

**1979 Tractorcade to Washington, D.C.
Interview with Mary Ellen Schinstock
October 10, 2012
Conducted in the Kinsley City Room, Kinsley, Kansas
Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff**

Joan: Mary Ellen, we wanted you to start out by describing what your farm was like in 1978 and '79, when you got involved in the American Agriculture Movement. What did your farm consist of?

Mary Ellen: We had about a thousand acres of wheat and ran anywhere between 400 to 600 head of stocker/feeder cattle. We had alfalfa, probably 80 acres, and then we had some rented ground also. We owned two sections.

Joan: So at this time, you were a family of five children and your husband? Was the farm your sole source of income?

Mary Ellen: Yes, until I went to work at the school as the secretary. Up until time, it was.

Joan: Okay, about when did you go to work at the school?

Mary Ellen: I think it was about '80 or '81, something like that.

Joan: How did you hear about or get involved in the AAM?

Mary Ellen: I really can't remember how we heard about it. I can't remember if we heard something about it on TV or if it was word of mouth. But somebody from Springfield, Colorado, came out here and had a meeting and we went to it. We talked about the problems with American agriculture and they filled us in a little bit about the movement.

Joan: Do you remember how many people were at that first meeting about?

Mary Ellen: It was pretty well attended. I can't remember exactly how many, but there was a lot of interest.

Joan: So from then, what?

Mary Ellen: Lela Fox and I started an Ag office here in Kinsley down at Fox Implement. The first Tractorcade to Topeka, I said, "Lela, we ought to get a bus to go up there, we ought to fill up a bus." She said, "Oh Mary Ellen, we don't have time. We couldn't do it." And I said, "I think I can do it."

Joan: You set up your office right before the Tractorcade to Topeka? What were you doing in the office? What was the purpose of the office?

Mary Ellen: Just to get information and have it there so if people came in and wanted to know about it or farmers came in and needed updates on what was happening, we could be there.

Joan: So you and she pretty much managed this, or were there other volunteers?

Mary Ellen: Yes. Her and I, because we had just started it. We had just set it up.

Joan: So were you there together? Or did you take shifts?

Mary Ellen: We took shifts, and she said she didn't think we had time to set this up. But I said, "I think we do." So I went home that afternoon and from about 1:00 that afternoon until about 10:00 that night, I called every farmer in Edwards County and some in Kiowa (*County*). But anyhow, I filled the bus. We got a bus going.

Joan: Was this a commercial bus?

Mary Ellen: Yes. I think I had 40 seats to fill.

Joan: So would this be in '78 or '77?

Mary Ellen: It was '77. So we filled the bus, and we rode up on the bus. It was the first Tractorcade that went to Topeka. Then the next Tractorcade, Leo drove a tractor up. But on the first Tractorcade, we filled a bus and we took it up. I don't what happened, I don't know why Lela dropped out, but she did. They really didn't want the office in there. They'd opened an office in Lewis that was really active and had a lot of people in it. So I went there and worked. The Kinsley office didn't last too long.

Joan: I wonder, were there people who didn't appreciate what you were doing? Could that have been it? Was it hurting business?

Mary Ellen: I don't know. She never said, and I really can't remember why we quit. There were never any hard feelings between Lela and I. That wasn't it. I think Lela just had other things she wanted to do with her time.

Joan: There were just the two of you doing it.

Mary Ellen: Yes, I think she just kind of lost interest in the organization, the movement.

Joan: So, were most of your friends and farmers that you knew supportive of what you were doing?

Mary Ellen: Yes, very. Most of the people in town were fairly supportive. There was only one business that I can think of (of course, we didn't ask for money or anything like that. We asked for window space to put stuff in the windows to advertise the Tractorcades or something like that). There was only one business in town that said, "No." She says, "My husband is a farmer, but I am not a farm wife. I am a businesswoman in Kinsley, and no. I don't want anything to do with it." That was okay, that was how she felt. But she was the only one who didn't want any part of it.

Joan: This was in '77, right before that first Tractorcade. You went and came back. When you were filling out your form, you said there was some other Tractorcade to Larned. Was that after that then?

Mary Ellen: Yes, after the first Tractorcade, we had a Tractorcade in Larned. Then we had a meeting trying to spark interest over in that direction. After we got done, well, we decided that we'd just come through Lewis and Kinsley too. I don't know how many people from Larned went out got their tractors and joined us and came through with us. But it was fun; it was a lot of fun.

Joan: So you went right down Main Street. Did you have permission to do this?

Mary Ellen: Leo was a firm believer that it is easier to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission.

Joan: So how did the city feel after this impromptu parade?

