

1979 Tractorcade to Washington D.C.

Interview with Edward E. Scheufler

September 24, 2012

Conducted in the Scheufler home, Belpre, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Also present: Marjorie Scheufler and Zane Lakin

Joan: Can you describe what your farm was like in 1979?

Ed: Well, back in 1979 we were growing good crops. We had a lot of grain, and we weren't getting anything for it. I think the farmers were going broke and we decided maybe we could get together and maybe change the government's mind.

Joan: How big was your farm at that time?

Ed: I was probably farming six quarters at that time.

Joan: Was it strictly grain, or did you have animals also?

Ed: I had cattle and I had alfalfa. I grew quite a bit of alfalfa. Basically wheat and milo, that was pretty much before... irrigation was just starting to come into this area. Later on, it didn't seem like we did much good in Washington. We formed the Tractorcade.

Joan: Before we start on that, how did you become involved in the AAM? What led you to join up in the little group?

Ed: Well, I don't know. Just a bunch of us neighbors were disgruntled, I guess you'd say, and we would just meet and talk about it. There were some guys out in Colorado that decided to take a bunch of tractors and see if we could go to Washington and change their mind! So it took a lot of organization and a lot of going around and visiting people. We tried to solicit money to go. I pretty much went as a support group. I took a camper and a pickup and we housed two people that drove tractors. We were busy all the time we were gone. We about froze, because the weather didn't cooperate in all that time.

Joan: Before you formed the actual Washington trip, wasn't there another trip? Did you go to Topeka the year before?

Ed: We went to all of the small towns with our tractors and paraded throughout the towns. We had meetings. We would call meetings with good speakers; my wife was one of them, to inform the people what was going on.

Joan: So you went... you would show up in town with some tractors for the weekend or?

Ed: Just for one day. Usually on a Saturday.

Joan: What was the range of those towns? Where did you go?

Ed: We went to St. John, Kinsley, Larned, Pratt, we went to Topeka. When we went to Topeka, our son drove one of my tractors. We would gather up other farmers on the way, that was kind of a pre-thing to

when we gathered up and went to D.C.

Joan: You were in the meetings when you were forming this interest in something, about how many people would show up from Pratt or Larned?

Ed: Oh, we'd probably have 150 or 200 people, probably.

Joan: And then you'd have the speakers?

Ed: Yes, we had speakers.

Joan: Now, did you trailer your tractors in for that or did you drive them to Pratt or whatever?

Ed: Most of the time they were driven. Well, back then we didn't do much hauling on tractors. We did a lot of traveling locally. The fact is, the furthest we went that I can remember was Fredonia, which is in southeast Kansas.

Joan: When you went to Fredonia, how many tractors would go?

Ed: We didn't take any tractors; we went strictly for a meeting down there.

Joan: What was the response to those initial meetings when you were organizing?

Ed: Well, not very good. It is kind of hard to convince people that things weren't doing that good for the farmer. I don't think they realized that the farmer was probably struggling.

Joan: The farmers who showed up, were they supportive?

Ed: Yes, they were very supportive. They didn't know what to do to try to correct the situation.

Joan: I'm trying to think, how old would you have been in 1979?

Marjorie: He was born in '27.

Joan: So you were about 50. Or in that area. Was that a typical age group?

Ed: I think so. We did have our son, he was in the process of starting to farm with us, and I didn't have enough to support both families. We decided that maybe we'd quit farming. We'd farm as long as we could and help Al as long as we could, so that's what we did.

Joan: So, to me this idea of driving a tractor to Washington D.C. was maybe daring, or foolish. I don't know which. What made you decide that it was worth the effort?

Ed: I think probably that it was the novelty of it, or the idea that we could do it, and get all the farmers organized throughout all the states. It was quite a feat to accomplish, and they did a good job of it. We were glad that we went for the experience. We had a lot of support back home. We had an office in Lewis, and all of the people would come in that office. A lot of them would go every morning and drink coffee and discuss what was going on and try to get organized. We did have a lot of farmers that were really against it.

