

Narrator: Stewart Wells (SW)

Company Affiliations: National Farmers Union (NFU), Saskatchewan Wheat Pool

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Summary: Former president of the National Farmers Union and life-long grain farmer Stewart Wells discusses both his career in the grain industry and the major policy issues of his era. He first shares his family's long history of farming in Saskatchewan, as well as their involvement in setting up the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. He recalls the history of the Pool, the Canadian Grain Commission, and the Canadian Wheat Board as institutions set up to protect farmers from private industry and fluctuating global agriculture trends. He then describes his own career as a farmer and becoming a delegate for the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool at a time of major structural change and hostility between farmer members and company management. He recalls a special meeting of delegates in 1994 on the privatization of the cooperative, and he explains the growing secrecy within the organization that ostracized farmers from policy input. He shares the ultimate fate of the Pool becoming a private company owned by an offshore corporation, as well as the impacts this privatization had on farmers and farm income. Wells then discusses the other major portion of his career as the president of the National Farmers Union in Canada. He shares the history of the union, the difference between the NFU and other farm associations, the NFU's policy of non-partisanship and questioning of governments, and both the friendly and hostile interactions with different politicians. Wells also recounts the demise of the Canadian Wheat Board, pressures for change from lobbying groups with low membership numbers, and the current court cases arguing the legality of the government's methods of removing the CWB. Other topics discussed include international agriculture and trade policies, the impacts of the Crow Rate debate, a strike of SWP workers in the 1990s, changes to his local farming community, and the erosion of CGC duties in the grain handling system.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative

NP: Nancy Perozzo conducting a second interview in Swift Current, Saskatchewan and it is June 19, 2013, and I will have our narrator introduce himself and his connection to the grain trade.

SW: My name is Stuart Wells. I am a full-time farmer approaching my 60th birthday, and we farm on the third-generation family farm that was homesteaded by my grandfather in 1911. He was the head professional gardener for the Duke of Wellington in England and could not resist the offer of free land in this place called Saskatchewan, so they packed up the family which at the time just included my dad and his mother. My dad was I think around nine months old when they made the trip over on the boat and ended up here at Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

NP: Were you the kind of child who listened to your dad and your grandfather talk about what life was like in their days on the farm?

SW: Yes. Not my grandfather so much as he passed away when I was still relatively young, but my dad was a builder of co-ops and different sorts of institutions. He also had quite a sense of history, so he was very interested in trying to make sure or at least related stories and events that had happened to him or that he thought were worthwhile passing on. Like a lot of other farm kids and families, we heard these stories at the breakfast table, and we heard them at the dinner table, and we heard them at the supper table. My sister was instrumental in getting my dad to put down some of his remembrances on tape before he passed away in the late 1980s.

Those were tough times, those pioneer times. A neighbour of ours actually wrote a small little booklet, which recorded his remembrances of the times. It was a book that he published in 1967 as part of Canada's Centennial. In that book, he relates the stories about going to the promotional meetings in England just after the turn of the century in the early 1900s. He was not a farm kid. He and his two brothers were city kids, but they were always looking for something to do, and there was this promise of free land. He went to more than one of these presentations that were put on by the Government of Canada. I think that the CPR had a hand in that. In the book, he says that he always came away from those meetings wondering what the buildings looked like on those farms in Canada. Of course, when they moved out here there were no buildings. This was prairie, and if anything was going to be built, he was going to have to do it himself.

NP: Was your grandfather involved right at the outset with the Saskatchewan Cooperative Elevator Company, and there was the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool?

SW: Yes. I am not aware of any direct involvement by my grandfather as far as going around and signing up contracts on behalf of the early Wheat Pools. My dad went to Grade 8 at the local school, which was a quarter mile from our house. By the end of Grade 8, it would be about 1923. So that was when Saskatchewan Wheat Pool got its start, under a special act of legislation in Saskatchewan. So he would not have been directly involved in setting that up because he would have been still too young. But he would have been part of that organization as quickly as he could have been, which would have been about 1923 because he went farming as soon as he was through Grade 8. He went farming full time.

NP: Do any of your dad stories that you heard stick with you and help form your philosophy about farming?

SW: Yes absolutely. He was a great believer in working cooperatively. I am sure a lot of that just came from being a pioneer because if the pioneers were not helping each other, they could not survive. Life was just too tough. But he took it one step further and did become a real active participant in building all sorts of retail co-ops and credit unions and actively working with Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. He ended up receiving an award here in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan used to have a Department of Cooperation, and he won an award in the Builder Category of Co-ops in Saskatchewan. He is recognized provincially as someone who had a lot to do with that.

He did relate all the stories about going to the line elevators or the private elevators and being told that they didn't have any room for No. 1 grain, but if they would take a No. 2 or a No. 3 for it, they had lots of room. It was just another way for the grain companies to make a little extra cash from each farmer. When those farmers were delivering with horses and wagons, there was just no way they were going to turn around and take that grain home after a half a day's trip into the nearest elevator. There were other stories about abuses of the companies not treating farmers fairly when it came to weighing grain or taking dockage from grain, et cetera. These were the things that were happening in the countryside when he was starting farming and which led to the creation of the Canadian Grain Commission through the Manitoba Grain Act in about 1908, which led to the creation of the Canadian Grain Commission, which was there created to introduce some fairness into the system, so that farmers were being treated fairly and had some recourse if they thought they weren't.

Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was set up on a local basis where they had local committees consisting of roughly seven to nine people that were affiliated with the local elevators in their communities. Those people would meet once per month during the winter and then maybe once over the summer depending how things were going in the summer. They had a chair of the committee and a secretary of the committee and other people. My dad spent 43 consecutive years as secretary of the Rush Lake Wheat Pool Committee. There are lots of reasons to think that is too long for any one person to be there, but he enjoyed it. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool had such a superior system when they had all of these small elevators distributed all around Saskatchewan. It is really what created their success and what made them a success by the mid 1960s. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool at one time had more than

1200 elevators throughout the province, and at each elevator they had a committee that was meeting once per month sending minutes of the meeting and resolutions for how the company could be doing a better job, sending those resolutions into Regina where the Minutes were read every month. If some issue started showing up in those minutes that were coming into the head office in Regina, they would get one thousand copies of similar resolutions in that month. When you think in today's terms of focus groups, that was the biggest and best network of focus groups anybody could ever imagine. Through all those years up until the 1990s when Saskatchewan Wheat Pool took a strong position on something, they were speaking from a position of actually knowing what the farmers were thinking. It was a real advantage to their company. My dad was active in Saskatchewan Wheat Pool on that daily or weekly basis by being on those committees.

NP: What was your dad's first name?

SW: Archie. He was Archie Junior, and my granddad and my dad were both Archibald. Then I was named Archie, so Archie is my first name. I have spent my whole life trying not to use that name in school or anywhere, but it keeps coming back. Of course, this last ten years with all sorts of extra privacy concerns and more paperwork and more security, I have almost resigned to using the name Archie. I really think in those pioneer years one of the advantages those people had—and they had lots of disadvantages when they came here—but one of the advantages they had that if they could dream it, they could build it. It was starting over and starting a whole new society. Those pioneers built a lot of institutions and a lot of community type endeavours. Nothing seemed to be too big to take on. Starting in the 1980s or 1990s there seemed to be a real drift away from that, and lots of the second and third generation farmers seemed to lose that perspective. They had seen some failures and had seen some things. It seemed to me that the farmers got jaded in a way, and big business and big government were telling the farmers that, “Just get out of the way. Somebody else can do it better.” I think there was a real loss of vision somewhere there after the 1970s. I think those pioneer times were exciting for a whole lot of reasons, but I think that was one of them.

NP: You mentioned saying and speculating why that change in philosophy or method of operating changed that they had experienced some failures, but your dad's generation experienced major failures, the Depression and the collapse in market at the outset of the Depression.

SW: I think they had the correct feeling that the Canadian Wheat Board and the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and the other cooperatives that they had built pulled them through the Depression, got them through to the 1940s, especially when the voluntary Wheat Board, the Central Selling Agency, crashed and was disbanded in about 1932 or 1933-ish. When the farmers were able to force Conservative Prime Minister to re-instate the Wheat Board in 1935 and then to make it mandatory in 1943 that was a real victory. That led to a lot of optimism and a lot of good times for Western Canadian grain farmers from the mid 1940s on up to the mid 1980s. If you look at graphs of net farm income, there is a 40-year period from 1945 to 1985 where the net farm income is

always positive. It varies between \$10,000 and \$30,000, but it never goes negative. During those years there was no crop insurance, and there were no government stabilization programs or transfers of taxpayers' money over to farmers. If the farmers didn't get their money from the marketplace, they starved to death, and they had to go do something else.

That led to the creation of things like the Grain Commission and the Canadian Wheat Board and the Grain Pools and other co-ops. But in 1985, International Competition and government interference by the European Government and by the Government of the United States got into international trade wars, dumping grain onto the international market and heavily subsidizing it. Canada was not doing that. That really drove the price of grain down through the floor. Just coincidentally, when Canada signed the first Free Trade Agreement with the United States in 1989, the Canada US Trade Agreement, that is when Canadian farm income went negative for the first time. It came down out of that 40-year period, which I think is fair to call that "The Golden Age of Farming in Canada." When it came down out of that in 1985, it stayed negative and went deeply negative for the next 30 years right up until three to four years ago.