Mary Ellen: Oh, we didn't know, and we didn't care.

Joan: And they didn't give you a ticket anyway.

Mary Ellen: And they didn't give us a ticket.

Joan: Tractors traveled at about what speed on the highway?

Mary Ellen: Oh, when we were going in road gear, I suppose may be 30 miles an hour? They don't go very fast. I don't know, I really don't know.

Joan: So when you went through Kinsley, you don't remember how many tractors were involved?

Mary Ellen: I think there were probably 50 or 60 tractors.

Joan: Oh really, that big.

Mary Ellen: Yes. We picked some up at Larned, and we came through Lewis. I think there were 50 or 60 tractors that came back.

Joan: We hadn't heard about that involvement before. Then, you said Leo drove his tractor to Topeka in '78? That would be right before the '79 one to Washington. Do you remember anything about that? His experiences?

Mary Ellen: He drove the tractor up there, and my dad had a Winnebago and he followed him up. So he gave Leo a place to stay and other people a place to stay that didn't want to buy a motel room.

Joan: You weren't able to go?

Mary Ellen: I wasn't able to go. I went up later on. I drove the car up so I was there on the day they actually had the parade through Topeka and we had the meetings and stuff, and the speakers. I was up there for that. But I came up later in the car. I got lost...

Joan: At this point, you are talking to whom? You wanted parity, right? How would you define parity?

Mary Ellen: Parity is the cost of production plus a living wage. Mainly it is the cost of production. We wanted to at least get that, and it would have been nice to have a living wage out of that too.

Joan: And you met with the senator and congressman?

Mary Ellen: Bob Dole and Keith Sibelius and Kassebaum was up there. We talked to Nancy Kassebaum. And then we went to all the offices. When we were up there, we went to all the senators' offices.

Joan: This would have been the state representatives, rather than Federal, at that point.

Mary Ellen: Yes, okay, the state representatives. I think Martin, was his name ~~Terry~~ (*It was Phillip*) Martin? Was he the state representative from Larned? He was very helpful. I'm sure it was Martin; isn't that terrible? I can't remember who was chairman. We'd call him and he'd be listening to things out on the senate floor at the statehouse. He'd take our calls and help us and talk to us. He was very helpful.

Joan: How did you find Senator Dole and Kassebaum?

Mary Ellen: Very supportive of the farmers in Kansas. You know, it was, "Oh yes, this is what we needed." But then, we all knew that when the doors were closed, they sang a different song. Keith Sibelius was real good thought; we really liked Keith Sibelius. Bob Dole was a politician. He wanted to be out there to shake the hands and get the photo ops and all that. He put his name on the bill, but it was half-hearted. By that time, we were educated enough to know about the deals that was made behind closed doors.

Joan: So, the first Tractorcade to Topeka. Did you feel that was successful? But the Washington Trip was already in the works, wasn't it because people took tractors up and left them there?

Mary Ellen: It was already in the works.

Joan: Then in January, they left from there.

Mary Ellen: That could be. Leo brought his back, and I didn't know that anybody else had left theirs up there. Because, there was some that left from here and drove to Topeka. Those were the ones that we knew. They left from Lewis and drove to Topeka and met up with those. When they went up to Washington D.C., they picked up tractor crews all along the way. I didn't realize that there were some that left their tractors up there.

Joan: We've heard that in another interview, but some of them after driving them up in December, they just left them there.

Mary Ellen: That could have been, that would have made sense. Then maybe the ones that left here decided after that that they were going to go. I remember going out and watching them leave.

Joan: Yes, there was a contingency. Why did you and Leo decide not to drive a tractor to Washington?

Mary Ellen: Expense and being away from the farm. We had the cattle and just couldn't be gone that long. Lester couldn't be gone from his long enough to go up there and drive it back and drive it up. We decided that if he drove it up, we could drive it back. That way neither one of them was gone from the farm for so long.

Joan: This would be Lester Derley, and he drove the fuel supply truck that supported the tractors on the way up. You had prearranged that you would come up and drive it back.

Mary Ellen: I think I've got some pictures in here of that. Mrs. Derley (*Janet*), I think it was, did it. Look at the...

Joan: Yes, we have a picture of the red truck and the sign on the side.

Mary Ellen: And it's all farm, like the "A" is two ears of corn put together.

Joan: I can't tell that in the little picture, I'll have to blow it up and look closely. We'll have that picture in with your transcript.

Mary Ellen: I think Mrs. Derley did that, I think she painted that sign.

Joan: This would be Lester's wife?

Mary Ellen: Yes, Janet. I think her name was Janet Derley. I used to make fun of people who would forget names! I never did.