Joan: How did they show their disapproval?

Ed: Well, for one thing, they wouldn't donate any money or donate any time, and they didn't want to hear anything about it. Those farmers were probably doing pretty good. If you were in the dairy business, the dairy business was really good. We had a lot of dairies back then, in a small area. They weren't interested at all because they were doing all right with their milk production.

Marjorie: And if you had an oil well in the backyard, you didn't care, or extra income.

Joan: At this time, you were just a farmer. You didn't have any outside income?

Ed: This was it. I did have livestock, I had a cow herd. I was probably an above-average farmer, for acreage. I was probably doing pretty good, but we weren't getting anything for our grain.

Joan: So, the year before the Washington trip, or was it just that December that you went to Topeka? I'm trying to remember.

Marjorie: That was before. We went to Topeka before Washington.

Joan: Like a year before? Tell me a little bit about that, what happened, and who you met with. What was the response?

Ed: Well, I don't remember much about that trip.

Joan: What tractor did you take up there?

Ed: I took a 1941 M Farmall; our son drove it. The fact is, I still have it out there in the shed. We had a lot of guys that age that drove tractors, and we had a lot of old guys that drove their old tractors. Most of them didn't have cabs, so it was tough.

Joan: This first trip, just to Topeka, was that in December?

Ed: Well, it was in the wintertime, as I recall, because it was cold.

Joan: How many days does it take to get to Topeka on a tractor?

Ed: I think three days.

Joan: Was it a pretty big group that first time?

Ed: Yes, we had a pretty good group. When we did this, one of us would have to stay home and do chores. I had cattle to take care of, but I did go to Topeka. I drove down in the car. We had a very good turnout in Topeka, and I think people in Topeka were receptive to us. Most of the time, all of the policemen and sheriffs provided good protection for us on the highways.

Joan: What was the route you took? Can you remember the towns you went through?

Ed: I don't know, I don't remember that part. All I do know is that I remember coming into Topeka from the south.

Joan: So was there some reason after that Topeka one that you decided to go on to Washington? Do you remember what the process was?

Ed: I think it was already in the works while we still kept doing things in Kansas. I don't know, I can't remember what we did on the trips to some of these towns, but we couldn't go very far because we drove our tractors and we had to get back for that night. They would only go about 20 miles an hour down the road.

Joan: Was it the same tractor that you took to Washington D.C.? Or was it a different one?

Ed: I didn't take a tractor to Washington. All I took was a pickup and camper. I was in the support group. I think we had five tractors that came from Edwards County.

Joan: Who had those tractors?

Ed: Jim Titus, Dub had a tractor, Deb Snyder had a tractor, Jack Wolf had one.

Joan: His was open cab.

Ed: Yes, and Deb's was open.

Marjorie: No, Deb's had a cab on it.

Ed: We had a fellow from Stafford that went. I think that was the fifth tractor wasn't it?

Joan: What was his name?

Marjorie: (discussion) I don't know, but he didn't get his tractor all the way to Washington D.C.

Ed: Yes, he had a collision with his tractor that ruined a wheel.

Marjorie: It was on a bridge, and I think, in St. Louis.

Joan: It collided with another car?

Marjorie: Yes, another vehicle that got too close.

Joan: And so you were support and went in the pickup and camper. You were alone, the two of you?

Ed: Yes.

Marjorie: That's my part of the story.

Joan: Can you describe some of the things that happened on the trip?

Ed: Well, we didn't see the sunlight for 14 days. I think it took 14 days to drive, and we didn't see sunlight all the way. We run into snow several times, and we always had freezing weather. We housed Lester Derley; he had a support truck. He had fuel, and he had a welder, and I kind of worked with Lester on that. We would service the tractors at night, in the evening, and let the guys that drove rest.

Then we fed them and tried to keep them warm. So we were busy all this time and always had things to do.

Joan: And you were going about 20 miles an hour?

