

1979 Tractorcade to Washington D.C.

Interview with Darrel Miller

August 28, 2012

Conducted in the Miller home, Kinsley, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Also present: Karen Miller, spouse

Joan: Darrel, can you describe what your farm was like in 1979, at the time of the Tractorcade?

Darrel: Well, in 1979, I basically ran a straight wheat operation.

Joan: How big was it?

Darrel: Starting at the first of the year, it wasn't very big. Karen's dad died, and I took over the ground that he'd been farming. So we about doubled in size and we're probably looking, at that time, at about 2,000 acres. Which sounds like a lot, but when you're summer fallow wheat farming, you are really only putting about half of it in production, which amounts to about 1,000 acres. We did not hire any outside help. Karen was my number one hired man, and my son, who was in high school then. In a year or two after that, we expanded out, and at one time we farmed over 3,000 acres. But at 1979, we were looking at jumping from 1,000 to about 2,000. I was not into row crop farming, but later on I got into farming milo, mainly for crop rotation. (*Gap in sound*) We were about a three tractor operation part of the time.

Joan: What kind of tractors were you using, and how expensive were they? Were you buying new tractors?

Darrel: Well, compared to today's market, no, I haven't bought a new tractor in my life. Everything I ever owned was used. Probably the tractors we were running at that time... right after her dad died, I had to buy another used one and it was somewhere around \$11,400. It had a cab and an air-conditioner on it. That was about the time that the price of all equipment was going up, big time, along in there. The tractor probably didn't cost that much new, but on the used market, we went through some economic adjustments, and the price of used equipment was staying at a pretty even price.

Joan: You didn't do any cattle work?

Darrel: We did cattle for a little bit, but kind of the way the operation went was, my dad had quite a bit of pasture land, but I liked farming better than I did messing with the cattle. I didn't have enough help, and you really need help if you are going to run a year-round cattle operation. So I basically stayed with the dry-land farming, and my sister and my brother-in-law used the pasture land. So that's just the way it worked out; it probably was for the better.

Joan: Did you get your farmland from your father? The original ground?

Darrel: No, at one time I had twelve landlords. I farmed for twelve different people.

Joan: So you leased it?

Darrel: I operated on a 1/3, 2/3. In other words, they got 1/3 of the crop, and I had 2/3 of the crop. They stood 1/3 of the fertilizer expense and the herbicide expense, and I stood all the harvesting.

(Pause) You're looking at five generations here, almost four generations. Like everyone else's family, ours migrated out here from Ohio and Illinois. My grandfather was actually the first person who grew hard red winter wheat in this county. Back in those early days, everybody was growing corn. That's what they knew how to grow, because that's what they grew back in Illinois or Ohio or wherever they came from. But his farm was where my great-grandfather's farm was, about two miles west and about a mile and a half south of Belpre. But he was the eldest in the family, and he went out and started making a living for the rest of the family, due to the fact his father was ill and died. He worked on a big wheat farm and cattle ranch between Belpre and Larned. It was called the Posey Farm. Mr. Posey kind of grub-staked him and got him started. He started buying land and went into planting wheat. Later on he operated a threshing crew, which is how he made his money. He turned out to be very successful. He owned land all over western Kansas and eastern Colorado. He liked partners. He always had partners in on his deals. My dad hated partners. He wouldn't partner with anybody. So that's kind of the background on the farming. My mother's side of the family was the same way. They had been Irish immigrants and ended up in Ohio and Illinois. On that side of the family, the great-grandfather was a track layer for Santa-Fe. He was laying track, and when they got to Ellinwood, he had the rest of the family come out. They actually had a little homestead north and east of Ellinwood before they came down to Edwards County. So we had farming on both sides of the road here.

Joan: Was your farm the sole source of income for your family in 1975? Or did you have to supplement it in any way?

Darrel: In 1979, Karen worked awhile for Cross Manufacturing, but that was pre-79. So basically, we just depended on the wheat crop that we raised. Once in a while, I'd help people do a few things since I knew how to weld. Maybe I'd get a job building some cattle corrals or something like that. But wheat was our main source of revenue.

Joan: How did you become involved in the American Agriculture Movement? This is prior to the Tractorcade, what was the history of it in the county and how did you become involved?

Darrel: The first I heard about it would have been in the fall of '77 in September, about the time I started planting wheat. I heard them mention it on the tractor radio, that there were some farmers in southeast Colorado, and they were talking about having a farm strike. And you know, that was about the dumbest thing I'd heard of for awhile. I didn't pay much attention to it, but as the weeks went by, there kept being more things in the paper about it. There was a little bit of coverage here and a little bit of coverage there. These guys in southeast Colorado were going out and just basically putting on informational meetings all over the state. Since it started in Springfield, Colorado, it naturally jumped across the state line into Stanton County, Kansas, which is Johnson City and Ulysses. So the southwest part of Kansas really got involved in a hurry. Then it just slowly started migrating toward the center of the state, not only in this state, but it was going into all other states. This was strictly a word-of-mouth operation. When these guys in Colorado decided they were going to do this, they just started calling everybody they ever knew or ever heard of, no matter where they lived, and telling them they had this idea. It just took off from there. The first time I ever went to anything where they were talking about it, was down in the building in the park, what we now call the 4-H building. I can't even remember who conducted the meeting. Karen's dad and I went, just to sit and listen. I remember we got back afterwards, and we sat around the kitchen table and both agreed this thing wasn't going anywhere.

Joan: Okay, was the American Agriculture Movement before 1978? Did it actually start in Colorado?

Darrel: This was the fall of 1977, in Springfield, Colorado.

Joan: That was the very beginning of it.

Darrel: That was the hub. Karen grew up in Springfield, Colorado, but a lot of those people, we didn't even know until later on when we started to compare notes and found out that she did know some of them. But that was the birthplace there. Really, what started it all was some produce farmers up in that Rocky Ford area; I think it was mainly onions. The produce they sold to this wholesale buyer, and I can't remember what they marked it up, but from out of the field and into the store was like 200% to 300%. These guys said, "This is ridiculous. We're growing this stuff and putting the work into it. We're sacking it, it's going into the store, and they're marking it up 200% to 300%." That's kind of what kicked the thing off. The timing was right. People were disgruntled with the fact that going through the Nixon era we'd had an embargo on grain; the price on beef got frozen. Coming in after a new election, Carter had been elected, and what appeared to be on the horizon was a farm bill that was worse than what we had, which was nothing. We just knew it was going to be worse than that. So that's kind of what sparked it off. I really didn't get involved, I would say, until probably late October or early November. They had what they called a statewide organizational meeting in Great Bend.

Joan: What year was this?

Darrel: This would be in the fall of 1977. So just to satisfy my own curiosity, I went up there and sat down and listened to what they were talking about, what their ideas were and what they had in mind. The whole emphasis was on going to Washington D.C. and putting together a major lobbying organization and trying to improve upon the farm bill that was already going to be in place. That day I'll never forget. The young guy conducting the meeting was Lyle Davison from Johnson, Kansas. He was a farmer, but he'd gone to Kansas University and majored in dramatics. He knew how to get up and run a meeting. He was probably one of the few guys who could have done it and kept it under control. The next day, big headlines on the front of the Hutchinson paper, "We Are Not Barnyard Radicals!" All those papers I had kept for years, but they all got pitched away. So, at the end of the day, I met several guys and talked to several guys. Then I came home and told Karen, "Yah, I think this thing's going to amount to something, and I want to be part of it. So that's kind of the way it kicked off. Part of the reason they had this was to elect a spokesman for the State of Kansas and an alternate spokesman. The guy that was elected as a spokesman was Jim Kramer from Hugoton, Kansas. He graduated from Kansas State with a degree in farm economics. He was really a sharp guy, and the alternate spokesman was Bill Wilkerson who was from Stanton County. He had a big background in the grain business. He's worked for the old Collingwood Company, which is now owned by the Archer Daniels Midland. He was a very successful farmer and a good thinker. These guys were all good thinkers. I guess that's kind of what impressed me that day. We had plenty of them that weren't, but these two guys were. That's how I got started, and it wasn't too long when they were looking for people to get out and spread the message. Well, for better or for worse, since my background was in broadcasting, I was a natural to move in and start doing some of that stuff, which I did. It seemed like for a while there, we were going somewhere two or three nights a week. I can't remember where all we went. I can remember Hoisington, up by Salina, just different places all over the state. And not only me, but there were hundreds of other guys doing the same thing.