Joan: Were you in touch with the Tractorcade people as they went to Washington? You were still back here. Did you have any communication with them?

Mary Ellen: Yes, I worked in the office in Lewis, and they called back at the office. People would drop in and say, "Where are they now, and what are they doing?" They had a telephone they would call back on and let us know kind of what was happening and keep us updated on what they were doing. They had to be at a certain place before they could call, because the reception wasn't that good. They didn't have the towers like we have now.

Joan: Do you remember any of those phone calls in particular? Were there any stories or anything?

Mary Ellen: No, they just... The stories after we got to D.C. were more..., before it was just that they were on the road and they never really talked about anything that happened on the way.

Joan: Okay, so you flew into D.C. What day would that have been? Was it before they took the tractors into Washington, or was it after?

Mary Ellen: That was after. The tractors were already on the Mall when we went in, I think. But as far as dates and what all... I can't remember the dates, but I'm pretty sure that they were already in the Mall. They had Tractorcades through D.C. all the time. There was some really funny, funny things about that.

Joan: Well, let's hear about that!

Mary Ellen: There was one guy that we knew, and I can't remember his name. I never thought I'd forget his name because he was real active in the American Ag. But he went up and took... They locked the doors of the American Ag building. This guy thought that that wasn't right; they shouldn't lock the doors against the people that were paying to have that office open. Whoever put on these doors wasn't very smart, because they put the hinges on the outside! Well, this guy and some of his farmer friends went and took the hinges out of both doors, and they were big, heavy doors. The next morning, when they went to open them up, the doors just fell flat. And the farmers walked in that building then. They couldn't keep them out then because the doors were off on the sidewalk!

Joan: And they were keeping them out because...

Mary Ellen: ... they didn't want to mess with them. They would open them during the day, but they wouldn't let us go in. They didn't want us in the Ag building because, you know, we were rabble

rousers. Darn rednecks. Get up there, and no telling what they'd do! They might take the hinges out of the door! Well, they couldn't keep us out after that.

Then there were some of our guys that got locked in the "Hilton". We called it the "Washington Hilton" because some of them got in there. Leo was about two people behind; he just couldn't get up there in time to get locked in.

Joan: What are you calling the "Hilton"?

Mary Ellen: That was...I can't remember what. Maybe that was another part of the Ag building after they got their doors put back on. But they couldn't get in.

Joan: So they had sort of a sit-in?

Mary Ellen: Yes, they got locked in. Then they wouldn't leave. They tried to get them to leave, and they said, "No, this is pretty nice here. We'll just sit here." And they made all kinds of long-distance calls back home on their phones and told us how things were. When they invaded the Democratic Headquarters, Leo was in that bunch. I think they spent the night in the Democratic Headquarters too, and he called home and talked to us about that.

Joan: I didn't realize they were actually sitting in buildings.

Mary Ellen: Yes. They were quite the rebel rousers.

Joan: Was he with other Edwards County people at this time?

Mary Ellen: Yes, he was with other Edwards County people. I don't know who else from Edwards County got in there with him. Harold Schinstock went up there with him a couple of times. I don't know if Harold was up there that time. I don't know, but there was a bunch of them.

Joan: Maybe we should have you go through who you remember was in D.C. We have a pretty good list of people who drove tractors, but I'm not real sure about people who flew in and out. Can you think of anybody else?

Mary Ellen: Well, Lester flew in and out too. He was up there with the Tractorcade, but he was also up there for more than just the Tractorcade. Harold and Leo, I think Dub (*W.A.*) Stapleton was up there, because the Stapletons were very active supporters of it. I think Jerry (*Stapleton*) was up there. I can't remember, it's been too many years and I hadn't thought about since then, except what great fun it was. It was such a neat thing, because you made such good friends when you were up there. You were working for a common goal and they were all such neat, neat people. We met farmers from Georgia; we met a peanut farmer from Georgia.

Joan: Not President Carter! He wasn't a supporter at all!

Mary Ellen: No, he wasn't. I made a sign up that said, "Nixon gave us a fixin', Ford got us bored and Carter ain't no smarter." Part of the reason that the American Ag movement couldn't really succeed was because there is such vast differences in each area of the country in the way they farm. The Georgia peanut farmer had so many other different issues than the Kansas wheat farmer. We could say, "We want parity," and that could bring us a little bit together. No matter what crop it was, we wanted it to pay for itself because at that time, the price of wheat wasn't any more than what it was during WWII.