When various events turned around and changed that, with the commodity pricing, et cetera, there was a 20-30-year period where farmers in Canada produced two thirds of a trillion dollars worth of farm production and had a net income of zero. These are all average figures but the only way they stayed on the land was with government taxpayer transfers, which were just enough to bring this deeply negative picture back to zero. Farmers were doing this work and producing this high-quality food and ending up with a net income of zero.

The creation of co-ops and retail co-ops and supply co-op, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was both. Really, I think those pioneers were correct in thinking that those organizations were the ones that pulled them through the 1930s. There were lean times in there, of course, in the 1940s and 1950s, but by the mid 1960s there was beginning to be a fair amount of disposable cash that farmers had, and again on average. In the mid-1960s, there is quite an expansionary phase of farmers upgrading equipment and Saskatchewan Wheat Pool for the first time turned a profit in the mid 1960s and started on their way to becoming a real institution.

NP: What year did you start taking more interest than just helping around the farm but actually knowing more about what was happening outside of the farm that was having an impact on you?

SW: It would have been my high school years, I guess, where I was farming full time with my parents. At that time, we were a mixed operation, and we had cattle as well as grain. When I graduated from high school in 1972, I went off to university in Saskatoon, not really knowing what to take. A very good guidance counsellor convinced me to go into engineering, so I spent four years in Saskatoon and came home with a degree in agricultural engineering. It was at that time period—1972—was the lowest enrolment of engineering students at any time since the Second World War. There were lots of job opportunities in 1976 when we

graduated and lots of places to interview. But for a variety of reasons, I ended up coming straight back to the farm. No one could know it then, but when I was talking about those net income numbers before, between 1945 and 1985, net farming income in Canada stayed in this range of plus \$10,000 to plus \$30,000, and the only time it broke out of that range, it went way higher. That was 1976, which was the year I came back to the farm. I looked back on it and laugh and say, “It was all downhill after that,” which is not quite true.

NP: What was going on internationally I would think in that year or the year before that caused it?

SW: It is to do with all the volatility of the grain market, which has always been there and always will be there. In 1970 and 1971, there was a lot of grain around, and the CWB was not able to sell all the grain that farmers produced, so grain was piling up on Canadian farms. The Trudeau Government—Pierre Trudeau was the Prime Minister—instituted a program called Operation Lift. Lift was an acronym that stood for Lower Inventory for Tomorrow. They offered farmers money for a certain amount per acre if they would not seed it. Some farmers took them up on the program and some didn't. One of the biggest turnarounds in commodity pricing happened just at that same time in 1971-1972, where the Russian came into the market, and in a big way. The price of grain more than tripled basically overnight.

There are two ways of looking at that. You can argue that Operation Lift was a great success because Canadian farmers seeded less grain and created more demand. A lot of farmers who participated in the program, though, were unhappy because they didn't have any grain to sell at these new higher prices. Grain, and I am talking mainly about wheat right now, but it really escalated in price up to 1976, and when you adjust the price for inflation those mid 1970s prices for bread wheat were in the neighbourhood of \$24 to \$26/bushel.

Right now, Canadian farmers are getting in that \$7 to \$8/bushel range, and you can find all sorts of media and government people that will tell you these are record prices that Canadian farmers are seeing these last couple of years. It is just plain untrue because you have to adjust them for inflation and look back to what they were in the mid 1970s, and they are far higher.

NP: It wasn't just that one year in 1976 that it continued to--.

SW: The mid 1970s were good, and strong commodity prices, and good growing years because you have to have both. You have to have the crop, and then you have to have a good price structure and a decent demand. But they were both, and they were good. Those better growing conditions and increasing production really took off in other wheat producing areas of the world from the mid 1970s into the 1980s. That is partly what led to these huge export subsidies that the European and the United States Government

put on their export program. The United States program was called “The Export Enhancement Program” EEP, and that had the effect of really pushing down international commodity prices, which really hurt Canadian farmers.

NP: You’ve lived the life of the farmer and be buffeted by international agreements and stabilization programs—incentive programs in one sort of the other—and your work with the National Farmers Union, and I would guess from a policy basis, is interested in these kinds of things. If you ran the world--.

SW: Yes, an interesting premise. [Laughing]

NP: If you ran the world and you knew international competition, what do Canadian farmers need to be as independent as they possible can be?

SW: From the policy perspective, it occurred to me in the mid 2000s when I was representing the Farmers Union on international trade calls with the Ministry of Agriculture in Canada who had a focus group of about 60 people, that he would talk to on a regular basis leading up to these various World Trade Meetings. Then I participated as an accredited Canadian delegate at the World Trade Meeting in Hong Kong in 2005. It occurred to me that having all these meetings about world trade, and this organization called The World Trade Organization, was well and good for its intended purpose, which was to increase trade. But it said nothing at all about the well being of the people in the country.

I started putting this question to various trade representatives from Canada and from other countries, “Did these world trade talks have anything to do about increasing the incomes of the farmers that were affected?” The answer from the Canadian minister and the Canadian trade officials and from a fellow named Franz Fishler who was the European Ag Representative for many years was just an absolutely, “No, these talks are not about increasing the incomes of farmers. These talks are about increasing trade. When you grade those policies and those international negotiations on that standard of did they increase trade, the answer is yes.” The Canadian government set targets in the 1990s to double and triple trade of all kinds including agriculture. They did that, but they were not doing anything for farm income. In fact, farm income was going lower and lower—farm income from the marketplace.

Back to policies, it would be better to set targets for farm incomes. Set targets for communities. Set targets for what you want the rural landscape to look like in 10, 20 and 30 years. No one has done that in Canada since really, I think, since the coming out of the Depression. The PFRA for instance, The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, was deliberately set up to do a specific job in trying to reclaim land in Western Canada and improve the environment. PFRA has just been killed by the current Harper Administration. It does not exist. There is just no vision except this default vision of “Let the market decide.” The market will decide what the

countryside should look like. The market will decide, that invisible hand of the market, will decide what your community or your town should look like or what happens to the soil, and what happens to the surroundings.

I think people need to be smarter than that and need to have the conversation about what they would like to see. I am sure Europe is not perfect, but Europeans have done a far better job of understanding, in historical terms, and trying to project that into the future about what they want their countryside and their farms to look like in the future. There is a phrase “Stupid is as stupid does,” and I think we can relay that directly across to all this talk about the market. The market is as market does. I think it is a default position in that the governments here, and some farmers and the society in general, have just adopted this, which is a real change in direction from the people who, in a very deliberate way, opened up this country and made it into—and built it into—these strengths of being able to produce high quality food on a sustainable bases.

You have really got to work to find people that are talking about that now. What people talk about now is, “How can I maximize the amount of fertilizer I put on the soil? How can I maximize the amount of acres that I own as an individual farmer? How can I maximize the investments that I can make off farm?” You have really to look hard to find the people that are talking about their communities and what they want their communities to look like in 10 or 20 years. Should there be more farmers or less out there?

NP: Those questions are good ones, but in the interviews that I have conducted a lot of those decisions have already been made. Let’s say for example you are an active supporter of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, that was where you took your product and look at the changes in that organization and over the years, which started long before the last round of really massive changes. What are your thoughts on that? I will throw in a couple of other things that other people I have talked to over the last few days have talked about, and that is almost a perfect storm of things. Implement dealers selling bigger machinery, so you can’t get them into smaller elevators, competition coming in and putting up larger elevators that are more efficient and possibly getting better yields on freight, and a lot of changes that you know more about than I do. You start thinking about rail line rationalization, which was probably the first blow to the communities having their own elevators, which was a long time ago now.

SW: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool is an organization that I have spent a lot of time thinking about, especially when I was a delegate there for four years. Then I spent the next three years fighting their plans to privatize the organization and essentially legally steal the assets away from the farmers—about \$1billion worth of assets—and take those assets to the market, the stock exchange, and essentially borrow or get investment against those assets. I truly believe that the change in the culture at Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was one of—in all their formative years from 1923 up until at least the mid-1980s—that culture was one of building an organization of farmers working together to improve the lot of farmers, and they just knew that working together they had some market power. After the mid 1980s and by the time I got there in 1989, it was clear to me that the management of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool had decided that farmers were the problem, not the solution.

NP: What makes you say that?

SW: Just the presentations that we were given when we attended meetings. The attitude of the managers, including the managers that was responsible for the elected side and policy development within the organization. As the organization grew and started to acquire more assets not even directly related to farming, there was more and more secrecy. Farmers were not told about a lot of important events that were happening inside the organization. By the late 1980s, there was a strong push to reduce the number of farmer delegates at the same time the organization was expanding exponentially. There was tremendous pressure to shorten the amount of meeting time with the delegates at annual meetings and at other meetings.

About 1993, the organization—the elected side—sent their delegates out with letters and instructions to those local committee telling the local committee that if there were resolutions passed at the local committee meetings, those resolutions should be reported on a separate page of paper and sent in because the minutes that they sent in were no longer going to be read at head office. This was something that had started in 1923, the local committees writing out these minutes and sending them, and people were hired, full time staff hired by the organization, to comb through those minutes and see what the farmers were saying and see what they were thinking, and then the resolutions would be part of those minutes.