Ed: Yes, about 20 miles an hour. I don't recall how many miles we would get per day. It would depend a lot on the weather. And we had people that would go out ahead and find places for us to park for the night. I think Darrel was one of them. He would go out and did a fine job of getting things arranged to keep things rolling.

Joan: About how many tractors were in the...

Ed: Well, we kept gathering up tractors as we went. We gathered up tractors from Colorado and joined up with them. The fact is, they came up 50 Highway, and I think we joined right down here at the driveway.

Joan: Right out here in front of the house?

Ed: Yes, we joined them right here and went on into Topeka. We got into Topeka and it was raining and snowing and cold. We waited just one day until other tractors came in from different directions. We had all of our group; I think Nebraska came into Topeka, the Nebraska tractors, and the Colorado tractors and Oklahoma tractors. We had a few states further west that just had one tractor out of the whole state. I guess you'd call it an experience.

Joan: Then did your son take care of your animals and things while you were gone?

Ed: Yes.

Joan: Then how long were you gone?

Ed: We were gone for what, three weeks I imagine? That was long time, not knowing what was going on back at your farm. Of course, we had telephones. And he was having a hardship because we had very cold weather here at home, and he had to feed cattle. He was young. But you could call them good times for us. Good memories.

Joan: Okay, there was one collision where you lost a tractor. Do you remember any other incidents? I talked to Darrel yesterday, and he said he wished he'd talked a little bit about church services and stuff. And I said I would ask other people. Do you remember?

Ed: Yes, we would always have church services on Sundays. We did run into a snow storm in Indiana and we stayed on a junior college campus. They would take their tractors and go clean streets and the people appreciated that. We did the same thing in D.C. We'd help the public. Farmers are always willing to help and do things. Some of them would get irate sometimes.

Joan: How about the police as you went across the country? Did you see any difference?

Ed: No, it seemed like they were all accommodating. I think they wanted us to get through their state without any problems. One incident, I think, when we stayed in Independence, Missouri, we stayed right on the Interstate. I think that was kind of before they kind of knew really what so many tractors were doing, that there were so many of them and how to control them. We stayed on top of a viaduct in

Independence, Missouri, right on the Interstate. We spent the night there our first night out.

Joan: Just pulled off the road?

Marjorie: No, we didn't pull off the road!

Ed: Just to the side.

Marjorie: And there was miles of tractors.

Ed: The poor guys that had to stay on the slope and try to sleep! We were fortunate, we were on the level! But that was one incident that I remember.

Joan: How about the public driving by and passing you?

Ed: Some of them greeted you and some of them acted like they weren't very happy because you slowed them down.

Marjorie: We also had our tractors...everything was spaced out to where the traffic could go by us fairly easily. If you were on an interstate, then of course they didn't have too much of a problem.

Joan: What was it like? I think you all met up in one area before you went into D.C.?

Marjorie: Yes, Cherry Hill Campground. It was in, I can't remember what subdivision where we were.

Ed: North.

Marjorie: We were north of Washington D.C.

Ed: That's where we camped, yes. I think we met on the other side of D.C., all of the tractors met.

Joan: So what was that day like when you actually were on your way into D.C., the big group?

Ed: I'll have to have Marj tell you that, she knows more details than I do.

Joan: Okay, what do you remember though? The tractors were in a line, were the support vehicles in with them?

Ed: Yes. Marj and I, we left our camper at the R.V. camp, and we got into the truck with Lester Derley and we rode with him. His truck was with the Tractorcade. We had to keep that all together as much as we could. Each group kind of stayed together as much as they could. Our group, well some of them got to wandering off and driving on the side of the streets when we got into D.C.

Joan: On purpose? Or were they lost?

Ed: Well, I don't know. A little bit of both, I think. I don't know what they were trying to accomplish.

Marjorie: Our ultimate goal was to shut down Washington D.C. with our tractors, to show them the power of the farmer. That's when they got herded into the Mall.

Joan: Do you want her to tell this part?

Ed: No, I'll let her tell that part, she's more theatrical than I am.

Joan: That had to be pretty amazing, to see these 8,000 or whatever tractors and be part of that. How did it feel to be part of a group like that?