Everything had gone up; interest had gone up. Like Leo was farming on his equity on the farm. That only goes so far until finally you've borrowed up your equity and you go under. It wasn't that the farmers were unsuccessful in what they did. The year that we went under, Leo's wheat crop was 50 bushel to the acre, and the milo crop was more than that. You can't be an unsuccessful farmer and do that. It wasn't that the farmers weren't... in fact, they were almost too successful, because they had too much of a surplus. They didn't have to pay you.

Joan: And that kept the price down.

Mary Ellen: They didn't have to pay us for our crops. We had to sell before they had to pay us.

Joan: You had mentioned another story before about goats?

Mary Ellen: Oh yes, the Missouri delegation brought goats. For a day or two Washington D.C. was the goat capitol of the world because the Missouri Delegation turned goats loose on the Capitol steps. Watching those D.C. police, who had no idea what a farm animal was, trying to ride their motorcycles to round those goats up, it was quite hilarious!

Another guy from the Missouri Delegation brought a couple of mules up there. One of the little girls he met along the road fell in love with the baby mule. It was just so cute, and she loved it so much. So, he just handed her the lead rope and said, "It's yours honey. You just take it home and enjoy it." Then he walked away, and she and her parents were standing there with a Missouri mule wondering, "What in the world do we do with this? Where is this going to fit in the Brownstone?"

Another thing that the D.C. police did that was really funny was, they tried to scare the farmers with their mounted police. Well, you know these farmers aren't afraid of those horses. They know those horses aren't going to kick them. They aren't going to do anything to them. They might push them around, but if you take a hotshot and the horse will move. So, they put the horses up real quick when the farmers got the hotshots out. They put the horses up, and then they brought out the dogs. They would hide when the farmers walked through.

Well shoot, we never did anything that caused any trouble. That was just fun, that wasn't trouble. We didn't cause any riots. In fact, one of the D.C. guys told Leo that that was the most friendliest bunch of demonstrators they'd ever had because the guys picked up after themselves. In fact, after they left the Mall, and a lot of people don't know this, the farmers went back and reseeded the Mall and did away with the damage that they'd caused. There was a snowstorm up there when the Tractorcades were up there, and they went out and cleaned the streets and took doctors and nurses and stuff to and from the hospitals. They helped a lot. Of course, that wasn't the image that the media wanted to portray of the farmers. You didn't hear about those stories.

Joan: What about the media thing? We've heard this before.

Mary Ellen: We had a parade that went down through Washington D.C., and there were six lanes. They were stretched across as far as the eye could see. When we got home, Peggy said there that there were about six hundred farmers there! Well! There were a lot more than six hundred farmers on six lanes across shoulder to shoulder and as far down as the eye could see.

Joan: This was walking?

Mary Ellen: This was walking. We did a lot of walking there too, as well as the tractors and stuff. We walked the streets a lot.

Joan: Can you think of any other stories? Anything that stands out?

Mary Ellen: Probably not that could be told. There was a guy from western Kansas, and he wanted to go down and see the street where the hookers were. So Leo and I and this old farmer, we got in a cab and got to talking to the cab driver. He just shut off his meter, and he took us all around and showed this old farmer all the streets where the ladies of the night hung out. It was quite an eye opener to the old man!

Joan: Well, how did you find the people of Washington D.C.? How did they appear?

Mary Ellen: Just the 'Man on the Street' we didn't have much (*to do with but*) we had a lot to do with but the cab drivers and the people in the hotels and stuff, they were very supportive of the American Ag movement. The cab drivers, we met one guy who was in D.C. driving a cab because he went bust on the farm down South. So he was very supportive. He said that he just loved to drive the farmers around because he was in touch with home people again. The kind of people that he grew up with. Farm people.

Joan: And you were staying in a hotel? Right in D.C.?

Mary Ellen: We stayed in Maryland, I think Bethesda, Maryland, was where we were at.

Joan: Were you close to where the tractors and trailers were?

Mary Ellen: We weren't too far, just a couple of minutes away by cab. We weren't too far away. We were down there all day long. The only time we went to the motel was to sleep.

Joan: How long were you there?

Mary Ellen: I can't remember, probably about a week. Probably about that, then Leo and the girls and I drove home. That was when the girls were there.

Joan: Leslie and Tina?

Mary Ellen: Leslie and Tina.

Joan: Well, I'm trying to think about how hold they would have been.

Mary Ellen: Leslie was in the 8th grade, so Tina would have been in the 5th or 6th grade.

Joan: Why did you have them there?