As soon as a couple of my committees—and I was responsible for four local committees around Swift Current—as soon as a couple of those heard that those minutes were no longer going to be read, their attitude was, “Why should we even come to the meeting? Why does it matter that we are here, and what are we doing here? We are all volunteers anyway? Why are we doing this, if head office doesn’t care?” There were just so many small things that were happening that were sending farmers this message that “We know what is best, and we, the managers in Regina, we know what is best. We are a big organization now, and we have arrived. We want to acquire assets and spend farmers’ money on assets that are only indirectly related to farming, and we don’t want any farmers holding us back.”

That just played itself out through all the annual meetings that I was involved with, including the special meeting in July of 1994 where the delegates voted to privatize Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and sell shares on the stock market, just like any other company. The leadup to that is that I had made, after certain statements were made by the president and CEO of the Wheat Pool, I had written letters to them asking what their plans were, and they assured me that nothing would happen by way of privatization or selling shares or any re-structuring of the cooperative without a full discussion at an annual meeting of Wheat Pool delegates. That never happened. They never had a full discussion about this at an annual meeting. They called a special meeting of the delegates in July, the middle of the year. Our annual meetings were always in the first week in November right around Remembrance Day. They just didn’t do it.

NP: Did people not attend? Most people would know that wasn't the best time for farmers to come in for a meeting in July?

SW: In July.

NP: Was it well attended?

SW: It was a delegate meeting, and all of the delegates attended the meeting. All of this information is well documented in a public hearing process that we forced the Provincial Government here into, because the Provincial Government actually had to change the legislation because Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was set up under a special act of the provincial government in 1923. To make these changes, the delegates had to pass a resolution requesting that the provincial government change the legislation. It turned into a political discussion at that point then. Roy Romino was the Premier of Saskatchewan at the time. At first, they agreed to have one week of hearings on the topic and because of the number of farmers that wanted to make presentations that were really upset about this, they eventually stretched it into two weeks of presentations at the Legislature in Regina in front of a Provincial Legislative Committee. All of this discussion is documented in those papers, in Hansard. There were an awful lot of signals, which were all saying the same thing, "Farmers were considered to be the problem not the solution. If we can get rid of this farmer millstone that is around our neck, we can do better." They didn't. They did a lot worse.

NP: Just to step back a bit. It is the board that votes on the decision to move towards privatization?

SW: The board had the discussion, and the board voted that they wanted to move that way. But they had to get a resolution passed by the delegates, and there were 144 delegates. They needed 66 percent of the delegates to vote in favour of that resolution, and they did get that vote at this special meeting in July.

But one of the things they did by concentrating or contracting a timeframe and not allowing this to go to an annual meeting meant that they didn't allow for a discussion out in the countryside. The same farmers that they were about to completely change their whole organization, they did everything they could to stop those farmers. I could go back and say in some cases it was to stop the farmers, but it was to get the resolution passed and get on with the mechanics of changing the legislation without providing opportunities for the farmers to have decent discussions. There were some elected delegates, like myself, who went back to their own communities and said, "We are not going to have any meetings about this." I was elected to lead. Some of the board members made that exact same statement. "I am not going to have any meetings with my committees or other member farmers in the countryside. I was elected, and I am the delegate, and I am elected to lead, and I agree with it, and I am just going to do it." That

just went against 100 percent against the grain of what built Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and what made it into the most successful, and largest, grain handling co-op in Canada.

NP: Anything operating internally within the day-to-day operation of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool that—for instance change in personnel, change of personnel training, change in the background of the people who moved into positions—that would lead to your sense that the farmer was just a gnat working on the periphery of the organization and not necessarily helping?

SW: I can't remember the year now, but it wasn't until I believe the very late 1960s when the first university graduate was hired by Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Until then, the entire organization was run by farmers, and farmers hired the CEO, and the CEO hired the staff and whatnot. They were all moving in the same direction. I am pretty sure my memory is that the first university graduate that they hired was a guy named Milt Fair who went on after many years of working with the company and became the CEO. There was a change in the culture somewhere after the organization became financially successful starting in the mid 1960s. There was a change in the culture, and it became fashionable to be part of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. People in the countryside—very good people and neighbours, responsible people—but people who really knew nothing about the founding of the organization or knew nothing about cooperatives would be convinced by their peers to sit on the local committee, then in some cases to go and let their name stand for election and become board members. By the time of the privatization in the mid 1990s, there were lots of board members sitting on the board of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, who in my view had no idea why they were there, except it was fashionable to be part of a strong grain company and kind of exciting. I actually attribute some of the loss to the fact that-- You could say the Wheat Pool was a victim of its own success. Once it became strong and financially viable and very successful, it became fashionable for people to be part of the organization who really didn't understand what the driving force was that made the organization in the first place.

NP: I think it was Glen McGlaughlin who told me about how the organization was divided into policy and commercial and kept separate by how they reported in order to accomplish some balance, I think, between the social aims. I won't say that those were his words, but that is what I took from it and there was an attempt. Are you saying that as it became more commercially successful, it also became much more dominant over policy things which might have been more in tune with what you were talking about, what kind of community do we want?

SW: Yes. There is a very good explanation of this in those recorded sessions from the Legislature in Saskatchewan in a 1995 presentation made by a fellow delegate by the name of Doug Fauler. He laid out this creative and positive tension that was created within the organization and deliberately created by having both the CEO who was responsible for day-to-day operations and the Director of Policy and Member Services both report directly to the board. By those years of the mid 1990s, this fellow named Glen McLaughlin was the Director of Policy and Member Services, and he was reporting directly to the board, and again in the early

1990s, Milt Fair was the CEO, and he was reporting directly to the board. By 1994, the board had been convinced by the CEO who was no longer Milt Fair, but the CEO was a fellow named Don Loewen, the board had been convinced to do away with that structure and to change the structure.

They made the Director of Policy and Member Services report to the CEO instead of reporting to the board. They moved the Director of Policy and Member Service down below the CEO, and that person then reported to the CEO and the CEO reported to the board. It was a fundamental change, and it was a secret change that I talked about before.

Glen McGlaughlin was the Director of Policy and Member Services when this happened. I broke the news to him during his report at the annual meeting because some of us found out about it before he found out about it. I asked him, and they have recordings, whether they have thrown them out. They used to report all of the annual meeting's proceedings. I asked the question to him, "Did he think it was appropriate that his position had been changed now, and he was going to have to report to the CEO rather than the Board?" It was a total surprise. That is the kind of fundamental structural change that moved that organization away from farmers and towards Bay Street.

NP: In order for those decisions to be made, the board of directors and the CEO have to be on the same page?

SW: Yes, the board of directors voted that that should happen.

NP: There are still farmer delegates but as you said--.

SW: Yes, there were farmers' delegates at that time.

NP: On the board?

SW: Yes, the board was all made up of farmer delegates plus the CEO which they hired. It was those kinds of changes--. And then we got into the battle over the privatization, where I argue that they stole \$1 billion worth of assets away from farmers. The elected side of the organization, the representatives that were still there, like Mr. McGlaughlin and another fellow named Nile Koutiac who is still bumping around in agricultural policy, they stood up at meetings and argued that, "No, no, now that we are going to be an investor-driven organization, the farmer's voice is even going to be stronger. Our jobs are more important now than they used to be." We would shake our heads in the audience and get up and say, "You guys are going to be the first ones to be fired because no corporation who thinks they are going to go head-to-head with Cargill is going to maintain this expense of this elected policy-development side." They were the first group to get fired.

It was very painful because there were families split in Saskatchewan. Families that would have employees at that time who had to make a decision. Do I represent the farmers, or do I keep my job, because I need my job and maybe there will still be a job for me later? I know of one instance where there was an employee who was a district representative, a paid staff person, who was out working with the committees and with the delegate in that district and sub-district where that person's father had been one of the original people who rode around on horseback signing people up in 1923 for five year contracts, getting enough grain together to start the organization. It split that family because they could not talk about Saskatchewan Wheat Pool because of what was happening to it. The younger person was supporting it and still working for the organization, and the parent was somebody who had started it, who just understood how flawed this idea was. It was a terrible sequence of events, and of course everything we said would happen came true.

The organization went through a near-death experience and had to change completely. It had to change completely and reconfigure itself, and it did become a whole new organization, Viterra, which was swallowed up by one of the largest commodity traders in the world. This organization that was started by farmers working for farmers is now owned by a nameless faceless commodity broker who is again in various ways exploiting farmers.

NP: How much of a part did financial difficulties experienced as a result of expansion lead to the 60/40 vote?

SW: There were a series of events, and again it is all a cultural shift that happened inside Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. The lynch pin of the Pool as an organization was something called "The Crow's Nest Pass Freight Rates" or in short people just called it "The Crow." That piece of Canadian Legislation said that the freight rate charged to farmers will be based on their distance from port. That served farmers really well, and the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool grain collection network and all the Pools' grain collection network were set up on the basis of that legislation. It was ironic because when the Crow's Nest Pass Freight Rates legislation came into being, it was a gift to the railways in 1897. It gave them guaranteed benefits. But by the 1970s and 1980s, railways were feeling that they could make a lot more money if this Crow's Nest Pass Freight Rate didn't exist. They were lobbying real hard.

Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister, made public statements that he would not change the Crow's Nest Pass Freight Rate unless there was consensus in western Canada. Unless you had Saskatchewan Wheat Pool on side in the early 1980s, you did not have consensus. In 1982, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool's Annual Convention were 11 days in length at that time. Delegates would go to Regina, and it was quite a pressure cooker because there were meetings going on constantly—morning, before breakfast, all day, and then there would be evening meetings—talking about other facets of the company.

That particular year it was just all about should we change the Crow, or shouldn't we change the Crow? There was this pressure cooker environment set up in Regina. Jean-Luc Pepin was the Minister of Transport. He made an address at the end of this convention, and the delegates voted the next day. The delegates voted to negotiate the end of the Crow's Nest Pass Freight Rate, really again without a full discussion in the countryside with their farmer members. There was a tremendous backlash, and what the delegates did with this resolution was they said, "Yes, we will negotiate, but here are seven caveats that we consider to be non-negotiable points." That was all beside the point. Once they decided to negotiate, that was the consensus that Mr. Trudeau wanted.

NP: Can you think of what some of the major conditions--?

SW: The only one I can think of right now was something to do with inflation costs with railway costs. It is partly competitive information that the railways don't want to be released, but there are ways of handling these kinds of things through third parties. But the railways have never wanted to have full costing reviews of their operations. They continually claim that they are losing money on certain pieces no matter how much rationalization has gone on inside the railway or how much less trackage they are actually working with and repairing. It is never enough, but they don't want anyone doing a costing review on their operations.

There was language in there because the government ended up negotiating the end of the legislation, but they put it into an interim piece of legislation called the Western Grain Transportation Act and something called a Crow benefit was then paid to farmers up until 1996 I believe it was when that ended completely.

The Pool's grain collection system was built on statutory freight rates, distance-related freight rates. When that was gone, that meant that competitors who came in and put up larger elevators or larger terminals on main lines and not on branch lines would all of a sudden have major competitive advantages. The grain collection system that had been the strength of the Pools then started to look like a weakness because as soon as the Pool as an organization would want to build a bigger elevator where they could load more rail cars and load them faster, that meant if they really wanted their members to haul to that elevator that meant they had to close maybe five or maybe ten surrounding elevators to feed this newer bigger one.

You can just imagine all of the fights that happened in all those elevators. They were no longer 1200 elevators but all those hundreds of elevators they had now they had neighbours scrapping against neighbours and towns scrapping against towns, communities scrapping against other communities because now the fight was not over how to build more facilities, it was which ones are we going to close! It really was a difficult time which in a large part Saskatchewan Wheat Pool brought on itself. By the time I was a delegate, this was still underway and in fact the destruction of local elevators was accelerating.

I can remember having conversations with people like the Director of Policy and Member Services and the Financial Director and other people where it seemed like heresy to me for them to have these private thoughts thinking they were going to just immediately snap their fingers, get a couple of extra dollars, and go head-to-head with a company like Cargill. They didn't seem to understand the difference in size and the difference in international capabilities. I can remember having these arguments as we would be traveling to meetings or at the meetings. These managers were totally stuck on the idea that they could compete head-to-head if they just had another couple of hundred million dollars. One of my good friends was a delegate, and in quiet times he would say to me, "I don't want this particular group of managers to have a couple of hundred million dollars, regardless of where they get it from. Because by the end of that privatization, Grain Services Union had publicly stated that they would lend Saskatchewan Wheat Pool \$200 Million."

NP: Who is the Grain Services Union?

SW: The Grain Services Union?

NP: No, I don't know them.

SW: They represented and still do represent the employees that worked for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool.

NP: Just Saskatchewan Wheat Pool or were they across the prairie provinces?

SW: I guess I don't know if they represented--. They must have represented employees of Manitoba Pool and Alberta Wheat Pool.

NP: Yes, they are probably the ones that went on strike as one person told me.

SW: There was a strike in 1993-ish again. It was the first ever strike by the grain handlers that worked for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. I walked on the picket line with Grain Services Union because Saskatchewan Wheat Pool had hired a human resources manager from somewhere in the United States like Atlanta or down there who had a proven track record as a union buster. There is the old adage that a company gets the union that it deserves. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool as an organization was taking a strident anti-union position throughout the organization. The union was forced into this first ever strike, and things just escalated from there. I think that was 1993. I was still a delegate for sure. Again, it was that cultural shift that was happening in all sorts of different ways within the Pool.

NP: The money that you feel farmers lost as a result, could you say more about that?

SW: The hard assets that the Pool had-- RBC Dominion were hired to do the privatization process and in the perspective that they filed they listed the assets at somewhere around \$1 billion or \$1.1 billion. That was all the facilities and the infrastructure and equipment, et cetera. Just the hiring of RBC to do that process in my mind and a lot of other farmer's minds was a complete conflict of interest because RBC Dominion were the ones hired to do a feasibility study about how the Wheat Pool as a cooperative could find new investments. RBC Dominion filed this report, which the delegates were never privy to, this report saying that, "Yes the Pools should privatize, and the Pools should sell shares." Then they were hired to do the process. There was a tremendous amount of income into RBC Dominion from this whole process, and it never exactly passed the smell test.

NP: The loss came about how?

SW: There are two or three different ways of looking at the loss. The first was the loss of the organization as a co-op. Because as a co-op you received patronage allocation just for doing business with the organization. In my own case, I had been selling grain as a farmer from about 1972 and starting out very small and increasing my equity in the family farm. By the time that the first shares went on sale in in-house trading, lots of farmers sold all of their shares immediately. My patronage allocation was the amount of cash that I was able to get in lieu of the shares that I was issued. That number was \$18,612. That money was allocated to me just because I sold grains through the Pool, and I bought supplies from the Pool. After that privatization, if you wanted to participate in any money coming back from the operation of the organization, you had to buy their shares, and then if they declared a dividend on their shares or if the shares appreciated in price, then if you sold those shares, you could crystallize that gain.

Of course, the first thing that happened was that the share price was about cut in half, which really bothered a lot of us because the people who built the organization did it for nothing. The people who built the organization did it out of volunteer time because they believed in it, and they knew it was good for their farms. Those people by the 1990s, a lot of those people, were in the years where they would be receiving a pension from CPP, and they would be 65 and older. The Pool for those people was a kind of religion. They had built it, and they didn't know exactly what was going on, but they knew they didn't like it. But they were the same kind of people that would leave their shares and their equity in there because they thought it might help the organization because it was still called Saskatchewan Wheat Pool.

If there was a death in that family, or if they fell on real hard times and those share prices were cut in half, those people really got hurt because their patronage allocation that they had spent their whole lives building up in there was now worth a half or a third of what it was a few months previously. The people who built the organization did it for nothing. The people who destroyed the organization walked away with millions in golden handshakes, and share options, and all other, you know, early retirement packages, and all those kinds of things.

It was a complete turning on its head of the whole idea of cooperative. Share options and building this class structure again. The managerial class has opportunities to have share options, et cetera, and the farmers' equity and opportunities to build equity has just decreased, and it just throws 100 years of work trying to change a class structure and get rid of the class structure. It just reinvents that class structure all over again. There are a lot of reasons that happened, but in the end that is what happened.

NP: The option of avoiding the sense of being pressured into making those decisions on a financial basis being the amalgamation of the Pools?

SW: The amalgamation of the Pools would have certainly been the way to go. Even in the last three or four years, I have heard more stories that reinforced the first stories that we heard about why that never went ahead. Any of the information I have leads me to believe that it was an issue of egos and personalities at the top of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool that stopped and blocked the amalgamation of the three Pools—that there were key individuals at the top of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool who said, “I am going to be the CEO of the new organization. There is not going to be any discussion about it.” If you get one of the parties saying that kind of thing either during meetings or outside of meetings, it is not a true negotiation.

NP: Was the location of head office another issue?

SW: That is one of the things we heard as well. As delegates of course, we were not privy to any of that. We had—again because of the lack of information and the changes in culture—delegates were not privy to any details around those types of discussions at all, until after the fact. Well, there were key people in Saskatchewan Wheat Pool who just had it stuck in their head that they could go out and go toe-to-toe with Cargill and Bungee and ADM and the international market, if they just had a couple of hundred million dollars.

When they got to \$200 million, they went and spent it, and within a very few months really put the organization in a lot of financial troubles. One of the first things was a terminal in Manzanillo, Mexico that was big money loser, and they got in a lot of trouble with a terminal in Gdansk. As far as I could tell nothing went right with the terminal on Gdansk. But again, they are working over their head, and they got in trouble with contractors. They got in trouble with governments and in trouble with being sued by contractors who said they were not paid for the work they'd done.

Incompetence really had to have played a big part in that. They burnt through that \$200 million real fast. At the same time, they are still destroying the infrastructure in Western Canada that farmers had spent so many years building up out of their own pockets, their own equity. The organization, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, was adamant that they would not sell these elevators back to the

local communities because they would be used as competition then against the cooperative. They would go in and smash down perfectly good elevators and lose any goodwill that they would have had up to that point in the community. They did it just down the road here from Swift Current. They did it in Swift Current. They smashed perfectly good elevators that would still be operating today, if they would not have pulled that lynch pin called the Crow Rate. If they would not have argued in favour of getting rid of that lynch pin, that was one of the factors. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool is both a tremendous success story and a tremendously depressing story about how the second and third generation of farmers were not able or willing to carry on the vision that their parents and grandparents had.