Ed: Well, it felt good, but it felt good and yet it felt helpless because it seemed like every time we turned around, nobody was listening. We'd go to meetings and maybe half the politicians weren't even at the meeting. You would write up your testimonies and they'd just take your paper and throw it down. It felt like they didn't even read what you were trying to tell them. But that's pretty much ... the government works in strange ways some times. But we enjoyed doing that, and we always had to make appointments to go see your legislators.

Joan: Did you just go to the Kansas ones or did you go to all of them?

Ed: We tried to go to all of them. Sometimes you couldn't get in, you had to make appointments ahead of time. Another time we'd maybe go every day. We were down there at the Capitol every day going around and trying to talk to people.

Joan: How did the politicians receive you when you did get in to talk to them?

Ed: Well, they would listen. They would listen. We went to a lot of the hearings, and they had a lot of farmers in them. Naturally, they weren't...there was always standing room, because there's not that much room in the meeting rooms. Then the farmers were all over town, and they went to all kinds of meetings.

Joan: Was that organized at all? "You go here and you go there?"

Ed: Yes, that was all organized. We had a meeting place out there on the Mall and they would tell different groups of people what was going on that day and what they ought to do, mainly. No, it was very well organized, for what a lot of people called, "A bunch of dumb farmers." We went to the big city, and some of them probably had never been out of the state of Kansas, or been out to D.C. No, we were there long enough that we knew our way around D.C. real well. It was a good part of our life.

Joan: I know that you actually, pretty much in the beginning, stopped traffic and everything when you went into D.C., right? You sort of shut the place down?

Ed: Yes, it pretty well shut down, and then they corralled all the tractors and, like I said, our group veered off and they started running around other parts of D.C. on the streets, and they did not get rounded up in the Mall, because they got split off from the rest of the group. They finally brought all the tractors all around and got them corralled, so to speak. They brought in some of their S.W.A.T teams and busses and surrounded the Mall and got the tractors in there and got them harnessed to where they couldn't get out.

Joan: How did it feel to have the government worried about you being...well, you weren't terrorists, but subversive?

Ed: I think that was their main concern, that we would get mean or cause a lot of problems. That wasn't

the case, but like I said, you did have a lot of irate farmers that could get that way pretty fast. But I think that as a whole, most of them were just pretty reasonable.

Joan: And your relations with the Capitol police and the D.C. police?

Ed: That was pretty good.

Marjorie: After we quit running over their cars! One guy, well the big tractor that was in the Smithsonian, had a dozer blade on the front of it, he kind of pushed cars out of the way, which wasn't good PR.

Joan: And it snowed while you were there in D.C.?

Ed: Yes, I think there was snow on the ground all the time we were there; and they went out and shoved the snow all over Washington D.C. I think we saved the city a lot of money. I think they appreciated that.

Joan: And the farmers paid for the gas for that?

Ed: Yes, they paid for our fuel. They had a difficulty thinking that the farmers were tearing up the grass on the Mall and I think that got resolved, and I think maybe, I don't remember how they did that, but I think the farmers might have reseeded if they did that kind of damage. You can imagine what a bunch of tractors would do in a place like that.

Joan: And you stayed in your trailer the whole time?

Ed: Yes.

Joan: Did you do any sightseeing? Did you have time for that?

Ed: Very little. We did go through some of the museums while we were there, some days when we weren't able to do anything else.

Joan: And your trip was funded by your personal funds and the group back here?

Ed: They solicited and went around the neighborhoods and gathered up money and support, but we didn't get that much money. So the people that did were pretty much on their own financially.

Joan: And you drove your truck and trailer back here. Now, I know Darrel and Karen stayed about three months. Did most people come back? Did you come back at different times?

Ed: We came back at different times, and we sent people back up there. We kept sending people up there to man the office. We had an office rented in D.C.

Joan: Was that for the AAM? The national group?

Ed: Yes, the national group.

Joan: So people would go and spend a week, two weeks, three weeks?