Mary Ellen: We felt like it was an education. They would go up there and get a first hand grasp of the government that they couldn't get in school. Then in government class when they were talking about these buildings and things, well the kids knew what they were talking about. When they talked about the process that a bill goes through, well they were up there and saw firsthand. It was kind of sitting out in the halls of the Senate building, but you know. And we took them to see Mount Vernon. It was a very educational trip for them. That was the purpose, was for them to get an education and to see what our government was like. There wasn't any of us that didn't love our country and didn't love our form of government. We wouldn't have changed it for nothing. We were all very patriotic; we all of us loved

our country. We wanted the kids to have a real appreciation of democracy and what it was like and how it worked.

Joan: I'm going to ask this, and then we'll come back. When you drive home, was the weather any better than when the tractors came out?

Mary Ellen: It was cold.

Joan: This was January or February?

Mary Ellen: I think the tractors were up there about a month, so it would have been in February when we brought them home. It was cold, and we didn't have any snowstorms or storms that hampered us any.

Joan: And of course, the fuel truck could pretty much go highway speed. The tractors, we understand, were basically hauled home by implement companies.

Mary Ellen: Yes,

Joan: So what did you do during your days to demonstrate or to get after the politicians? What were your activities up there?

Mary Ellen: We walked through the offices and talked to them, those that would talk to us. Some of them, the senator wasn't in and they didn't know when he could be expected. So a lot of times, we'd just sit there and we'd hold him captive in his office because he couldn't move with us sitting there. We knew he was there, so we'd just sit and talk to the office people.

Joan: And these would be just any senator, not just Kansas senators.

Mary Ellen: Yes, any senator. Because they all voted on it; they all had to vote. The Kansas delegation, they always saw us. But some of the other people weren't so gung ho about seeing us.

Joan: Maybe they saw their own people?

Mary Ellen: Yes, but they wouldn't see people from out of state. We'd sit in there. The Missouri delegation, their representatives were very good to see us.

Joan: You just talked to them about parity and asked for some support?

Mary Ellen: Asked for their support

Joan: Can you talk a little bit about the law enforcement? Was there ever a time when you were afraid of the law enforcement?

Mary Ellen: No, the police were very nice; they really were. In fact, one of the guys, they had those dogs out there, you know. The kids and I and Leo went up and talked to him and talked about their dogs and stuff. We weren't afraid of their dogs because we knew that as long as we were peaceful, as long as we didn't cause any problems, they weren't going to turn those dogs loose on us. None of us were ever really afraid because we knew that we weren't going to be anything but peaceful. We bought tickets to

the policemen's ball from them and talked to them. They were really super-nice guys. One of the guards at the White House, we took the girls on a tour of the White House, one of the guards at the White House flipped up his lapel, and he had a support button for the American Ag movement on the underside of his lapel! He showed it to us and then put it back down. They were super.

Joan: You did have the FBI and they were watching you and monitoring you? How did you feel about that? Or what did you know about that?

Mary Ellen: Well, I know that one guy; he was really a rabble rouser. I've got a couple of stories I can't tell, but this one I can tell. He stayed where the National Headquarters for the AAM was, he stayed in that hotel. I can't remember what hotel it was, but it was the hotel that all the delegation stayed at. The FBI had rented the whole top floor, and we knew that they were monitoring everything that was going on in the Ag offices.

Joan: By monitoring, you mean bugging?

Mary Ellen: Yes. They were bugging it. This old farmer knew they were bugging it. He was from Lacrosse. So he went out and called his friend on a payphone, and he said, "Tonight, from my hotel room, I'm going to call you, and I want you to just go along with whatever I say. And you just act like you know about it, whatever I say."

The friend said, "Okay." So that night, the guy called him at home and said, "Everything up here is about ready to go."

And he said, "Okay."

And he said, "Now, you remember the signal?"

And he said, "Not for sure, tell me."

"When you hear it on the news, you'll know that it is time to start things on this end. You'll know by what you hear on the news that we're going here in D.C., and you just start it there, and all the other states are going to start it at the same time. It 's going to be great!"

The guy no more than hung up the phone till the FBI was knocking at his door!" He went to the door and answered his hotel room door, and you know, "Yes, we're going to have a big celebration. We're going to have firecrackers and we're going to set them off and it is going to be a big party all over the United States! We're just going to have a party! What did you guys think?" And the guy out here in Lacrosse, the FBI came and visited him! And he said the same thing, "It's just going to be a big party! All over, It was going to be a unity thing. Everybody, all the American Ag people all around the country, we were just going to have a party!" That was funny.

Joan: Are there any other good stories you are holding back on?

Mary Ellen: Well, when we go through the pictures, I can probably remember some then. No, those are the ones that I could tell. This guy, he was so funny. At the Topeka delegation, he and his friend dressed up like Arabs. They had their white sheets...

