours and every minute of it was worthwhile. Other than Mr. Ploss that you mentioned, are there any other people that you think—and I do find myself in Manitoba occasionally—if you think of any, you have my email address, so you can email me.

PS: Have you spoken to any farmers out there at all?

NP: Ernie Epp, who sent you the letter, has spoken to some because he is, as you can imagine with the name Epp, he was born in Manitoba, and he has some farming friends that he has interviewed. I interviewed Bill Toews from Kane, Manitoba.

PS: Also known as Toes right.

NP: Here we call them, and always call them Taves.

PS: That is what I knew them as, but they are also known as Toes.

NP: Here?

PS: And in Manitoba as well, but a different pronunciation and same spelling.

NP: Yes, and same spelling.

PS: Was Ernie Epp, was he not a Member of Parliament?

NP: Yes, he was. I will sign off now, and we can always get those names later on.

PS: Yes.

NP: Thank you so much.

PS: You are very welcome.

End of interview.