Ed: They would lobby, and we would send different people up there, eight or ten or five or six people.

Marjorie: We flew up twice, Ed and I did, and our son flew up once.

Joan: Were there other people who did that from the county?

Ed: Yes.

Marjorie: Dub and Clara did, Stapletons did.

Joan: They went back and forth? Then that got to be really expensive, if they were flying.

Ed: We had a nephew from Sterling, he went up and he manned the office for probably six months. He was one of the main guys in the office. He'd keep things orderly and do the paperwork. So, yes, we had people from all over the United States who helped man the office.

Joan: So after the initial confluence on D.C., say maybe after three weeks, about how many people would have been there at one time? How long did the tractors stay there?

Ed: Well, the tractors were there for what, three weeks maybe?

Joan: Were they trailered back home?

Ed: Yes, most of them were trailered back home. They made arrangements to have them hauled back.

Marjorie: The implement companies donated that; they donated their big semi's to come get our tractors.

Joan: The local implement companies.

Marjorie: I don't know any of them around here, but there were implement companies that did.

Joan: So after that second month, about how many people would have still been lobbying? Do you have any idea?

Ed: We probably had thirty or forty people that stayed there year-round.

Joan: And they were basically volunteering and going in and out, except for maybe a skeleton...

Ed: Yes, and you had a lot of really knowledgeable farmers up there, that could get up and tell them how it really is and what is going on.

Joan: Did any legislation come out of this? You were trying to get parity, you were trying to do something to get the price of grain up.

Ed: No, I don't think anything came of it. It seemed like a trip with not getting anything accomplished. I think a lot of the farmers were probably disillusioned about the way things work.

Joan: When you came back, what was the reaction of people when you talked to them about the trip?

Ed: Well, we were still supportive of everything that was going on back there. We thought maybe we did some good, because they recognized that we had farmers out here that were feeding the world so to speak. And we ran our office there in Lewis for a couple or three years, I think.

Joan: After the Tractorcade, was it mainly letter writing and going to Topeka and things like that? What did your office do for the next couple years?

Ed: I don't know, you worked over at the office...

Marjorie: We manned that office. There was somebody over in that Lewis office all the time, and we were always in contact with Washington, not Topeka, but Washington. There was always information going out and coming in, stacks and stacks of paper that we'd keep. There were things that we could send up there and they'd send back to us. Reports. Busy work, but we thought we were doing something.

Joan: And local farmers, if there was a bill pending...

Marjorie: Yes. If there was a bill pending, anything that supporting ag., we would send guys up there to lobby.

Joan: Do you think this was a worthwhile project, looking back now, all these many years later?

Ed: I think so. We made a dent in the history of the American farmer and I think they listen to us more now.

Joan: So it is something you would do again?

Ed: Yes.

Joan: Oh, you'd do it now!

Ed: It was an undertaking that you don't regret doing. We got a lot of friendships over this deal, got acquainted with a lot of people. I even think it brought our county together more, our farmers. Of course all the farming technology now, it has changed so much since then. We don't regret what we did.

Joan: Do you have any other closing comments?

Ed: No, I don't think so.

Joan: Rosetta, is there anything you would like to ask him?

Rosetta: All I can think of is, you know Kansas is kind of against unions. Some of the farmers that resisted, do you think they thought it was kind of a union, or that you wanted to take over the farmers?

Ed: No, I don't think so. I think they thought it was just...that you were just wasting your time, I think. And like I said, the dairy industry, they weren't against the farmers, it was just the fact that milk production was doing great and they had cheap feed. That was a lot different than the regular straight grain farmer that was the only thing. The only thing that I can think of where there was any difficulty between the farmers was the dairy industry. I don't think the unions entered into it at all.

Joan: And your son was supportive, and I'm trying to think, did you have parents alive at this time?

Ed: No.

Joan: Do you think your parents would have been supportive?

Ed: I think so. I think so. I think so.

Marjorie: Ed's dad was a man of fewer words than Ed, but I can visualize Ed's dad saying, "How much money do you want? How much money do you need."