Joan: Now did you have a title?

Darrel: Later on, they organized and after that they split the state up on districts. The southwest, northwest, south central... In this area, we were part of the south central district. So they got together and said they had to elect a spokesman for this district, and I was elected to that, which was a high paying job.

Joan: About when was that?

Darrel: Well, that would have still been in the fall of 1977.

Joan: Okay, so it was early when you actually organized it.

Darrel: But going back to the tractor deal. We had this statewide meeting in Great Bend, there were two guys pulled in there with two old tractors, and they were from Texline, Texas, which is clear down in the northwest corner of Texas, about as far as you can get. They'd decided they were going to drive these two old tractors clear to Washington D.C. They just come pulling in there and passed a hat to get some money, and they did drive them back there. So they were the original tractor pullers.

Joan: In 1977, just the two of them?

Darrel: In the fall of 1977, just the two of them.

Joan: All the way to D.C., and nobody joined them on the way or anything?

Darrel: Not that I ever knew about.

Joan: Do you remember their names?

Darrel: No.

Joan: And they were from Texline, Texas.

Darrel: Texline, Texas. And if you haven't been to Texline, you haven't missed a lot. To carry that on a little further, they decided they had better organize this tractorcade and go to Topeka, the state capitol, which they did. I can't tell you how many of them went. There was a huge amount of them.

Joan: Was this the winter of '77 and '78?

Darrel: This would have been in the fall.

Joan: After harvest, I assume.

Darrel: It was late November and early December, probably. This stuff all kind of runs together now. Great Bend was kind of an organizing point with guys coming down from northwest Kansas and guys coming from straight west of here and some guys from southwest Kansas. They all kind of piled together in Great Bend. I can remember going up to Highway 50, we knew about what time they were coming down there, they actually turned the school kids out from Lewis. They brought them down in a school bus to see all these tractors coming down the road and everything. It was a huge, huge thing. I don't know how long it took to go by. From Lewis, there might have been six or seven guys that went and drove a tractor.

Joan: And that's from the first one, that's to Topeka.

Darrel: Yes, like I said, the fall of 1977. My tractor happened to be broke down, and I really didn't care because I wasn't to interested in driving it up there. I think they went from Lewis to Hutchinson, then

from Hutchinson to Emporia and then from Emporia on up to Topeka, the way I remember it. They got up there and had a big rally.

Joan: On the capitol grounds?

Darrel: Yes, in downtown Topeka they had a big civic auditorium down there. They had to park out at the fair grounds on the south part of Topeka. City, county, state... somebody owns it out there. It is down by where that big coliseum is. That was the beginnings of the Tractorcade idea. Of course, they were getting a lot of negative press, and people were saying that they were burning up fuel they didn't need to burn... doing this, doing that and doing something else. But that's how it got started.

Joan: You don't remember the guys from Edwards County that went?

Darrel: Well, I can remember Lee Belcher, Kenny Keene, Jim Titus, Bob McLean. I don't think Ed drove a tractor; he might have gone though.

Joan: I remember he told me later...

Darrel: Next year, when we went up...

Joan: Oh, there was another one.

Darrel: Yes, in '78 they did it again. But those are the guys that I can think of. And you know, we had people that went on that thing, and we never saw them again. They did their one thing and it was over. So we always had what we called, "Silent support." You had a vocal group, and then you had a group that you wouldn't see, but they might write a check and put money in. Everything was running on volunteer donation. One time they had a little mini deal and went to Larned. The people that organized that deal put on a free-will donation barbeque. They learned a good lesson. Farmers eat a lot, but they don't put a lot in the till when it comes back later. So, it was some more of the learning experience.

Joan: So they went up there the first year and met with the state officials?

Darrel: I'm not sure they met with officials; I'm sure there were a lot of politicians down there. I'm trying to think who was governor then. Governor Bennet was in..., I don't know if he was in then, but I know he was governor next year. But they had a reception. The thing I do remember, and I wasn't there, I wish I had been, was Senator Dole came out, naturally, since he was from Kansas. They had a big rally out at Forbe's Air force Base. That might have been where they were storing all this equipment, I can't remember. But those hangars out there are huge. According to the guys that were there, it was packed. Everybody was standing up. So Dole got up and started talking to them and telling them what he thought they needed to do. Typical political rhetoric. Finally, everybody kind of boomed or the crowd was getting a little noisy, and finally Dole in his caustic style (which he could get that way sometimes) said, "Well, what is it you guys want me to do?" And some guy in the back hollered, "We want you to shut up and listen!" So he started listening, and he started getting the message. But that all came to me second handed, but from more than one source, so I think it did happen. So then, after the first of the year, when they did go back there and start flying into Washington, he was the big cheerleader for the whole deal because with the Democrats being in power, he was the natural to be opposing them. He did have some good ideas, and he did listen, and he worked at it. But anyway, in the state, each area where they wanted to, they tried to organize these little local offices as a means of communication so everybody could keep up with what was going on. At one time, they had one in

Kinsley, but it didn't last long because there weren't that many people really that interested. They started one in Lewis, and we had a pretty active group over there.

Joan: Do you know what building they used in Kinsley?

Darrel: No, I can't remember that much about Kinsley.

Joan: How about Lewis?

Darrel: Well, in Lewis, we were in what is now the beauty salon. (Behind the beauty salon) On the south side, where there used to be the old Golden Manor Restaurant. There was a little annex back there in the back that somebody just donated and said, "Here, use it." At that time, I think the Home State Bank owned all that stuff, and they said to just go in there and use it. So they put in a telephone and all that kind of stuff. They had a little system back there. Do you remember anything about the quip machines? They were like a FAX machine, but they called them quip machines. You had to type up something and put it on a disc that rotated some way and sent it down the phone line and reproduced it on the other end. That was their main source of communication, rather than getting on the phone and running up a big phone bill.

Joan: So the donations paid for the phone and paper and whatever?

Darrel: Yes, there weren't any dues. The whole basic premise of what they started with was that people had been paying money into farm organizations forever and not seeing any results. So, we're tired of paying dues, we're tired of doing this, and we're tired of doing that. We're tired of electing guys that get on expense accounts and then don't represent us. So the number one premise was, alright, we're not having this as a dues-paying organization. It's going to run on volunteer money. We're not electing any official officers. Part of the logic behind that was that if you have a structured organization, then somebody could file legal action against you. So they decided to keep it informal. Who are you going to sue? You could pick out somebody, but that was kind of the logic behind it. It went that way a long time, and finally about late '79 or '80 they decided they needed more of a structured type thing. They did it and actually called them "National Spokesmen." There really wasn't a president or anything.

Joan: What did the other farmers think about the Edwards County farmers that became active in this?