NP: This obviously was a topic of discussion with people I have spoken with earlier this week. I made the observation that a Californian was involved at the beginning and the end.

SW: Aaron Sapiro. The National Farmers Union in 1921 was the organization that invited Sapiro up here to speak about this. By all the accounts and all the writings, he just was a tremendous speaker. The quotes that I remember from him are very poignant and really cut through a lot of the jargon that would have been used at the time and the spin at the time would be the same kind of spin that you hear now about the market and free enterprise and private companies doing better. Sapiro would look at the people and say “This is not about wheat. This is about your family. Can you afford to send your kids to school? Can you afford to put clothes on their backs and shoes on their feet? It is about your community. This is why you need the co-op.” By all accounts he was a fascinating individual and a great motivator. The Farmers Union for its part always took a proprietary interest in the Pools and in the CWB.

NP: Tell me about the National Farmers Union. How would you describe it and distinguish it from other producer groups?

SW: The union has been through various different structures such as provincial structures which amalgamated into a national structure in 1969. The Farmers Union in Saskatchewan can trace its routes right back to the Territorial Grain Growers organization, which had its inaugural meeting in 1901 in Indianhead. To mark that 100th anniversary of that first Territorial Grain Growers meeting the National Farmers Union held its convention at Indianhead and that is the convention where I was elected president. So we marked that 100th year there. The fellow who had served for quite a while as the executive secretary with the Farmers Union developed a flowchart showing all the different linkages of the different organizations over that 100 years in tracing their routes right back to the Territorial Grain Growers.

The individual provincial unions had done a lot of wonderful work leading up until 1969, and then they decided that they would have even more power if they formed the national organization because a lot of agriculture policy is national, and you need the ear of MPs and Prime Ministers if you are going to do important things in agriculture. The National Farmers Union is formed under a

special act of the Canadian Parliament, and in that act, it states what the object of the National Farmers Union is, and the first object is to work for the betterment of farm families.

The jargon that people use today is, they use the phrase of speaking truth to power. The Farmers Union and all of its different structures and organizations and provincial bodies and national bodies has never been afraid to speak truth to power. They have never been affiliated with any particular political stripe. They have always been non-partisan, which means that they are equally critical of all governments, which mean they have never had any friends in government, or any governments that would look on the Farmers Union as an organization as being a friendly organization. That spells itself out in a lot of different ways.

One of the stories that comes to my mind is the rival organization on a national basis has really been the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. The Canadian Federation has always prided itself on representing the interest of industry as well as farmers. One of the curious things that happened sometime in the mid 2000s was the Saskatchewan provincial affiliate of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture was looking for a new executive director. They hired a head-hunting company out of Regina that company contacted me, and I was president of the National Farmers Union, and I don't know if they knew that or not, but they contacted me and offered me the job of executive director of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture Affiliate. They sent me their job description at the same time. The number one item on that job description was to maintain a positive relationship with government. That was the number one requirement of their executive director. If you are going to do that, in the view of Farmers Union members, if you are going to do that you are not really going to do any important good work for farmers because government is always going to come first. There are lots of examples I think of how that has played itself out over the years with various governments.

For instance, when Jean Chretien announced one of the farm stabilization programs he did it with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture people in a field in Ontario, and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture people all felt very important going to this photo op with the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister wearing one of their ball caps. In the end, the program that they announced was grossly inadequate. But they maintained their positive relationship with government, even though the program that they were supporting was not doing the job that farmers needed.

NP: Canada National Farmers Union, are they always angry or are there situations where actually what they want and what the government wants coincides? Are they always in a battle position?

SW: They are not always in a battle position, but there have been a lot of major changes since 1969—since the organization became a national organization, and on most of those major changes it has been a fight with elected politicians and with industry. One of the ones that I was involved in as president of the Farmers Union was the fight to keep genetically modified wheat from being registered for use in Canada. One of the curious things is when you get politicians talking about farm policy, they will say, “If those

farmer organizations could just get together. If everyone would speak with one voice, it would be so much easier. We would know what farmers wanted.” Their default position would be what they try to lead you to believe is that they would do what these farmers wanted and needed.

In the early 2000s, Monsanto and friends were working very hard to have genetically modified wheat registered for use in Canada and in the United States. The Farmers Union built here in Canada the largest coalition on any issue that has ever happened in at least modern times. We built a coalition that had what you would call, to use a euphemism, a very independent minded farmers that would, say, belong to an organization like the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities. They were part of the coalition sitting right alongside Greenpeace Canada. When we started to work on this coalition, to actually think about it, my position was that there would be no way in the world that we would get Greenpeace and SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] and APAC, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture affiliate, and the CFA affiliate out of Manitoba, and all these different people including the Farmers Union working in the same direction—Canadian Health Coalition and the Council of Canadians. It was a huge coalition, and we made it work, and it worked. Those people were united, and they were speaking with one voice. In the end, we did not change the position of the Liberal Government one iota.

Our largest one-day event was a joint press conference that we held in Winnipeg with everybody there. It was an international press conference with reporters on the line from all over the world. The CWB was part of this coalition. The CWB told us afterwards that it was the largest press conference that they had ever had anything to do with. We co-signed a letter to Prime Minister Chretien. It didn’t change the Liberal position one inch. But it caused Monsanto to back off. That was 10 years ago, and Monsanto now is agitating again working with other astroturf, so-called farm organizations and agitating to bring genetically modified wheat.

NP: What is an astroturf farm organization?

SW: A farm organization that has no grass roots. It is astroturf. It is just a covering. An organization that has very few members, that probably has no public meetings of any kind where they develop any policy. One of those organizations right now has been directing the farm policy of the Harper Government since 2006. As opposed to the Farmers Union who prides itself in having local meetings and having resolutions and ideas come up from the members and having annual meetings that are open to the public and resolutions discussed.

The Grain Growers of Canada is an umbrella group of a few different organizations, and two of those organizations are the Western Canadian Wheat Growers and the Western Barley Growers Association. Their memberships are in large part the same people. They have given various answers to MPs at the standing committee in Ottawa the standing committee on agriculture in the House of Commons when they are asked about how many members they have. It is in the very low hundreds. The Western Canadian Wheat

Growers a few years ago held their annual meeting at Vancouver and were bragging on the radio and the reports from the convention that they had no policy resolutions. They had a tremendously successful meeting. They didn't debate any policy resolution. These are the types of people that are supporting and giving all sorts of help and support to the current government.

All these cultural things that are being turned on their head, this are one of these pieces where democracy isn't actual democracy. Canadian democracy when you elect a majority government you are elected a dictator basically because the Prime Minister can do what the Prime Minister wants to do, as long as his MPs will continue to put up their hand at the appropriate time in the House of Commons. There are very, very few checks and balances in the Canadian system.

NP: You raise the issue of working with government and politicians. You have dealt with a lot of them over the years. Were there any that you felt had a similar view of what farming was about?

SW: Yes, although the higher you went up the chain of ministerial responsibility, the less that seemed to be the case. But the Chretien Government had at least one farmer who later became the Minister of Agriculture, and his next Minister of Agriculture that Minister was Lyle Van Clief. You can argue whether or not he was a great Minister of Agriculture, but he did come from a farming background. Their next minister, Andy Mitchell, did not have a farming background, but his parliamentary secretary was a fellow by the name of Wayne Easter from Prince Edward Island, who was a dairy farmer and had actually served 10 years as president of the National Farmers Union. Not only did Wayne Easter know agriculture in PEI, he knew a lot about what was going on in the rest of the country.

I really felt privileged to be in a position with the National Farmers Union where you could travel across the country, meet with other farmers, and discuss other farm policy because you really did get an idea of how difficult it was to design and implement farm policy that was going to work for the majority of farmers across the country because although things can be pretty similar, they can be pretty different as well. Wayne Easter had that background. As parliamentary secretary to Andy Mitchell, he did, I think, a heck of a good job. He also still has an awful lot of respect from other farmers and farm groups just because he has been involved in agriculture issues for so long. Once you get past that, it gets more difficult to find ministers.

The current Minister of Agriculture here federally, he and I would not agree on very many policies. He had some interest in farming in his background, but some of that involves being involved in pyramid schemes and ostrich farming and that kind of thing, too, which his detractors take great delight in pointing out. It is just one of those things that the market is as the market does.

Generally speaking, with the Farmers Union, because the Farmers Union is not afraid to speak its mind and speak truth to the MPs and the Premiers and the Prime Minister, governments are reluctant, bureaucrats—and I don't know about the Ministers—but there

are bureaucrats who do read the NFU material. The NFU documents that have been drafted over the years and presented and published—and my view is biased—but I have read a lot of documents from other organizations, and there is no question that the research, and the discussion, and the conversation that the Farmers Union is just a level above what is coming from other organizations, if in fact they put out any documents at all.

NP: What staffing is in the Farmers Union?

SW: When I was there, we had three full-time staff in the office in Saskatoon, and a couple of full-time staff in an office in Ontario, and a couple of part time staff in Manitoba and the Eastern Maritimes. We were incredibly lucky that the staff we had had deep roots into agriculture and were just tremendous at their jobs and their research.