Joan: I've seen the pictures. Were they doing that to comment on oil?

Mary Ellen: Yes, the price of oil. The price of oil was, well, I don't remember how many dollars a barrel it was, but wheat was nothing. And it took so many bushels of wheat for the farmer to have anything or to be able to buy gas or diesel for his tractors. It wasn't like it is now; it wasn't against the Arabs.

Joan: Well, generally speaking, do you think you were supported in Edwards County? Were there people who thought you were just being foolish? Or rabble rousers or whatever?

Mary Ellen: Yes. There were a lot of people who knew we couldn't get anything done and thought it was just stupid and that we were doing okay. But they were mainly older farmers that were doing okay. Or younger farmers who had inherited everything and didn't have to buy the land and everything.

Rosetta: Did Leo inherit the farm?

Mary Ellen: No, he bought it.

Joan: I think you've sort of told us, do you not think you had much of an impact on legislation or the officials?

Mary Ellen: No, I don't think we did. We had a lot of fun, but we didn't have any impact on anything.

Joan: Was it a worthwhile project? Would you do it again?

Mary Ellen: Oh, in a heartbeat. It really helped. Leo was always kind of laid back, you know. He had difficulty speaking to people. I did too; I was always shy. (*laughter*) It didn't help me as much as it helped him. But it really helped him. It gave him the courage to go for other things. It gave him a voice, and he could go in and like the flood control issue. He was a big opponent of the way the flood control was going to be. He wasn't against flood control, he knew we needed that, but he was against what they had proposed. He was against that type of flood control because that would have ruined us. It would have kept the water back and it wouldn't have helped the people in town, because if you build a dike around the city, you can't tell the rain not to rain in that area. It was going to have a swimming pool effect. And it gave him a voice.

Joan: Did he do speaking at the meetings here locally or in D.C.? Like Darrel Miller did?

Mary Ellen: He didn't do like Darrel, Darrel was a good speaker. Leo at that time wasn't that sure of himself and couldn't. Now, later on, especially after he went to Liberal, then Leo became very proficient at public speaking. But at that time, he had to believe in something, or he wasn't comfortable at speaking. He'd get up and give his opinion at a meeting, but as far as... Marj Scheufler was another one that was excellent.

Joan: We have copies of her speeches that will be on the Web. It might be fun for you to read them after all of the years. Do you think this experience affected agriculture or legislation even today? Did it have any impact on...

Mary Ellen: I don't think so. I don't think so. Their goal back then... it might have slowed it down a little bit. Their goal back then was for everything to be corporate farming. There was no place in farming for family farming.

Joan: By "they" you mean...

Mary Ellen: The government. There was no place for a family farm. They wanted corporate farming.

Joan: So you think the legislation was actually skewed to eliminate family farmers?

Mary Ellen: Yes. I do. Drive out in the country now, and you'll see these place where a family farm once stood. You'll see a grove of trees, and it is kind of heartbreaking.

Joan: I know things did not get any better after the Tractorcade. You and your husband struggled to keep the farm, but you did lose it. What year did you lose your farm?

Mary Ellen: Actually, we could have held on a little bit longer, I think, but Leo's health was... he was starting to have high blood pressure and he was starting to... In '83.

Joan: In '83, so it was just four years later.

Mary Ellen: Yes.

Joan: Had you gone to irrigation?

Mary Ellen: No, we didn't.

Joan: So you didn't have any big debt for irrigation like some people we've heard from.

Mary Ellen: No, but when they... If you lost one year of farming or one year of crops to hail or something like that, well you didn't just lose one year. You lost several years because everything was so dependent on that crop. You lost that year, and you lost the next year because you had to buy seed wheat; you didn't have any wheat. It wasn't just one year you lost; it was several years. And it was tough; it was really tough.

I loved being a farm wife. I loved raising my children on the farm. There is just no better life in the world. And if I won the lottery, I'd probably go out and buy some land and farm until I went broke again!. I loved it, and Leo loved it. In fact, we own rentals now. I own rentals now. The reason Leo bought his first rental was because he got some money. I can't remember how he came into some money, but he got some money and he was driving by a wheat field one day. He thought, "I wonder if I could rent that and put some cattle on it." Then he thought, "Leo, do you want to lose it?" So he went and bought a rental. He knew that would make him money; cattle would lose it!

Rosetta: Did you borrow money from the Federal Land Bank or from a local bank?

Mary Ellen: Both.

Rosetta: Did you have trouble with the Federal Land Bank?