Darrel: Well, it's like anything else when you start getting into that kind of a deal. You are going to have negatives and positives. It kind of depended a lot on the areas. Like Kingman County was a real successful area down there. But they had a lot of big farmers, well-known farmers, that jumped on the bandwagon real quick. Then the rest of them were kind of like sheep following along. So a lot of it depended on who was involved and what their reputation was. There was a lot of controversy over the whole thing, you know, carrying clear back to the Ku Klux Klan days. People were just leery of an organization that they couldn't put their hands on or wrap their arms around. Most guys, if they had a cattle operation, they didn't have time to go running up and down the road on a tractor. They didn't want to, and I don't blame them. So a lot of it had to do with the people involved, who they were and what they were and where they were from. Support varied all over the state. But mainly western Kansas, central Kansas, southwest Kansas and to some extent northwest Kansas never was involved. An area that was pretty strong was up at Hays. Father Andrew Gottschalk, who grew up at Hays, that's a common name there, was a Catholic priest. Well, he was the Catholic Rural Life Director in the state of Colorado. He got involved real early on, which helped a lot because he was a great spokesman and entertaining speaker. He jumped right in and did everything for everybody. One time we thought we

were going to be thrown in jail in Topeka. This cop, unbeknownst to him, started bossing Father Andy around and everybody came to his rescue and said, "Back off, you're dealing with a Catholic priest here." Which he had his little cap on, but you couldn't see his collar. He loved that deal.

Joan: Did the Catholic Church...was this his mission at that time? Was the church behind him?

Darrel: Well, as a Catholic Rural Life Director from Colorado, I don't think you could say he was being backed by the Catholic Church, but that was his job, being involved in rural agriculture in Colorado. He died several years back; he got blood cancer. He was a great guy.

Joan: I saw him on one of the tapes.

Darrel: He was really a great guy. And you know, some church congregations I suppose would support and some that weren't. Anytime you do something that's out of the mainstream, you'll get that kind of feedback.

Joan: How did other members of your family or Karen's family feel about you guys being involved?

Darrel: I don't think Karen's mom or dad were...they were basically impartial. My dad, personally, was not supportive of anything I was doing. He thought it was just farmers bellyaching. So we had a little discussion a time or two about it, but I just basically just plowed ahead.

Joan: So, you were organizing in '77 and then in '78 you went up to Topeka, twice then to Topeka or just one time?

Darrel: It was '77. In '78 they had started forming the idea that they were going to drive these tractors clear to Washington D.C. The main organizer of that was a man named Gerald McCathern from Hereford, Texas. Gerald was a very intelligent guy and I gave you one of those books that he wrote, or a couple of them. He had been active, as a lot of these guys had, in the National Farmers Organization. They had evolved back in the 1960's. Their whole idea was to have a holding action, hold grain off the market, hold livestock off the market and so on and so forth, to try and negotiate the price. It was successful probably more in Iowa than anywhere else because that was where they were headquartered. So a lot of the guys that were involved in that were involved in the startup of this American Agriculture Movement, which Gerald was involved in that really. There was some action here in this county, but at that time I was living in Phoenix, so I didn't know much about what was going on or what happened. They had some success and they were pretty much nationwide. They were clear into California. There was a guy I knew in California; he was a rice farmer. He told me, "We finally negotiated a deal when one of these big grain companies was selling some rice. We got it done and in a week they called us back and said they wanted some more rice. We didn't have any more to sell them." So if you can't be a reliable supplier, you aren't going anywhere. But in Iowa and up in that area, they got a wedge put in the corn market particularly. I'm not sure they're even active anymore. I haven't heard anything about them in a long time. National Farmers Organization.

Joan: That was the name of it? National Farmers Organization.

Darrel: Yes. NFO.

Joan: So they were involved with the Topeka ones?

Darrel: No, what I'm saying is that a lot of the background the sit-in and the ideas that they had came from this movement. Like NFO, they always started the meetings with the flag salute and a prayer. That carried right into the American Agriculture movement. No matter how small or where it was, they always started a meeting with a flag salute and a prayer. That's one of the things that carried over. That's minor, I guess, but it was part of what they did.

Joan: So the second time they went to Topeka, and again, it was just to go to Topeka and they did the same thing they did in '77, rattling cages again?

Darrel: The idea with Topeka was, when they decided to make this trip to Washington D.C., was to get the tractors from Kansas and Colorado or wherever they wanted to come from, to come into Topeka and leave them there. The people who wanted to go on. Then when they started to Washington D.C., the tractors were already in Topeka. That meant they were already on I-70 and they could start going eastbound. We didn't have a tractor in there. We had a trailer and went along in a support vehicle.

Joan: What kind of a trailer?

Darrel: A little travel trailer, 27 feet. But the thing in Topeka that year got a little bit out of control. There was a guy from Nebraska named Stan DeBoer. He was a pretty good orator, but he was a cage rattler, I called him. They had a big turnout, it drew a lot of people in. When this thing was over...

Joan: Was this in December?

Darrel: It was in the fall, late fall of '78. Anyway, when this thing was over, the streets were full of tractors. We'd met down at the fairgrounds, and the police department was well versed on where they wanted everybody to go and what they wanted everybody to do. We were supposed to be following their orders. I did take a tractor that time, so when that thing was over it got a little bit disorganized. I think a few guys ended up in jail. So basically, we left the tractors there, and when they decided to go on back to Washington D.C., this was the staging area. They went down I-70, which Kansas cooperated. They had the highway patrol out and everything. When they got to Missouri, they were met by the National Guard. The governor said, "You're not going down I-70 through Missouri."

Joan: How many tractors left Topeka?

Darrel: I have no idea.

Joan: 5-20-50?

Darrel: No, in the hundreds. Five or six hundred, maybe more than that.

Joan: And what was the speed they could travel?

Darrel: Basically, a tractor in road gear you can go 20 mph, but it isn't the most advisable thing to do. Some of the material here says they could make 100 miles a day, but most of the time they were doing more than 100 miles a day, depending on the weather conditions.

Joan: Did they stay on one side of the road?

Darrel: Yes, on the right. Of course, being on I-70, it was a four lane. But like I say, when they got to

Kansas City, they just said, “You’re not going down I-70.” The governor of Missouri said that. So they routed everybody off on Highway 50. So basically, as I remember, on that first day, they drove from Topeka to Sedalia, Missouri, which is south and east of Kansas City. They had a big fairground there, and that’s where everybody gathered up. That’s actually where Karen and I started in, was in Sedalia, Missouri.

Joan: So you had a travel trailer and met them there.

Darrel: Right. Well, out of our group from south central Kansas, we had three in our bunch from Lewis. There were several guys from Pratt. I can’t remember how many tractors they had, at least two or three tractors from the Kingman area. But when you move this much stuff, even if you had a local crew, like Lester Derley took a truck, and he hauled the fuel. That was his job, to keep them fueled up and to stay with them. Well, if you’re driving your truck all day following that whole line of tractors, there’s not a whole lot of fun about that. But there were a lot of funny things.

Joan: Who else went? Do you want to give us their names?

Darrel: In our group, there was Karen and I, and Jim and Jean Titus, Dub and Clara Stapleton, Ed and Marj Scheufler, and Beverly Snyder. I think that’s about our little nucleus of right close here.

Darrel: So that was our group, and you can imagine getting that stuff strung out on the road every day. Probably going down Highway 50 was the best thing that happened to them because it was amazing. They were letting kids out of school, people were standing on overpasses, kids were waving flags... It was just an awesome sight. So from Sedalia, near as I can remember, we went to a little town called Washington, Missouri. It was southeast of St. Louis. If there was a stop between those two, I can’t remember where it was. You know, we just parked on the side of a hill somewhere out there. A lot of those places, if they knew we were coming, the Chamber of Commerce or the J.C.’s or anybody might put on a soup supper or have some entertainment or whatever.

