

Tractorcades and the American Agriculture Movement

Interview with Alvin Wheaton

December 19, 2012

Conducted in the Wheaton home, Lewis, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Also present: Judy Wheaton, spouse

Joan: Can you describe your farm? How it was in 1979? How much ground you farmed and what you raised?

Alvin: I don't know how much I owned. Maybe 20 quarters maybe? We raised everything, wheat and milo, soybeans and alfalfa. Anyway, we had a big operation, and it came under tough times with \$1.00 corn. Anyway, the first time I heard about it (I think I was the first one to go to anything) was Alvin Jenkins was going to be in Hays, Kansas. My dad and I went. I was a little scared, because there got to be a car of guys came in and they got in between to AAM-ers and they just kept hitting him with their cars.

Joan: With a tractor or in cars?

Alvin: No, they were all in cars.

Joan: This was in Hays?

Alvin: And who was hitting whom?

Alvin: Some AAM-ers, there was one in the front of this car and one in the back. They was hitting him! The cops came up and told them they shouldn't be there and to get out of there. So they got out! It was quite a day.

Joan: Why were they hitting the car in the middle? Because he didn't agree with them?

Alvin: Because he wasn't one of them.

Joan: So about how many people were at that meeting?

Alvin: I don't know. It wasn't a meeting, it was a...

Joan: Was it a Tractorcade? Or what was it?

Alvin: No, I don't remember tractors being there; it was cars, a lot of cars.

Joan: Was Mr. Jenkins speaking? Why did you go up there?

Alvin: I wanted to see what was going on. Then we went to Colorado, and he spoke.

Joan: Whereabouts in Colorado? Do you remember?

Alvin: I think it was Springfield. I don't think it was his hometown, what was his hometown, do you remember? (*Campo, Colorado*)

Joan: Yes, but we don't know it right now.

Alvin: Anyway, he gave a good talk and he said he was getting sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Joan: Were there a lot of people from Kansas who went to that meeting? Or just you?

Alvin: Well, the Stapletons did, Mr. Stapleton (W.A. or "Dub") and me. That might have been it. We stayed at one of the people's places there.

Joan: You stayed with another family?

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: This would have been in 1977? Or 1978? The Tractorcade to Washington was '79 and the Topeka one was '78.

Alvin: You know, I don't remember. We stopped an auction. There was a guy that was going to lose his place and they was going to auction it off. We went there and the sheriff came there and he seen everybody there and he said, "It's not going to happen today." So that stopped the auction.

Rosetta: Where was that at?

Alvin: Out around C.T. Everett's at Springfield. C.T. went with me. The same thing was about to happen to him. But they did stop the auction, so that was a victory.

Joan: So the man didn't keep his farm, it just postponed the auction?

Alvin: Yes, but the sheriff postponed it. Then, let's see.

Judy: You went out to a soybean deal in Missouri.

Alvin: Yes. We went there. So then people started getting in it. The Scheuflers and Darrel Miller, who was a very good spokesman for us. And the Meads, Zelma and Jeff. About everybody, I mean, our office was humming, just the little office there in the café there. It was behind the café at Lewis. Things were going.

Joan: There was a lot of support in Lewis, and there wasn't so much in Kinsley and Offerle. You had the Jones from Offerle and the Schinstocks, well Schinstocks were from here I guess, and the Arensmans from Kinsley.

Alvin: Mildred VanNahmen, she was very good.

Joan: I was wondering why there was so much more involvement here in Lewis, do you think. Were things worse off here?

Alvin: I don't know. Just kind of rebels. Yes, but there were some from Offerle and Kinsley.

Joan: But this was the only town with an office. I think both those towns had an office briefly, but they didn't last. This office sure did.

Alvin: Yes, and after this all happened, life was never the same. This is a quote from me. We'd go over and visit Jack Wolfe's, which he 96, and of sound mind, he's good. Life was never the same. We'd sit down to play card, and after that we could never play cards again. All we thought about was the tractor stuff, the AAM. So it was never the same after that.

Yes, we went to Topeka. I took a truck. On the side it had, "Screw a farmer and you won't get any meat." Judy's frowning at me.

Joan: And it was a truck that you took up there?

Alvin: Yes, a feed truck.

Rosetta: Why'd you take a truck?

Joan: More comfortable?

Rosetta: Did you take fuel?

Alvin: Then another time at Lewis I had a grapple fork on a tractor. I had a dummy in there being squeezed.

Joan: Is that the one that went to Larned and Kinsley? I think that was up at Larned and came back through.

Alvin: Yes, we went through Larned. I drove my old International straight up and down, radiator tractor. A lot of guys was criticized because they had a lot of kind of new tractors. The feedlot manager over at Larned, Harold Cowan was his name. He said the only one he seen in there that had what they should have had was me with that old tractor.

Joan: What was that old tractor?

Alvin: It was a 1530 International, about a 1936.

Joan: Did it have an open cab?

Alvin: Oh yes, there was no cabs in those days. Then my dad, we still got that tractor and I'm restoring it, he had a 2132 Minneapolis Moline that he drove in the Lewis parade. The wheel wobbled, but he got a kick out of doing that. Everybody thought that was great, him driving that old tractor.

Joan: Do you happen to have the signs still that you had on the sides of the tractor or truck?