Mary Ellen: No, the Federal Land Bank didn't give us any troubles at all. The local bank is the one that... I remember our last harvest. I was coming into town with a load of wheat when I heard a "BOOM!" We had like a 1927... You know, we were big farmers. We had expensive machinery! This was a 1927 Ford, I think it was, with a flat head motor. It threw a rod, and I knew when I heard it that it had thrown a rod. So I got a ride into town and went into the Co-op. They came out and pulled the truck in and dumped the wheat. Then they took me out to the field, and I told Leo what had happened. I said, "You go on in and see about it." And so, I drove the combine while Leo went in and checked on the truck. A couple of days later, I went into the bank. The girls had always borrowed money for their 4-H animals and for their feed and everything. Then they would go in after the fair, after they had sold their livestock, then they would go in and pay off their debt. That way they saw firsthand what it was to have an animal, and they understood farming a little bit better.

I went in to do something with the girls' livestock. I can't even remember what it was. I went in to talk to Bill Allison. He said, "What's Leo done about that truck?" And I said, "We haven't done anything yet. It's a flat head motor, and there's no sense in fixing it. It's going to cost too much. So right now, we're hauling with one truck." And he said, "You tell Leo to go buy him a grain cart." And I said, "Okay, I'll tell Leo that." And I went and told Leo that Bill wanted us to buy a grain cart. Leo laughed and said, "I'm worried about making my land payments and about paying the money that I owe now. I don't want to go in debt anymore. I don't want to buy it. We've farmed a lot of years with one truck. We'll haul with one truck." Then Leo had to go in a couple of days later and Bill says, "Leo, I want you to go buy a grain cart." And Leo said, "Bill, I can't buy a grain cart. I'm worried about making my payments and everything." Bill says, "Don't worry about it; we've got you covered. We'll loan you any money you need. You go buy you a grain cart."

Well, Leo didn't do it. He didn't want to buy a grain cart. After harvest was over and everything, Leo went into the bank, and Bill was no longer his loan officer. His account was given over to somebody else. He went in and visited with him and he told Leo, "I want you to sign over every note that you have to us, and in 30 days you'll be out of business. We will foreclose on you, and you'll be gone. We're taking over." So it went from, "Leo, you've got to buy a grain cart, we've got you covered, don't worry about making your payments, don't worry about anything," to "Sign everything over to us, you're history. You're out of here." So that's when we went up and filed bankruptcy against the bank. We didn't file bankruptcy right away. In fact, we came back, and I went around and paid everybody in town that I could. I went up to Oliphant's (*veterinarian*) and I said, "Now Oliphant, you cash this check right away. You take it into the bank and you cash it." Because after they got the notice, they would freeze our account, and we wanted to make sure that nobody in town was hurt when we declared bankruptcy. So I went up and I told Rodney (*Oliphant*), "Rodney, you go cash that check right away, make sure it goes in tonight's deposit, because I may just go to Dodge this afternoon, and you know what a spendthrift I am. I might just go and hit every store in town. So you cash that check before my checks hit the bank!"

Leo went down, and he paid John Deere off. He had a bill there on our tractor that we had had some work done on it. It was a big bill, and he told Butch (*Danler*), "Butch, you make sure that that tractor is taken care of. In fact, I couldn't pay all of it off, why don't you guys put a mechanics lien on the tractor?" Because he knew that he couldn't pay it all off, and by them putting a mechanics lien on it before the bankruptcy was ever... before they were notified, John Deere would be safe. They would get their money. Because we knew we couldn't save the 4430, and we wanted to make sure that nobody in town... I was so embarrassed, and Leo was too. We were so ashamed. We were afraid people would look down on us because we had to do this. But the bank left us no choice, and Federal Land Bank didn't foreclose on us because we weren't behind any payments with them. We made sure that our payments were up with them.

We borrowed money from over in Dodge... it was like the Small Business Administration. We got the money from them to buy an old tractor, and we kept on farming until Leo just couldn't handle the stress anymore. He was driving the truck, and Leslie was running the farm.

Joan: He was driving the truck to make a living?

Mary Ellen: Yes.

Joan: And you went to work for the school, too. But there were other farmers in the same boat as you; everybody was struggling to farm.

Mary Ellen: Right. We had some friends that they went under. They were so ashamed because they had lost the farm. Leo said, "Don't be ashamed for losing the farm. I'm just four years behind you."

And that's just about what he was; it was four years then. But it was hard, because Leo was the fourth generation to farm that ground. He had a really time. One night, he was sitting out on the hood of the car looking at the sky, saying, "God, why? I'm such a failure. I've lost my family's inheritance; I've lost four years (*generations*) of Schinstock legacy, I've lost. It's gone. I did it."