Joan: Was it pretty routine that things broke down?

Darrel: No, I can’t remember a whole lot about anything breaking down. Now, some of these guys were driving some real old tractors. There were two guys from out here at Plains, Kansas, had a pair of old W9 Internationals, which hadn’t been made since the middle 1950’s. They had some old cabs on them, and they drove those things all the way back there. I’m sure there were some things that broke down. Jack Wolf, I forgot about Jack, he was along, and he had a travel trailer and he got sideswiped somewhere going out of Newton. It damaged the trailer, so they got behind. So we were in Washington to St. Louis, then we were in Illinois. In Illinois, the highway patrol was pretty cooperative. They helped us along there.

Joan: You were still on Highway 50?

Darrel: Through Missouri. When we got in Illinois, we got back on I-70, after we got clear down to St. Louis. I guess we had to go around a bypass because that thing kind of merges there. There are two ways you can go around, two towns. I’m sure they sent us around the north route, which takes you clear around the north side and hooks back into I-70. They about had to let them back on there so they could cross the river and everything. Well, the next town up the road where we were going to stay was Greenville, Illinois. They had a big, local fairgrounds there. So what Karen and I were doing, we were staying out in front of this thing, kind of going ahead and seeing where we were going to park at night

and what kind of organization it was going to take. It was hard to get across to these people what was coming until they saw it happen. We got to Greenville before dark, and it started snowing. And it snowed and it snowed. So they had a big racetrack there at this fairgrounds, and we just lined everything up as best we could and it went clear around that race track, once, twice, I don't remember how many times it was. But the J.C.'s there, they came down and they put on a soup supper for us and brought in a band and all kinds of stuff. So every night, when we'd get together, we'd kind of go over what had happened that day, and kind of what the program was laid out. The next day, and I can't remember, we must have been there two days, maybe longer than that...

Joan: Because of the snow.

Darrel: Yes, we couldn't get out on the road with that much stuff when they were trying to clear the roads off, but some of those pictures you've got out there you'll see me doing an interview with a helicopter with a news crew out of St. Louis that flew out there. When we got ready to leave Greenville and go into Indiana, and I think the next stop was Terre Haute, Indiana, but I'm not really certain. Soon as we hit the Indiana state line, we got no cooperation from the governor, the highway patrol, or from anybody. You were on your own.

Joan: Did it depend on whether the governor of the state was a Democratic or Republican?

Darrel: That could have had a lot to do with it! Because you know, Indiana is home to Purdue University, Earl L. Butts (*US Secretary of Agriculture, 1971-1976*) and you know, they think they got all the answers. So when we left Greenville, Steve Close from Colorado was kind of one of the guys that was keeping things in order. I need to back up a little bit, because basically we had three routes. Gerald McCathern, who was the organizer, was on the southern route. These guys left basically out of Lubbock, Texas, and they went clear over to Atlanta and then up. Then our group, which was formed out of Colorado and Kansas and as we went that way. Then we had a northern group, which was guys from South Dakota, North Dakota and Nebraska. They converged with us in Columbus, Ohio. So we actually had three routes going on for a while.

Joan: Did you pick up people on your route, did you pick up people along the way?

Darrel: We picked up a few, mainly after we got pretty much...we picked up some in Illinois. We might have picked up a few in Ohio, I just can't remember, it was so long ago. But a guy I got acquainted with in Ohio, he had reserved the state fairgrounds in Columbus, Ohio. They had everything organized when we had to be there. Back when we left Greenville, Steve Close said, "Well, I've got to have somebody get out in front of this thing and start lining up places for us to stay at night." They had organized some of these spots, but he said, "I don't know what we're going to do when we get to Indianapolis. We couldn't find anything there." So he said, "I want you to go ahead and see what you can find." Back then, nobody had cell phones, but a lot of these guys had mobile phones. You know, farm mobile phones that ran on business band. Then he said, "I'll keep giving you contacts. You can call this number and we'll talk." So we left Greenville and we started up on I-70. I don't ever remember staying in Indiana until we got to Indianapolis. In fact, we went up there, and we started looking. You'd go to talk to people, and they couldn't even fathom what was coming. The first place we went to was like a county fairgrounds. Somehow or another, I got a hold of some guy who was on the fair board. He said, "Well, I can show you what we've got." He wasn't enthused about the whole deal. He was an Earl Butts Purdue educated farmer. He wasn't too much in support of what we were trying to do. He wasn't very much interested in letting us park there. He said, "Well, there's always the Indianapolis Raceway." So we went out to drive a little, we thought we'd find it. Well, that thing was

locked up tight, and we can't do anything. So I think we spent the night... I got to talk to some guy, and he said, "There's a place out here that's called the Indianapolis Raceway, but I think it's the Indianapolis Raceway Park." And he says, "It's a pretty good sized facility, and they have stock car races and drag races and all this kind of stuff. It's out on the edge of town, and it's a big wide open area." So he told me how to get there, and we go out there. By this time it's trying to snow again or was snowing again. Then I find this guy that owned this thing and tried to explain to him what was coming and how many of them there was going to be, which you never knew from one day to the next. This was on a Friday or so, and he said, "I'm supposed to have races out here tomorrow, and you can see what that track looks like. Do you have anybody that would have any kind of equipment that would take snow off this track?" And I said, "As a matter of fact, we do." We had two guys that had big four-wheel drive tractors with dozer blades on the front. He said, "If you'll clean that snow off that thing so I can have my races, you can park anywhere you want to park." And I said, "That's a deal!" So that's what we did. We pulled in there and the guys cleaned off the stuff. I don't remember how many days we were there; we were stuck in there a couple days, maybe longer than that. That's kind of what you ran into.

So from there, we ran up into...it's not too far from Indianapolis to Columbus, Ohio, and that's the next place I can remember going. So we go on up there, and I had a contact there, and we pulled our trailer into this guy's yard, he was a farmer on the edge of town. So they put on this big rally for us at the state fair grounds. They fed everybody, and they had a band and all kinds of stuff.

So from Columbus on, the next place I can remember is Zanesville, Ohio. I can't remember picking that spot out quite, but there was a huge, big shopping mall there. It was something similar to Town West in Wichita, or maybe bigger than that. So we decided, "That's going to be it." So we just started pulling in there and going around it as far as we could get on the outside. I don't know how many times we lapped that thing. We stayed all night there.

Joan: I'll just interrupt you here. When you were staying all night, did everybody stay in travel trailers? Did they stay in motels?

Darrel: A lot of people were staying in motels, but most guys, if they had a tractor in the deal, they either had somebody traveling with them. They had a trailer or knew where they were going to stay. I'm sure there were a lot of people stayed in motels.

Joan: How many acres would it take to house you at night? What kind of space were you needing?

Darrel: Oh, I couldn't even start to project that. If you went down here to the South Park and you started over on Niles and went clear over to Airport Road and you got the old grand stand on the football field, we could probably lap that thing in there three times, maybe four times, bumper to bumper. Plus there might be a whole pile out there in the middle.

Joan: So you were kind a like the Conestoga wagons?

Darrel: Everybody was asking us, "How many vehicles? Or how many this and that? Well, nobody knew but the CIA and the Secret Serve, and I guarantee you could have pinpointed it down to a match in your hand because they had the "eye in the sky" watching what we were doing all of the time. They had a count on everything.

Our guys didn't think that second year, we went back there on another deal, and we talked to some of these guys, and they said, "Oh yeah, we knew right when you left your driveway."

Joan: I wonder with the Freedom of Information Act if that is old enough to get the files?

Darrel: I actually got to be friends with some of those guys. When you get back there in Washington, D.C., the Mall was operated by the Park Police. Then you had the Capitol Hill Police. Then you had the Washington, D.C. Metro. But we got to be friends with a lot of those guys. They all retired a few years ago, but they gave us a lot of information.