I appeared last year, probably a year ago now, it would have been before the end of June last year. I appeared by tele-video link here in Swift Current before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture, and I had appeared over the years at both the House of Commons and the Senate Standing Committees. There were a couple of other people—an economics professor from Saskatoon Ken Rosanin and a Farmers Union current director for Manitoba—we were all witnesses at the same time. We were talking about value chains, that was supposed to be the topic, but the MP just took it anyway they wanted to.

NP: What are value changes?

SW: That was their question basically. What should farmers be doing? A value change in rough terms is just the linkage between the farmers and the processors and the retailers and the handlers and the input suppliers and all that kind of thing. I made my presentation, which understandably—and I was not representing the Farmers Union—I was invited there as a private individual farmer. I accepted that invitation. But I was saying things that the Conservative MPs and the Minister would not have been all that happy about, because it is a different point of view to what they have. One of the conservative members from Alberta on the committee when he got his opportunity to ask questions he said, “Mr. Wells, at the Farmers Union Convention in 2009 did you say such and such?” He reeled off this quote. I am sitting there. So, this is three years later, and I am sitting there thinking this sounds familiar. I am trying to figure this out. I say, “Well, I really don’t know. I will have to consider that for a moment.” He comes back to me again just as hostile as you can imagine. I said, “Well, I am not going to confirm it or deny it because whatever it is, you are taking it out of context, and you are going to try to use it against me.” He goes on to the next witness, and he attacks him for some quote that was in the media attributed to him. Then when the next MP gets their chance, and it was somebody from the NDP, that person came back to me and said, “Mr. Wells I want to give you a little more time, so you can explain your answer to this previous question here.”

In the interim, I had remembered parts of my speech from my outgoing speech to the convention in 2009. In fact, I had made the statement that this member attributed to me, but it was a section I was quoting from a book by a guy named Chris Lind who was a university professor at Saskatoon. The last time I heard of him, he was a professor in the Maritimes. A little book called *There is Something Wrong Somewhere*. He had done a lot of research in the 1980s trying to figure out what was going wrong in the farming community. He had boiled it down to this dichotomy between competition and cooperation, and that was the part that I had quoted at this convention. I came back and I said, “The response to that was that I was quoting from this book by this fellow named Chris Lind, and it is a great book called *There is Something Wrong Somewhere*, and all of you, and everyone who is supposed to have some responsibility for agriculture, should read this book.”

Then on the way home, I am thinking, “How many Conservative MPs or their staffs have been reading through the old speeches from the presidents of the Farmers Union?” On the surface, they will pretend they don’t know anything about the Farmers Union, that the Farmers Union doesn’t hold any of their views, and they just don’t want to know. Somewhere some person was told to go back and dig up anything they can find on Stewart Wells that they could use three years later, even if that means going back and reading through their old speeches. I sent out a letter to the editor saying how tickled I was that this MP had attacked me, but I couldn’t help wondering how many other Conservative MPs are spending their late-night hours reading old NFU documents?
[Laughs]

NP: Maybe you will have some converts! How would you distinguish objectives from cooperatives such as Saskatchewan Wheat Pool from the National Farmers Union? Did farmers feel that they were just covering the ground twice?

SW: I am not quite sure I understand that question?

NP: Because Saskatoon Wheat Pool and the other Wheat Pools in their heyday really had, as you said, a lot of policy discussions and probably far reaching not just what elevator are we going to deliver at, but something more to do, likely, with the communities that you have talked about. How would you distinguish, or even how could the farmer distinguish, if we are going to pick which organization to belong to and spend your time volunteering with? Which one would you pick?

SW: It all came down, I think, to a matter of personal preferences, like a guild structure. You just got closer to the organization that interested you at the time. That might last for 10 years or might last for a lifetime. In the main that group of people, they were all the same people who came out of the agrarian movement and pushed for the political arm ended up being the CCF and in various places it took various names. Alberta was a hotbed of progression agrarian movement. They were never called CCF, but all sorts of other party names actually ran the provincial government for some number of years.

In the Saskatchewan case that political wing became the CCF Party. The commercial arm became Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. The cooperative arm, it was all the same people that developed Federated Co-op and Pioneer Co-op and the credit unions here. It was just various different shoots of the same grassroots movement. So those people just self selected into whichever organization interested them the most at the time.

NP: Obviously, the change in Saskatchewan Wheat Pool is a big event over your time so far, and you are still, compared to a lot of the people I have interviewed, a relative youngster, and there is more to come. What else?

SW: The loss of the CWB is in my view a real game changer in Western Canada. The Wheat Board was a unique institution, which there is just absolutely no question put billions of extra dollars into farmers' pockets over the years—money that they would not have had if they had just been relying on the grain trade. The unilateral action by the Harper government to destroy the Wheat Board without a vote of farmers has to rank right up there as one of the most undemocratic and un-researched policy moves by any federal government. They did it just on the basis of pure ideology and their feelings that private business--. The market is as the market does, and the market rules. You don't have to have any sort of plan, and if you are the government, you don't have to research a plan, and you don't have to announce a plan about how things are going to unfold in the future, because it is just the market.

It is an absolute abdication of responsibility in my view to take that approach, but that is what they did. Even though the existing legislation in 2011 said that farmers had to be allowed to vote on a significant change to the CWB, the Harper government moved to, instead of having the farmer vote, to change that legislation. They argued in a court of law, because people like me and other farmers joined together in an organization called the Friends of the Canadian Wheat Board, and we launched legal actions over what the government was doing. At the first level of court, at federal court, we were successful, and the judge agreed with us that what the government had done was an affront to the rule of law.

This is a federal court judge, and the government never slowed down and never stalled, and they kept moving ahead with the passing and the implementation of their legislation, even though they had a court ruling against them. So at the same time they were implementing their legislation, they were appealing the original verdict. Our ruling was overturned at the Federal Court of Appeal at which point we applied to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court declined to re-hear the case. The Federal Court of Appeal ruling then is the one that holds, and that ruling for all the wrong reasons said no, what the government had done was legal, and they were within their rights to ignore what had been the existing legislation.

NP: What was their contention why that was the case where the lower court didn't think so?

SW: The Federal government was successful at the Court of Appeal. They ran three or four arguments simultaneously, which comes as a bit of a surprise to a lay person to see lawyers doing this. They ran three or four distinctly different arguments, and they would lay one out to the Federal Court of Appeal and with their reasons, and then they would say, “But if you don’t agree with that at all, here is our second reason.” But the one that really stuck was they argued— both in public and in private politically with the minister—they argued that the changes they were making to the CWB were so huge that it fundamentally changed everything about the Board, that they were no longer bound by the old legislation. That is what they ran there.

Right now because we have another ongoing case against the Federal Government, a class action where we are asking for a remedy of some \$17.5 billion for the loss of the CWB, they are running exactly the other argument, which is, “No, the changes we made were so small that we hardly changed anything, and that is why we can roll over all the assets and the liabilities from the old organization into the new one, and it is a seamless operation and nothing has changed, except it is no longer mandatory. It is voluntary, and we don’t have any elected directors. We will just appoint whoever we want to, with a five-person board.” They have already been successful running this argument that the changes they made were colossal. Now they are running the argument that the changes they made were tiny. That is where we are in this court process in October 2013. We have a court date set up where the Federal Government has moved to strike the action for lack of cause and will have a judge decide whether we have cause or not for this class action.

Having said all that, regardless of what happens in the courtroom, there is just no question that farmers have lost billions of dollars of actual cash in premiums that they will no longer get out of the marketplace. Farmers have lost a tremendous amount of policy muscle because now there is no central organization like the CWB that can weigh in on policy like plant breeding or genetically modified wheat or other things that are going to impact farmers in various ways, such as transportation policy.

The loss of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool created this tremendous policy vacuum in the mid-1990s. The loss of the CWB has now created another tremendous policy vacuum. It is a policy vacuum that the federal government is filling with these astroturf organizations, which it can use as mouthpieces for government policy and say, “Oh look, farmers are supporting our policy.” It is a loss financially, and it is an indirect financial loss through the lack of a cohesive policy voice. It was so much work that the CWB was doing that farmers were just not aware of, and they won’t be aware of the negative changes for two, three or four years because farmers are living off the equity of these institutions that the farmers in the previous 100 years had built up.

NP: What makes you say that?

SW: There is all this pressure now to kill or destroy or “modernize the CGC.” Who is going to speak up for the Canadian Grain Commission? The Farmers Union and that is it. The CWB used to support the CGC, and together they were a real tag team because

they both worked with international buyers. They both had certain responsibilities. They coordinate on a daily basis, and that is just not there anymore. Just like when I became a delegate to Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, I was shocked the first time I heard my director say, “You know the Wheat Board is okay, but they are not perfect, and they don’t do everything right.” The closer I got to the CWB, as when I was president of the Farmers Union, I would hear the CWB staff and management say, “Well, you know the CGC is okay, but we don’t actually hire them now to do a bunch of our grain testing because we can get it done cheaper somewhere else, with a private company.” The whole system just becomes more and more fragmented every time you lose a cohesive policy voice. Really, the only voice that is left out of that original grassroots movement is the National Farmers Union.

NP: The groups that you mentioned earlier on, the ones that--. The Western Canada Wheat Growers?

SW: Yes, the Western Canadian Wheat Growers and the Western Barley Growers Association.

NP: Have they seen a surge in membership because of the year that they had?