Tina had the bedroom that overlooked the drive, and she saw him sitting out there, and she came down she said, "Daddy, I can't sleep." He said, "What's the matter?" And she said, "I don't know Daddy, I just can't sleep. Come in, I want to sit on your lap." So he went in the house and sat in his chair. She sat down on his lap and put her arms around him and told him that she loved him and went to sleep in his arms. He said, "I decided then that I was worth something; my girls needed me."

Tina, it was her way of saying, "Everything else may be going wrong, but as long as Daddy's in the house, then all is right with my world." That was a big turning point for him; he had been contemplating suicide. That was a big turning point. He went to college and got his degree, and then he went on to human resource management for a degree in that. American Ag did all that. It gave him the courage and gave him a voice. It did help teach him that there is another life besides farming, that there was another way to do it. I don't know what he would have done if it hadn't been for American Ag to give him that confidence.

Joan: That is a moving story. Yet, do you look back and think that if American Ag, if those legislators had listened, had done something, in '79, that maybe you would have been able to keep that farm?

Mary Ellen: We'd be on the farm. We'd still be out there.

Rosetta: Did you grow up on a farm?

Mary Ellen: No, I was a city girl. My brother and I went to Missouri every summer. My Dad's family were farmers, and so we went out every summer and I rode horses and followed Uncle Russell and Aunt Rhonda around. I loved the farm life, but I was raised...you talked about how fast a tractor would go in road gear? I found out when Leo and I first got together, that you can't go in road gear in the tractor and disc at the same time. I tried that, and it didn't work. It was a little miscommunication. Leo said, "You go in sixth gear, you go out to the field in sixth gear and then work the field." I thought he meant I was supposed to work the field in sixth gear, too! It didn't work!

Joan: So you started farming when you got married?

Mary Ellen: Well, actually, Leo had farmed for years. When Leo and I got together, when we started dating and started being serious with each other, he says, "My first wife hated the farm, and she was always after me to sell it." He said, "Mary Ellen, I am a farmer. I love my farm. If you can't love my farm, and if you can't farm with me, then this is going to go no farther." So, I was a kept woman that summer. We rented a place here in town and the girls and I lived there and the girls went to school. It was for a whole year. I worked for him, and I did everything. I was his hired man. I did it, and I loved it. I loved running the tractor and I loved working cattle. I just loved everything about it. The girls thrived, they love... Tina was always so shy, and she would never look anybody in the eye. She walked around like this all the time, with her head down. If somebody spoke to her, she looked up like that, she wouldn't raise her head up. Leo took her in, and he loved her. He gave her confidence, and he brought her out of her shell. Leslie loved it from day one. In fact, they were going to town one day, and she said, "Leo, would you adopt me?" And he says, "Leslie, I think your mom and I ought to get married first before I adopt you! But I promise you, when your mom and I get married, I'll adopt you." So, they had to go to town on the 24th, and they were going into town, and she says, "Okay, Dad. You can adopt me after today." And he says, "Let's wait a little bit because I think I can get all three of you."

I'll just adopt you all." And that's what he did.

Joan: So you were divorced from your first husband?

Mary Ellen: Yes.

Joan: And Leo was divorced, so it was a second marriage for both of you?

Mary Ellen: It was the third marriage for me. My first, Leslie's biological father, was killed in a truck wreck when she was nine months old. He was a truck driver. So she never knew her biological father. Rod was the only dad she had known, but Rod turned on the kids after we got divorced. He turned on the kids.

Joan: Annette and Deitra are Rod's?

Mary Ellen: No, Annette and Dwight are Leo's children from his first marriage. Leslie, Tina and Deitra were my children. Deitra and Tina were from Rod.

Joan: We got that straight, if we'd done your whole life we'd have gotten that story, but we weren't doing your whole life. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the Tractorcade? You had some marvelous quotes and I will use...You are a very good story teller!

Mary Ellen: It was a wonderful, wonderful time. It was so good for our family and it was so good for Leo and I and for the community in general, because it brought the farming community together. We really had such a deep appreciation for all of our farming friends after that, through this. And for the people in town because they knew what we were going through. We were so proud of our community. You know a lot of people were saying, "Let's go to Dodge and do grocery shopping and such. You know it's cheaper in Dodge." Leo always said, "No. We are going to support our local town. If we don't support it, then someday we're going to have to go to Dodge, because there won't be anything here in town. I don't want to drive to Dodge for a gallon of milk." He said, "We're going to support our local town." He was a firm believer in that, we never went out of town to buy stuff. We supported our town.