Joan: Let's go back. I am sorry I interrupted you.

Darrel: Well, back in Zanesville, Ohio, we left Zanesville, Ohio and we're on I-70, I-70 all the way till we go into West Virginia. I can't remember the name of this town, but there was a college there, and they wanted us to stop and put on a little program, which we did. I cannot think of the name of that place to save my soul.

Joan: But it was in West Virginia?

Rosetta: Morgantown?

Darrell: I tried to look that up the other day and I couldn't find it. Anyway, we got there fairly early in the day and did this little program and so on and so forth. So when this thing was over, they said, "Well, you guys can get this junk out of here, you can't leave all this stuff here." So, Steve Close mentioned earlier, and Gene Schroeder, who one of the original organizers, and another guy from Southwest Kansas and I, we started figuring out what we're going to try to do with all this stuff. So somebody said, "Well, there's a ski run up here. It's got a lot of room and you could go up there." So we get in the van to start going up this road going up to this ski lift. I started looking at the road, and they're looking at the road, and everybody said, "Oh man, getting up here is one thing, but turning all this junk around and getting back on the road is going to be something else." So we nixed that out. Well, by this time we had started back down the road and we had to come up with some ideas. So on down the highway, there was some other little college town. Some way or another, we got permission to pull in there and just park on this campus. I mean, there was stuff everywhere: side streets, main streets, parking lots at the college. They said, "Yes, you can park here overnight, but you have to be out of here by a certain time in the morning, because we have to have room for our students." So the next morning, everybody is trying to get out of there, and it is still snowing again. Everybody is slipping and sliding all over the place. Some guy pulled me and my trailer up out of there. Well, since we had to move out in the dark, we had to move out that early in the morning, so nobody had had time to fuel up their tractors (or they didn't take time, one or the other). So we get out on I-70 again, and I talked to this highway patrolman and said, "You know, we're going to have a big problem here pretty soon." And he said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, a lot of these guys didn't get these tractors fueled last night, and they're going to start running out of fuel. If you don't let us stop and fuel this stuff up. I said, "If you think you have a log-jam now, you're really going to have one then!" And he agreed. He said, "All right, you stay with me, and we're going to find a place here pretty soon." Finally, there was a huge long hill. It must have been two or three miles to get to the top of it. And he said, "Tell your guys," and of course, everybody had a CB radio, "Tell your guys to start moving everything as far to the right as they can get and stop." So we put the word out, "As far right as you can get, and stop." Then they let the fuel trucks come up as close as they could get to the tractor and they started fueling all these tractors and got them full.

Joan: On a hill.

Darrell: Yes, going up that hill. By this time, everybody is getting out and they're fussing and fighting and growling that they're going on, arguing and so on, so I told Steve, "You know, I've had about all

this fun I can stand.” I said, “I’m taking my trailer and my wife and we’re going toward Washington D.C. So that’s what we did. We got out in front of the thing and let them worry about it. So when they got outside of Washington D.C., they stopped in Frederick, Maryland, which is north of D.C. maybe 50 or 60 miles. Through some contacts we had back there already, we’d arranged for everybody to park on this guy’s farm. Farms back there and farms out here are a little bit different size, but they got all that stuff piled in there, and it sat out there several days. But we went on down to where we had a trailer park picked out which was on the Beltway, clear out on the north side of D.C., which was actually in Maryland. It was called Cherry Hill. So we all stayed out there. A lot of people didn’t know where they were going, they were just going. That’s where we got this 20 inches of snow that locked everybody down.

Karen: That was after we went into...

Darrell: Yes, we’d already been there a while. That’s the basis of getting to where we got to. So we’d been making friends all the way along with these highway patrolmen. It was amazing how many of these kids had grown up on a farm and couldn’t stay there because there wasn’t nothing to take over for the family. Some of them had been cops in Washington D.C., so they started telling the brains about which streets they needed to go in on to create a major traffic jam, and they told them how to do it! “Okay, you’re going to get on Wisconsin (*Avenue*) with one bunch, and you go to So-and-So with another bunch!” Of course, the whole city is laid out like spokes in a wheel, and they created a major traffic jam!

Joan: When did you meet up with the other two...

Darrell: Okay, the guys that came on the northern route: Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota... They gathered up with us in Columbus, Ohio.

Joan: Oh, so when did you meet up with the southern?

Darrell: Those guys ended up out in Manassas Park, which is southwest Washington D.C., out in Virginia where they had the Battle of Bull Run. They had a big camp ground out there; it wasn’t quite big enough, but they got them all in there! So they had this “strategical” meeting, (like George Bush would say) the night before they decided they were going to invade Capitol Hill and laid out who was going to go in on what streets and do what and so-on and so-forth. So then the next morning, they started the movement into the city. It sure did shut the traffic down! Big time!

Joan: By this time, when you were all gathering up, how big was it? How many tractors? Or...?

Darrell: Oh, there’ve been estimates of six thousand, seven thousand, eight thousand, between the vehicles and tractors and so forth. I couldn’t really put a handle on how many there were, but it was a big... Well, I mean, it stretched basically from the reflecting pool at the foot of the capitol clear down to 14th street. But what happened, the cops had their strategy too. So the next morning, when everybody is down there circling the Capitol and running all over the place, the idea was to have this big rally up on the Capitol steps. And it was cold, I mean it was nasty cold. So they put all or most of this stuff, well, the tractors, the only place you could put them without tying up all the traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue and everywhere else, was in the Mall area. So everybody parked their stuff on the inside of the Mall while they were having this big rally up on the steps. The Metropolitan Police and the D.C. Capitol Police started bringing in every trash truck and every piece of equipment they could find and started parking it bumper to bumper. They basically impounded everybody that was in there. Well, our group

from Lewis, they got out of there early some way or another. So their stuff wasn't impounded, and they found their way back out to where we were staying. So then they had us in there, and they didn't know what to do with us, on that day with the people that were in there. (We weren't down there either.) From then on, it was just a logistical nightmare.

Joan: How far was it from where the people came out to where they stayed to go into the Mall?

Darrell: Out there right on the inside of the Beltway, I'm guessing probably 15 or 20 miles. It was quite a ways.

Joan: So most of the group was trapped?

Darrell: Yes, I mean everybody wanted to be down there where the action was. A lot of these guys, if they didn't have a tractor or even if they did, were staying in public campgrounds. There was one camp in northeast Washington, probably in Maryland. I can't remember the name of it. A lot of those guys were parked out there. They were scattered every which way.

Karen: There were tractors at the USDA.

Darrell: Yes, there were some tractors that happened to be on the outside when they started penning them in. Four or five of them were down by the USDA building on the side of the street. They sat down there for a long time. Finally one day, the cops said, "All right, either you're getting them out of here today, or we're hauling them off somewhere." And they did impound a lot of stuff. So we kind of talked it over and thought that rather than have it impounded and pay a fine for getting it out of there, we'd be better off... so they opened the thing up and they went in on the Mall.

So they were there actually I don't know how many weeks. Finally, they had enough and they said, "Okay, today you're leaving. Anything that's not out of here is going to be towed and impounded and you'll be paying a penalty for getting it out." So by this time, the guys had been up there a long time, I mean, a lot of these farmers. That was their program. "I want to drive. I want to go up there. I want to do my thing, but when I get there, I don't know what to do." They weren't big on going out and talking and lobbying, and that's what they wanted everybody to be doing. But a lot of them weren't cut out for that, you know. So they were ready to go home anyway.