SW: To my knowledge they don’t publish any membership numbers, and I haven’t seen anyone ask them that question lately. To tell the truth, I wouldn’t believe the numbers that they gave anyway. There is an interesting piece that we actually put in the Farmers Union Publication when I was still president. The president of the Wheat Growers was appearing before a standing committee in Ottawa, and MPs routinely ask this question, “How many members do you have, and how many people do you actually represent?” It becomes a real dog’s breakfast because The Canadian Federation of Agriculture will say it represents 200,000 farmers, and they have no direct representation. They are an umbrella group. They represent various organizations that are paying money into the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. The Grain Growers of Canada do the same thing. They are an umbrella group, and they have membership, say the Canola Growers Association or the Wheat Growers.

When you add all these numbers up, everybody is claiming to represent 200,000 farmers each. Well, there are not that many farmers in Canada. There are not just that many farmers. The Farmers’ Union is a direct membership organization. The Western Canadian Wheat Growers are, as far as I know, a direct membership organization. So the president of the Wheat Growers is in front of the standing committee and she is asked how many members they have. She tries not to answer the question. She hums and haws. If an MP really works on it, they can force you to answer. She was forced to answer, and she said, “I think we have around 3000 members.” Fine, the meeting moves on. A different representative from the Western Canadian Wheat Growers was at the standing committee the following year under the same kind of pressure, and he said he was sure they had about 300 members.

Was the first president telling the truth when she said 3000 or did their membership go from 3000 to 300 in one year? That was the question that we put out in the Farmers Union publication. When an organization like the Western Canadian Wheat Growers

doesn't have any meetings in the countryside and doesn't have any policy meetings and only has one annual meeting per year, which is sponsored by railways and grain companies—openly sponsored with plaques and gold platinum sponsorship levels—when you couple that with a submission that the Western Barley Growers made--.

The court cases we're in now were not the first court cases that I was involved in as a founding member of the Friends of the Canadian Wheat Board. In 2007, we formed FCWB, and we took the Federal Government to court on the changes that they were trying to make to barley marketing, and they were trying to take barley marketing away from the CWB. So, we went to court, and we won in July 2007. The Western Barley Growers Association made a presentation at appeal, and they wanted to be part of the appeal process. In their application—they didn't have to, so I don't know why they did— they made the statement that they had 150 members, most of which were farmers. There you go. If you have 300 in the WCWG and 150, most of which are farmers in the Barley Growers, and a bunch of that membership are the same people, I think that accurately reflects the membership that they have. And they are receiving thousands and thousands of dollars, each organization, from the federal government now. They have received a lot of money from the Government of Alberta over the years. They are designing and implementing and supporting farm policy that is negatively affecting this country and the minister holds them up in public all the time. He attends their annual meetings.

NP: He doesn't attend your annual meetings or the National Farmers Union?

SW: Oh no, no. Farmers in Canada are not being well served by this kind of policy development. The Wheat Growers policy and the Western Barley Growers policy is policy that is regurgitated from the corporate grain-trade players that are sponsoring their organizations and their conventions. The Western Canadian Wheat Growers as an organization folded in about 2004, and they quit operations. The Canadian president or CEO of Cargill, a guy named Kerry Hawkins, was interviewed in the *Western Producer* that summer saying that he wasn't sure what the problem was with WCWG, but if it was just a matter of money, it wouldn't be much of a problem to get that organization going again. Within a year they were back as an organization. Then, when the Conservatives under Stephen Harper became the government in 2006, both those organizations just received new life. They had no shortage of money. They had no shortage of political support because it is a symbiotic relationship between the government and those organizations.

NP: You said that it will take a few years for the changes to filter down or become more apparent. What do you think will be the clearest manifestations of those changes?

SW: A lot of people, willfully or otherwise, are not going to see it nor recognize when it happens, and they won't know why they are all of a sudden in a position they are in. When I talk about farmers now living off the equity of what has been built over the last

hundred years, the CWB just did a tremendous job in branding Canadian grain. That is just not going to happen in the future. The Glencores of the world and the Cargills of the world will be mixing Canadian grain with US grain and price is going to rule, not quality. Right now, when buyers come to Canada, buyers that have been buying from the CWB for decades, they still want to talk to the CWB. They still want to know if the CWB is there and if these other companies are cooperating with the CWB. They still want to know if the Canadian system is intact, even though they know there is something wrong with it.

For instance, when the Harper Government fired Adrian Measner—Adrian Measner had been a 32-year employee of the CWB and worked his way up I believe from the mailroom was the CEO for a number of years working with international buyers all around the world—and the government fired him without cause, it triggered a fairly substantial severance package, which the government forced the farmers to pay out of farmer proceeds. International buyers rightfully looked around and said, “What’s happened? Adrian Measner must have done something wrong, or why else would a government fire a prestigious person like Adrian Measner?” This is just one example of how you destroy and unravel the Canadian brand. All of that work and we are still getting the benefit of that Canadian branding, and we will for a few years.

The money that Canadian farmers receive for grain even though commodity prices have gone up, especially last year because of a hundred-year drought in the States, in relative terms farmers think they are doing okay, but farmers would be receiving more if we had the single desk selling through the CWB. In their last annual report from the CWB, the last one that was published, covered half of the year that they were out of the single desk. What the CWB did in that annual report is that they did an analysis comparing Canadian returns for the similar quality of grain to the United States. They showed that Canadian grain was fetching seven or eight and nine dollars a tonne more than the similar grain from the States. That is going to erode. That’s not going to be sustainable. The only reason that money was there was because of the work that the CWB was able to do on behalf of Canadian farmers. Speaking directly, playing off one country against another, and charging that country more because you knew they could afford it and charging that country less because you knew they could not afford it. Not making those numbers public.

International companies, these other competitors competing against each other, are not going to be able to do that. Anyway, these are two of the ways. With all the policy work keeping rail freight rates down, the CWB has been a really important player in working with farm groups like the National Farmers Union. Here is another example where the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the Farmers Union and other various groups—with the exception of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers and the Western Barley Growers Association—the CWB and these progressive farm organizations did a really good job of lobbying government to try to keep a lid on freight rates. Still right now, we have legislated freight rate caps. Where railways have flexibility, they can charge one group of cars a higher rate than another group of cars but there is a cap on the total income that they can have from the grain movement. The Wheat Growers, the Barley Growers, and the Canola Growers have all lobbied against this system being in place. They want--. The market is as the market does. Just open it up.

NP: What do they feel and who do they feel gain from--?

SW: The market. I am sure they will say that farmers in the end will win somehow. I can't follow their logic. That is why I am not one of their members because I don't think there is any logic to it. It is a matter of them wanting to stay in business as an organization and they need that sponsorship money from those organizations. Without that sponsorship money from those organizations and now the money from the Federal Government they can't exist as an astroturf organization.

I'm forgetting the numbers. I did some research when I was a board member of the CWB and the freight rate here in Swift Current if it went to full commercial rates, it was something like one and a half times what farmers are paying right now. But on a Western Canadian basis, if commercial freight rates went to what they are just across the line in the United States where we have the so-called open market in grain transportation, it would mean an extra billion and a half dollars out of farmer's pockets to the railways. That is real money, and we are going to see that happen.

NP: Is it correct that those caps are put on because of the lack of competition in railways in Canada?

SW: Yes, that is the argument that the people like the National Farmers Union and CFA and other shippers' organizations are making.

NP: Is the real competition in the United States? How many tracks are running in the United States?

SW: Any place where you have water, and they have several other places where they have water and access to water. But they do have trouble in the United States. They have shippers' organizations in the States that do a lot of complaining about their rail traffic. Where their rail traffic is--. You are a so-called captive shipper. That is where they have these high freight rates just like we are captive shippers here because we have no access to water. That is why it is legitimate to compare what our freight rates will go to if the Wheat Growers are successful in getting the caps removed. In my view, it is just wrong.

NP: In your everyday life as a farmer, is that pretty much what you have taken on now?

SW: Yes, with the exception of these court cases. I am one of the central figures along with many others in these court cases that we have had with the Federal Government. In the everyday life, in farm life--. In 1991, we started to get involved in the organic business. We are actually producing wheat and lentils and flax and peas and a few other things organically. If there was ever anything that would make people like me want to have a central selling organization where you have hired professionals doing your

currency exchange and watching the market on a daily bases and doing that marketing, so you can farm, this has switched the organic business has just reinforced all of that predisposition I had towards having professionals doing that on a daily basis. It is always a challenge. Anytime you are working with the weather, it is a challenge. I was most unhappy this morning when Environment Canada said we had a 10 percent chance of a rain shower, and we had a three hour rain that ended up being 1.6 inches and a lot of real hard so it has made a lot of bad ruts across the fields and drowned out some crops. We are probably still glad that we got it, but anytime you are working with or against the weather, it is a challenge.

NP: How has your community changed?