So in the meantime, since everybody was down there, we decided we should be there too. They'd let you in, but they wouldn't let you out. So we took our trailer down there, and we parked it on the Mall. If you had to empty your holding tank, you popped the manhole cover open and let it drain it out there. I guess we carried in own water; I don't know what we did. 'Cause you know, we were eating outside most of the time anyway.

Something was going on all the time and like I said, most of those cops were real friendly, but that's their job, being a cop. Things got a little quiet. A lot of these guys were getting antsy. They didn't know what to do and trying to figure out something to spark their interest. So we had a little gathering where three or four of us were trying to figure out something to create some excitement and get these guys back in the ballgame. I said, "Who has one of these big, fat nylon tow ropes?" Well now, of course, somebody did. And I said, "Well, tonight when things settle down about 10:30 or 11:00 (because they let them run their tractors around on the inside) let's go down there where one of those vehicles is blocking a street, by which you can cross that Mall several places. We'll yank it out of place and kick some tractors out on the street." I have to take credit for this. They all thought it was a great idea. Those cops had never seen one of those big fat tow ropes like that. So I don't know how many of them got out, five, six or maybe seven. They hooked onto one of those big busses and they just yanked it sideways and pulled it out of that parking hole, and out on the street they were! They were going up

Capitol Hill toward the Capitol before those cops even knew what was happening. Of course, everybody was getting a big laugh out of it. They rounded them up real quick and took them back down there. The cops were all saying, "How'd you all get that bus out of there?" We just said, "Farmer ingenuity!" So there was some humorous stuff that happened.

Karen: Tell about the snow.

Darrell: Yes, there was this huge snow well we had that before we were down there, maybe 20 inches. And all a sudden we went from being the enemy to being their friends because nobody could do anything and they (*the farmers*) were hauling doctors and nurses to hospitals with tractors. They even took these big ones with the blades out to the national airport and had them cleaning off runways. They were donating blood and there were farmwomen were cooking meals in places. After that they redeemed themselves a little bit. So, like I said, at that time Senator Dole was the farmer's friend, and he put together this legislation that was going to solve all their problems. So when they started having the hearings on it, everybody gave hours of testimony. If testimony could do it, we'd have had it done. I mean, just every committee was having some kind of hearing. We were going in there and testifying and we had some sharp guys. We put together a lot of good stuff, but we found out real quick that it went in one ear and out the other one.

One thing I can remember was, I think there were five of us, four or five of us. We put this deal together to export grain. Congressman Sibelius was still congressman, and he was chairing the hearing. So we got in there, and we had this one kid from northwest Kansas named Ron Chase. Ron had graduated with a PhD in statistics, I think from Kansas State. If there was ever a stereotypical looking farmer, Ron was it. He had one of them old mackinaw coats on and an old cap with the ear flappers sticking out like that. We'd go in there and sit down, and Sebelius, he's beaming from one ear to the other because all these young gentlemen were from his district in Kansas. There was press all over the place; they were standing around the wall and everything. So finally he says, "Dr. Chase, would you like to begin now?" And they'd go, "Whoops! This guy's a PhD!" Dr. Chase, I'll never forget that. So, that was the whole gist of the thing. We tried to provide some factual information and some motivation.

Joan: You've never said, what exactly were you asking for? Parity?

Darrel: Well, at that time nobody knew what parity was.

Joan: Tell us about that.

Darrel: What they were trying to do was try to get the price of agricultural products in par with the cost of production, plus a reasonable profit. The first thing, the USDA publishes, and I think they still do, a monthly parity index where they compare prices for everything you think of: Milk, goat hair, and so forth. They've been doing this forever. The original parity was based on four years, 1910 to 1914, as I remember. The reason they picked that period of time was it was a time of economic stability, no inflation and so on and so forth. They used that as the gauge. Well, from then on well, you can go look it up today, and the price of grain that we have today, based on the price of input costs would not be anywhere close. We're probably at 70, 80 or 90 percent of parity. The real thing we were trying to do was get hooked to that parity index, saying, you know, everybody has been raising this stuff for years under the cost of production. I'll print this off, and you can look at it later on, but they had five basic points that they were looking at. It all had to do with what they felt like was necessary for agriculture to stay in a profitable production situation. Of course, the part about the strike thing, which got a lot of people upset right off the bat, was the deal with the strike was, they said, "It's simple. You don't buy,

you don't sell, you don't raise anything." Well, when we started looking at that, that ain't going to last too long. For the first thing, your banker says, "Oh, you aren't going to raise anything? That means you won't be paying on your note this year." And your landlord says, "You aren't going to be raising me a crop? I'll rent it to somebody else." Well, the "don't buy, don't sell," the bottom line there was, your local retail merchant, he's not the problem. And you have to consider your bank as a retail merchant. So that was a little bit far-fetched. But it got a lot of attention, a lot of attention. And in a lot of places, they'd go in and picket and shut down stuff. Amarillo and Lubbock, Texas, were hot areas. They stopped trains down there; they did a little bit of everything.

Joan: Was this so goods couldn't get in and out?

Darrel: Well, it was to make a statement, you know. The union guys, they weren't going to cross a picket line. One of the funniest things that ever happened, a guy from Kingman, he was a trucker in the wintertime. He hauled wholesale groceries and stuff out of a big warehouse down at Wichita from a railroad siding. So when they started having this idea about putting these picket lines up, it wouldn't last more than 20 minutes, most likely. So he said, "I'll go down and talk to management in this warehouse." So he goes and talks to them and tells them what they want to do. And the guy says, "That's no problem. Call the press out and say we're shutting them down to honoring the farm strike." So they got a group of guys together, and they go down there, and they've got their little picket signs and everything.

Well, it just so happened that they go down there and the fellow they'd made all the arrangements with was not working that day. So here these guys show up and this manager comes out and says, "What are you doing here? What do you want?" And they said, "Well, we want you to shut this place down." And the guy says, "You've got to be kidding!" And this one guy says, "Do we look like we're kidding?" And he said, "Nope!"

So in the meantime, guys go around on the side of the building where the railroad track was with their little picket signs, and the train pulls in on the side where he's going to unload produce. The conductor or engineer or somebody steps out and asks, "What's going on here?" And they answered, "Well, we're having a little holding action." And he said, "Well, we're not crossing this picket line." And they just stopped right there until it all got straightened out.

I guess the bottom line is that it did some good because it had some effect on farm life and legislation. Down the road, it made the public more aware of what some of the problems were, and we all learned a lot about how Washington D.C. works, a whole lot.

Joan: For how long were you and Karen there?

Darrel: We actually stayed there about three months.

Joan: I've seen some pictures, did your kids join you?

Darrel: They did.

Joan: But they weren't on the whole trip?

Darrell: They were there for spring break. Like I said, when the big surge was over and they cleared them off the Mall, and it was time for the farmers to go home, these guys from the south, they start planting early down there, so they were wanting to get back and get things going. In summer, there was something that was going to keep on every day. So we had a little office up there not too far from the Capitol. There were people staying there around the clock. Karen started working over there and

helping out, and I started helping out. There were a few days where there were more people than they needed. But, we were still in meetings with the Department of Agriculture. We even met with the Federal Reserve Bank one time. So there was something going on and we built up a rapport with all these legislative aides. They're the ones that write the bill. They know what's going on; they go to committee meetings. They come in and tell the congressman and the senator, "Okay, here's what is going on and here's the way I think you ought to vote." Like Senator Dole's top ag aide. He told me one time, "I never know what he's going to do. He's told me how he was going to vote, then I've seen him go on the floor and turn around and vote the opposite direction." He said, "This is the way it works. Everything they're doing around here in the daytime is basically for show. In the evening when things get quiet, they get on the telephone and that's when they decide what they're going to do the next day." That's the way it really is." For better or for worse.