SW: The community that we are in has been very stable over the past 100 years. There are fewer farmers and naturally larger farmers, but the core families have stayed there, many of them. I think there is a lot of change coming pretty quickly in that. Within a 10-mile radius of our farm, there are thousands of acres that are going to change hands in the next 10 years. There are no visible buyers right now in the community, and with the changes in land ownership that the Saskatchewan Government brought in a few years ago, which essentially opened it up to anyone--. There used to be rules here in Saskatchewan that if you wanted a farm in Saskatchewan, you had to live here at least six months out of the year, which I think was completely fair regulation. I know people who did that. Who worked in Alberta, but also farmed here and spent six months of the year here on the farm. They didn't seem to have any problems, and in fact, they seemed to like doing that. But the Provincial Government here a few years ago changed those regulations and technically opened it up to Canadian citizens, but really that is just a joke. It is open now for any buyers. If you are from the United States, you can find a Canadian who is going to act as your agent.

NP: Why was the legislation in place in the first place?

SW: To foster community and keep--. It had the effect of building more cohesive communities, and to take that away allows more, bigger capital to come in and concentrated blocks and buy up huge tracts of land. If you were actively farming it yourself and spending time on that farm, chances are less likely that you are going to do that for a variety of reasons. You might not have access to the capital that it would take to buy up all your neighbours for instance. If you are working someplace else and living out of the province for six months, maybe you don't want to do that anyway because you are just not available physically year-round to make that happen. It opens the whole thing up to this notion of absentee landlords. Various countries and various provinces have been around that mulberry bush several times. Prince Edward Island and lots of places have started out run by absentee landlords, and it never ends well. It is part of the whole class structure again, and it is just a regressive move. It is unwinding of the positive forces that built up Western Canada.

NP: I am going to ask some questions. You referred a little bit about your connection and experience with the Canadian Grain Commission. Anything to add there?

SW: Just that the Grain Commission was put in place to be this watchdog on the Canadian grain trade and be the eyes and ears of farmers, because farmers were back on their farms farming. They could not be at the terminals, and they could not be in the elevators, and they didn't have the authority to go in and check the scales and make sure they were being treated fairly. It was a very positive factor of the Canadian system, which is being completely unwound again and gutted. One of the seminal events there was when the Liberal Government of Jean Chretien, with a fellow by the name of Ralph Goodale from Regina as Minister of Agriculture, appointed a person with strong, strong ties to the grain trade and made him the Chief Commissioner of the Grain Commission, which was in effect putting the fox in charge of the hen house. This fellow just happened to be an ex-director of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. He had been affiliated with Saskatchewan Wheat Pool for a long time, and the government appointed him. His ties and his connections were all back and forth with the grain trade, not with farmers. Again, it was the change of the culture. That person immediately started calling himself Chief Commissioner and CEO of the Grain Commission.

NP: Does this person have a name?

SW: Yes. [Laughs]

NP: Continue.

SW: He was on the board of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool when I got there in 1990, and his name is Barry Senft. He is now working and hired in Ontario. He came from a farm not that far from Regina, but he is now—but I can't just recall the name of the Ontario organization he is with, but it is the umbrella group, Grain Farmers of Ontario (GFO)—and he is there as president or CEO or executive director, or whatever they have.

But the changes he tried to institute at the Grain Commission, and I say on behalf of the people he used to know in the grain trade, immediately were things like changing the mandate, the mandate of the Grain Commission that says that it is there to regulate the industry in the interest of producers. It is very clear. He moved to try and change that mandate immediately at the same time he started calling himself President and CEO or Chief Commissioner and CEO. His title was Chief Commissioner. Then he moved against short-line railways and wanted to change one of the regulations governing short-line railways that would have the effect of making their life more difficult. There was a real grassroots backlash against him and his policies. The backlash was enough that when his five-year appointment was up, he was not re-appointed. He got a one-year extension. Then they moved onto a new Commissioner.

The future of the Grain Commission was put in doubt with that appointment, and the future has never brightened. Now we had a Federal Government who has legislation ready to completely gut the CGC and make it a service provider to the grain trade rather than an industry watchdog that is acting in the interest of farmers.

NP: What do you see--. Let's take an example. Being from Thunder Bay and quite aware of the downsizing with the CGC and the withdrawal of various services, one of the major changes in Thunder Bay was the ending of inward inspections. From the farmer's perspective what can go wrong there? Or is that something that really doesn't matter given the way that farmers now deliver their grain?

SW: The viewpoint of the people that want to make that change was, "Well, farmers don't care. Why should farmers care when farmers deliver their grain to the elevator and dump it into the pit that is the end of it? Farmers no longer have any interest." The farmer's point of view or my point of view is that the farmers still have an interest in that grain because that grain is blended all the way along, and things are added to it or things are subtracted from it through cleaning processes. A lot of things can happen to that grain which reflects on Canada's reputation as a supplier and my reputation as a farmer trying to grow high quality grain. The grain I deliver into the system is high quality grain, if it is handled wrong can end up as low-quality grain going out of a terminal somewhere. The Grain Commission job was just to track all of that and to be the farmers eyes and ears to see what was happening and see if the farmers were, either being abused by the companies or if there was just money left on the table some place that should have been going back to farmers but was ending up in someone else's pocket. As soon as you start taking the CGC's eyes and ears away from them, what are they? What good are they? Inward inspection. The grain companies have successfully argued that they don't need or want any of these Grain Commission people on their premises.

NP: It is coming from their elevators to their elevators, and it can be inspected as it leaves on ships?

SW: There are people that I have heard at public meetings, and in fact a year ago in Moosejaw in June there was a fellow who now works with one of the grain handling union on the West Coast, but he spent 20 plus years as a company employee working in one of these terminals who was routinely told to keep upping the amount of foreign material that they were putting into grain on the way into the boats. They are always trying to hit that tolerance right on, but he was routinely being pressured to go over that tolerance. According to him, without the CGC people right there on the premises, he would have done it. There is just no question if he didn't do it, he would lose his job.

There are all these little pressures and little levers that these companies can manipulate that will make more money for the companies in the short run, but it might do tremendous damage to the farmers either directly or indirectly in the long run. Right

now, we have an ongoing question, problem here in Canada with the quality of Canadian wheat, which was just reported four or five months ago in the farm press that countries including China were complaining about the gluten strength of Canadian bread wheat. This hit the newspapers and created quite a kerfuffle. I was in communication with the Chief Commissioner of the CGC, a fellow named Elwin Hermanson, who used to be a conservative Reformed Party MP and talking about this issue. Then the issue kept growing and growing, so the CGC actually had three separate meetings. They had a meeting with plant breeders and the researchers' establishment. They had separate meetings with the grain trade and grain handlers and then a separate meeting with farmers. I attended by telephone that meeting with the farmers. Everyone was talking about is there a larger issue here or this a nonissue or is this just something that has always been in the background?

NP: Or the countries trying to get the price down?

SW: In the process of all this, I ended up talking with Elwin Hermanson, the Chief Commissioner, about the certificate final which the CGC signs off on these export shipments. The Western Canadian Wheat Growers right now are publicly promoting a plan that would change, do away with, the current variety registration system, which includes classes of grain. They would do away with that variety registration system so that there would be no more merit-based testing or quality-based testing before a plant was offered for sale to a farmer and just bypass that whole system so that the plant breeders and these companies can get these plants out in the field quicker. Fine.

The outward inspections that the CGC still does before it offers this certificate final is based on just a visual inspection of that grain. By the visual inspection then they can assign it to a class and the class tells them what the specs have to be. The proposal that the Wheat Growers have put forward that the government is seriously looking at, will make that entire system unworkable and obsolete, because there will be no viable class system that is based on merit-based testing and quality controls. The Grain Commission still does valuable work, which is being totally discounted by the current government and its shill organizations, like the Wheat Growers and the Barley Growers. It all leads to the US-ification of our entire grain industry because it is a tremendous advantage to Cargill and Glencore—and I say Glencore instead of Viterra because they are owned by Glencore—it is a tremendous advantage to them if there are no rules. If there are no rules made by government, it doesn't mean that there are no rules. It means that those companies get to make the rules. They decide who is going to deliver, what they are going to grow, if they are going to accept it, and what the specs are.

When I was still with the Farmers Union, I had a member contact me in a dispute over a canola contract in Manitoba. The contract stipulated that the company's grade and dockage and specifications would be final. It was in the fine print, and this fellow read it and said, "No, no, that goes against Canadian law. Canadian law is the Grain Commission specs and inspections are final." He got the Grain Commission involved, and the Grain Commission pointed out to this company that this contract is not valid the way you

have it written up. Without the Grain Commission and without any of these rules, there are still going to be rules. They are just not made by farmers or for farmers.

NP: Do you know much about Thunder Bay's operation?

SW: No.

NP: Good. [Laughs]

SW: The only thing I can really think about in terms of Thunder Bay is that grain inspector that I mentioned before who I am positive is not with the CGC anymore, Dave Lewicki, because that is where he worked. He was in all sorts of ongoing disputes with unregistered varieties that would come from Western Canada and end up in the system down there. This is when Barry Senft again was Chief Commission of the Grain Commission. You knew that the company shipping this grain knew that they were shipping an unregistered variety, because they salted the same amount in each car. You could not do that if you didn't know what you were doing. I asked Barry Senft in print and in person. His response was, "Well, as the Grain Commission, we don't have any teeth and have no authority to go out and fine that company." I would say, "Can't you just write him a letter and ask him not to do it anymore?" But no. The short answer is I can't speak anything around Thunder Bay.

NP: I think we have dealt with the major changes and the major challenges would you say?

SW: Yes.

NP: Significant events and vivid memories?

SW: I am trying to think of ones that--.

End of interview.