Joan: What legislation actually came out of this?

Darrel: Senator Dole got this thing on the floor, and it got voted down. They let groups of us go and take turns going in while they were actually having a hearing with debate going back and forth on the thing. The way he designed it, it would have worked all right, but basically what they did was they hooked production to a price support. The more land you laid out, the higher the price support was on what you'd raised. Well, the thing everybody needs to understand is you're knocking heads with some multi-national corporations that are buying and selling in grains and also handling all your input products. I'm talking about the big players, like Cargill, Bunge, Continental Grain... These people have sophisticated, at that time it was sophisticated, ways of telling what production is going to be, not just in the United States, but world-wide. They've got their finger on everything. Well, they don't really care what the price of grain is because all they do is deal in volume. The more they deal in, the better they like it. So anything you can come up with that is going to slow down production and cut the volume, they're opposed to.

Even today, that's somewhat there, but then you've got the Chicago Board of Trade. They're dealing in volume. So you've got a huge lobby up there that has to do with agribusiness and they have influence. You know, we're getting fewer and fewer farm state congressmen. I remember the first time I ever went up there, I was sitting in Congressman Sibelius' office. Four or five of us were sitting there when the phone rang, and he said, "Just a minute, I have to take this call." We sat there not knowing who he was talking to or what he was talking about. When he got done, he said, "Well guys, I want to let you know how this system works. They have a Congressman Barbara Jordan, she was a big (*influential*) black lady, as I remember. She was from some big district in New York City, I think, or Houston...

Karen: Texas.

Darrell: Yes Houston. And he said, "While we're talking about this, she said she'd support my farm legislation as long as I'd support her rat eradication program in the slums of whatever town it was that she represented." He said, "That's the way it works." And that's the way it works. So, even today, when they're talking about the agriculture budget being so large and they keep wanting to chop it, the biggest percentage of it has to do with food stamps and that type of program more than what agriculture has involved. And there's plenty of money just wasted, believe me. There is, and I think the thing is probably antiquated, the system they've run under for several years. In a way it's better, because everybody says, "Well, they've got those multimillion dollar farmers that are going to get this money." Well, the multimillion dollar farmer does not write the farm program. They didn't design the thing, and they're not responsible. Well, the bigger you are, and the more you operate, the more money you're going to get. It's that simple. But they do have a cap, too. You can't go over the cap, but I don't even

know what it is anymore. But there hasn't been a farm law that was ever written that somebody hasn't been able to figure out and get around. After being on the FSA Committee for six years or whatever it was, I can vouch for that.

Joan: FSA?

Darrel: Farm Services Administration. They used to call it the ASCS, Agriculture Stabilization... I can't even remember. They changed it to Farm Service Administration. Back in the 80's, they introduced the Paperwork Reduction Act when computers came in, which was supposed to do away with all this paper. Well, they've got more paper down there than they've ever had. It didn't last.

Joan: So, how do you feel about having gone on the Tractorcade?

Darrel: It was a good experience, because as one guy said, "I went back there worried about my farm, and came home worried about my country." You definitely experienced how the system operates up there. It is just scary. It really is scary. There are so many people in so many Mickey Mouse jobs, doing so many things. Well, one thing that we pioneered in was developing Ethanol and alcohol fuel, which came a year or so later than that. But you know, there were people interested in that. We made a friend at the Department of Energy who was in there when Carter was in, named Bill Holmberg. He was a professional bureaucrat, but he got really pumped up on the idea of alcohol fuel and what it could do and how it would cut down on the use of petroleum fuel. I don't know if he's in there anymore, with the change of administrations, but he could do anything he wanted to. He had a deal down there one day and there was a huge press turnout. There were four or five of us sitting up there on a panel, and he was fielding questions about renewable energy and alcohol fuel and how it would keep coming back every year and keep renewing it and all that kind of stuff. So we learned a lot and met a lot of good people. We met a lot of flaky ones too.

Joan: How did the people when you came home, what was their reaction to you?

Darrel: Do you know, we had everything from people who would cross the street because they didn't want to talk to you, on down to being patted on the back. If you watch some of those video tapes and stuff, we all know what the news does. It is the "old man biting the dog" deal. They were going after the sensational stuff, the stuff about hauling the nurses to the hospital and clearing the airport runways and donating blood and all that stuff, that never made the news because that wasn't too exciting. So overall, I'd say, in this part of the country, we had a good response. And it varied from one part of the state to the other, and one state to another. There were actually two kids from Klamath Falls, Oregon, that drove tractors all the way down there. One of my college friends was from there, and he knew these guys. So we debated forever whether it did good or didn't do good, but in the overall analysis, I think that if we hadn't done something like that, you would never have seen some of the changes we have today. That's my impression anyway.

Joan: You got the tractors home by trailoring them?

Darrel: What happened to most of the guys, like Crawford Barber, he was an International Harvester Dealer in Greensburg. He was supportive from day one. He actually sent a truck back there to haul them all home. I think three was the most he could get on a truck, and that's what we had in our group was three. But then, coming back, like I said, a lot of those states like Indiana, man they were tough. They didn't want us there and they didn't care whether we came back through there the way home.

Joan: So some of the people drove their tractors back?

Darrel: No, not from our area they didn't. It was too far to drive them back. But some of them left them back there. Those guys I was talking about with the W9 Internationals, they took them out to some guy's farm back in Virginia, and they're still sitting there as far as I know. Gerald McCathern's tractor, was actually put in the Smithsonian. It was there for years and years. A couple of years ago, for some unknown reason, they took it out. We tried to promote leaving it in there, but it didn't happen. But it was down there in a building that was named National Museum of Industrial History. It was on the north side of the Mall, but I just can't remember the name of it. But yes, a lot of them left them back there.

Joan: Did a couple of them get burned?

Darrel: No, there were cotton pickers that got burned. There is a picture in there by the Washington Monument, there was one got on fire there. Yes, there were some crazy things happened. I'll have Karen tell you about going to the White House. They let us out of there one day to go to the White House, and she got to drive the tractor down there.

Joan: Well, I'm not from here, and I do not remember this from southern Michigan, although there may have been farmers that joined from there, I don't know. As a child of the 60's, with the protests, I found it amazing that farmers stood up and protested in this way. Was that the reaction? Because farmers are usually pretty conservative.

Darrel: It built up over a long period of time. Father Andy, he advocated from day one. He said, "We don't want violence. We want non-violent action." My term for it was, "Constructive harassment." Never once did he advocate violent action. I mean, there were some days in the country like Georgia, those guys down there did stuff that was so innovative that I can't even remember all of it. The way they got started, they just called out there to Springfield and said, "We want somebody from there to tell us about this deal." So they flew Gene Short down there, and this guy named Tommy Kersey, he was a fireball, he had a couple-three brothers. They picked him up at the airport and put on a big meeting. There were several thousand people there. Gene explained what was going on and what the deal was. He got up and told his story and sat down and Tommy Kersey got up and said, "Yes, well, you all heard what the man said. Are you for him or against him? If you are for him, stand up." Well, who isn't going to stand up? They just did stuff that was wild. Nobody ever got hurt or anything. Backing up a little ways, we knew all the time, people pretty well knew, especially the produce growers, that we had all these restrictions put on produce growing in the United States. You can't use this herbicide or this insecticide and so on and so forth. And these guys knew it was coming across the border all the time, It was repackaged in boxes saying "Produce of Texas" and so on. And stuff that we couldn't use here was being used over there.

Joan: In Mexico?

Darrel: Yes, on like tomatoes and I can't remember what all else. So there was a group of them decided to go down there to McAllen, Texas, which is on the Texas/Mexico border, and protest this thing. Well, they got down there and there was a big farmer named Orthal Brand, I think. They wanted to shut this thing down, and they found out he was the kingpin of the area, and a bunch of them ended up in jail. But it did spotlight it. And another family found that the United States Department of Agriculture was putting canned beef in the school lunchrooms, and right on the can it said, "Product of Bolivia" or "Nicaragua" or somewhere. And they said, "Is this right?" And American beef producers were getting

shortchanged by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. So we got that one stopped, but I'm sure there's still plenty of produce coming in that has got that stuff on there. But that goes back again to that lobby.

So anyway, they threw a bunch of those guys in jail. Tommy Kersey's brother was one of them. He goes down there, and he tells this guy, "You all got about 15 minutes to let my brother out of that jail. If he isn't out, that tractor is going right through the door of that police station." Well, they negotiated a deal and got him out, but there were a bunch of guys got beat up and tear gassed and I don't know what all. There were plenty of heads got knocked when they got that back there on the Mall. Some of them were asking for it and they got it. You know, they are only going to tolerate so much.

This one cop told me, "You know, I come off the farm up in Pennsylvania, but how would you like to have a job where every morning you know you're going to have to deal with the scum of the earth?" He told me about the riots during the Vietnam War era. He said, "I had fish hooks thrown at me, stuff you can't even imagine." So, when they spoke, you'd better pay attention to what they told you.

Joan: Is there anything else that you've left out that you'd like talk about?

Darrel: Well, we can about for hours, but you know, that's kind of the general gist of the deal.

Darrel: Arkansas had a real active organization. They did a lot of stuff. There was a guy that was a big rice farmer, but he was also a lay-Baptist preacher. His famous line was, he told his wife, "I'm going up there to Washington. You'd better pack me two pair of underwear. I might be up there for a week or so." I mean, he could get a crowd riled up in a hurry!

Joan: What was his name?

Darrel: Otis Chapman. Unfortunately, he went broke, but he was a great guy. But, like I said, we went there for a convention one time, and Clinton was the still the governor of Arkansas. It was the first time I'd ever met him or been around him. He was definitely a charismatic personality; he was at that time. And he backed these guys, 100 percent. Of course, when he got elected president, they thought, "Well, we'll never see another bad day." But guess what; they didn't even get close to the White House. A lot of them were on a first name basis with him.

But another funny story about Otis. There were some of these congressmen that even they were from an agricultural state, they didn't have the foggiest idea about agriculture. So Otis goes into this congressman's office and the guy welcomes him in. He sat down and the man says, "How's your spaghetti crop doing this year?" Otis said, "It was doing real good until the alligators ate it all."

To give most of the people credit, they were willing to listen up to a point until they got over-saturated. The congressman from Texas, named Poage, I was in those hearings. Senator Dole got in; he saw me standing there by the door, and I asked him if he could get me in. He said, "Yes, come on in." And he led me by the arm on in there. So they were going on about all this stuff, and this old man said, "You know, I represent a pretty big agricultural district in Texas, and I have not heard anything from one farmer in my district about this problem." Well, he shouldn't have ever said that. Because all these guys from Texas, I knew a lot of them, they were sitting around the wall, and I could see them start looking at one another. Well, they got his unlisted telephone number. He started hearing from some farmers from Texas. About two days after that, Karen and I were over in the Longworth Office Building, and when we turned the corner to go down to where his office was, just by accident, that hall was jammed with guys. And here were mail carts, one after the other, just stacked with mail bags. He was hearing from farmers from Texas. They were getting in touch with him. So you had to be careful what you said, or what they said, but it still wouldn't have made any difference.

Joan: Did this experience affect how involved you have been since then?

Darrel: Well, I never was much of a joiner. This friend of mine, Bill Wilkerson that I was talking about earlier, he was real active in the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, and I belonged to that for a while and went to the National Convention one time in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Historically farm organizations get kind of entrenched, and they've got a pecking order and they just become more of a fraternal thing than anything else.

Joan: What happened to the AAM?

Darrel: Well, they quietly kind of died down and went off into the sunset. They got really involved in '80s on this alcohol fuel thing. They started promoting that and the biomass energy and a lot of that stuff. Really what derailed them, when it got past the point of driving a tractor down the road, there were so many of these guys were lost when they actually went up there and you had to be at the hall and try to present your case. In any group, you start getting splinter groups. We attracted every splinter organization you could think of. Right wing ideas, and most of them were just wanting to ride our shirttail. But, they got all involved in thinking the Federal Reserve ought to be restructured. Well, lots of luck with that one! Then they got all involved in whether the currency was going to crash, and you needed to buy gold and silver, and just a lot of right wing screw-ball ideas that didn't make any sense. They kind of got them off the beaten path. Father Andy said from day one that we didn't want to get identified with the far right or the far left. We wanted to stay with what we were doing here. So, over time, it was a movement, and movements die out. There's still a core group that gets together once in a while, but the influence that they had at one time is pretty well gone.

Joan: So the organization still sort of exists?

Darrel: Yes, they have a structure. A young guy from down there at Haven, Larry Matlack; he'll still the president of it. Once a year, they have a get together over here by Stafford. They had it just a couple weeks ago, I think. They just get together and talk about all their memories and stuff. I haven't been to one in a long time. And they kind of a national get-together once a year in Oklahoma City. We haven't been for probably three or four years. But, the thing is, I'm 76. A lot of those people associated with it are gone, unfortunately. We have one good friend that we hear from usually at Christmas, Tom Benson, who lives up in Appleton, Minnesota. His dad was governor of the state of Minnesota, and then he was also a U.S. Senator. So Tom grew up in Washington D.C., and he knew his way around. He was a big asset. Sharp thinker, a really good thinker. Tom's got to be in his mid 80's probably now. Not to discredit anybody, but there were a lot of really intelligent people with good ideas about a lot of things. Bud Bitner, in Walsh, Colorado, he taught school. Unfortunately, he got killed in a wreck while working on his alcohol still, to make ethanol with, not drinking alcohol! Yes, there were really guys with good ideas. Smart people.

Joan: Any other thoughts you want to wind up with?

Darrel: No, not really. You know this Tractorcade business was exciting and everything. But when people got done with it, they didn't know what to do. Going up and beating that hill was work; I mean, you could walk yourself to death up there. Some places you get response; some places you don't. Some places they wanted to talk to you. But very few of them have an agriculture aid. Farm state congressmen usually have an agriculture aide. If you go and talk to somebody from downtown Chicago, they're not going to have an ag aide. But they'll have somebody that will usually listen to what you have to say. But unless you've been up there and seen how that thing works, you can't believe the amount of people that go in and out of those offices every day. Everybody's there beating their own little drum for something.

Somebody use to say ... oh yeah, that was Jim Kramer's line: "Washington D.C. does not act, they only react; and they only react to the current crisis." So you got a crisis in agriculture, that's what they used to say. What came along afterwards on this alcohol/fuel thing, in the early '80's when Reagan got in, they went through the financial wreck, and guys couldn't get loans and all that stuff, we probably as good an effect right then as at any other time because we were saying, "It's coming, believe me it's coming, and guess what, it's here." When you figure the biggest industry in the United States starts going downhill, it's going to pull somebody else or something with it. Mike Moeur, from Washington state, he had a fertilizer business, and he thought we were nuts, the stuff we were doing and everything. We went up there to visit him in the early '80's, and he said, "Everything's good up here. We grow potatoes; we grow apples; we grow a lot of things." I said, "Believe it. You're going to find out one of these days, and it may not be this year or the year after, but you will find out." He did. He went broke. The farmers owed him so much money that he had to fold up. But he couldn't understand what we were doing at the time.