Alvin: I've got a sign that says, "Wheaton Farms Since...."

Judy: No, that was for the Lewis Centennial.

Joan: But you don't have the Tractorcade one yet. Quite a few people still have the Tractorcade ones.

Alvin: Really?

Joan: Up in the shed, you know.

Judy: You went to Missouri for the soybeans.

Alvin: We went and got soybeans out for Wayne Cryts. He had a loan with the government, which the government shouldn't have tried to claim because it was just a loan. The Federal guys were there; they took pictures of everybody.

Joan: He'd put it into a Coop? He'd put it into the elevator and couldn't get it back. And you went down to support him?

Alvin: I went down to help him get it out.

Joan: You were actually helping him get it out! You were one of those people! I read an article about this.

Judy: It was somewhere in Missouri, but I don't know the name. (*Ristine, Missouri*)

Joan: I've got it at the library, I'm going to put it on. It was a little bit after the Tractorcade.

Alvin: It was right in the corner of Missouri there. We flew in there.

Joan: How many of you were there that helped him?

Alvin: I don't know, maybe four or five maybe (*from our office*).

Joan: How come you got to do that? Was somebody friends with him?

Alvin: We just went to help him.

Joan: But how did you know that he needed help to get those soybeans out?

Alvin: Through AAM. I guess it was the FBI, but the Federal guys they said, "You guys are right, we know you're right." But they had to take our pictures and everything. They had the police on hand, the Highway Patrol, not very far away. It was kind of a scary deal.

Joan: Did they fingerprint you?

Alvin: No.

Joan: Just your pictures. How did they catch you doing this?

Alvin: They didn't catch us, they knew we were there and took our pictures.

Joan: Did you get the soybeans out? And where did you put them?

Alvin: We got them out and they went to... I think they took them to a different elevator. I think that happened. Then later, some of the guys were from around there went and got the soybeans and took them to their places. Then every once in a while they'd send him a check. So it got laundered.

Joan: But all they did was photograph you and take down the information.

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: But I'll bet you did worry a little bit that you were going to get arrested or something?

Alvin: Yes, it was kind of scary, but I really didn't think that I was going to get arrested. I had a lot of things to do at home. I couldn't be gone too long. I was running probably 10,000 head of cattle.

Joan: Okay, you said your dad was in the Lewis parade. So your father was supportive of the AAM?

Alvin: Oh yes. I don't have my hat anymore.

Joan: Most of the people still have their hats and their buttons.

Alvin: They were cotton hats.

Joan: So, were the people around who did not approve of what you were doing? Or didn't they dare tell you?

Alvin: Feel this arm...

Joan: I just felt his muscle in his arm.

Alvin: I mean it's hard, and I'm a 74 year old man.

Joan: So if people disagreed with what you were doing, you didn't hear about it.

Alvin: No, I didn't.

Joan: Because like I said, around Lewis, people were very supportive.

Alvin: Yeah, then when we went to Washington D.C., I flew there. Rocky Snyder was in it. Have you interviewed Beverly Snyder yet? They were very supportive, him and her both. He was trying to start a farm, his life's dream, and having a real hard time of it. But anyway, we got up there and there was an economist and he started cussing us farmers as we come by. I come around and hit him like that and just laid him out. Papers flew everywhere.

Joan: This was where?

Alvin: Washington D.C.

Joan: Inside the Capitol? In the buildings?

Alvin: No, it was outside. Anyway, I told the guys, "Let's get out of here." There were some farmers across the street, so we just intermingled with them and got out of there.

Joan: So the police didn't get you that time either?

Alvin: No.

Joan: And that was actually in those days right around February 5, when the tractors were going down? Was it that weekend or so?

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: And the tractors were barricaded in?

Alvin: Yes. Then I think Larry Matlack and one of the guys from Hugoton, Kansas, Jim Kramer, he was really big in AAM. Anyway, we was around the perimeter, and I was one of them. The police was on us there and this guy from out west there, he said, "Just go on around them. Just go on around them." They were on foot there, so that kind of ended that.

Joan: So the police were stopping you from going somewhere?

Alvin: Yes, we were outside.

Joan: And you just went around the police. How did it feel to see those police with their guns and their clubs? Were they intimidating or not?

Alvin: No, they weren't too bad. I think then later, I don't know when this was, but they had keys for all the tractors. The farmers shut them off and thought they had 'em where they wouldn't run. I don't know when that was.

Joan: I think it was the next year, after '79, that the police got smart and then they could move the tractors. But the first year, they couldn't. So it was probably 1980 when they did that.

Alvin: I'm pretty sure that whenever we had meetings, they had somebody in there. Spies. I kind of thought I knew who they were, I mean, I didn't know them, but I knew they were there.

Joan: You could identify them. They had shiny shoes on? So you participated in meetings; did you do any lobbying on congressional offices?

Alvin: Yes, we went in. I remember one of the things that was said there, "Let the bastards starve!"

Joan: So the farmers said that. What do you remember about Senator Dole? Was he supportive?

Alvin: Senator Dole was no good for us.

Joan: Why is that.

Alvin: I don't know. We just didn't like him, he did some bad things. Probably some good too. Doug Wildon, have you ever heard of him? He was a big AAM-er, he just passed away about a year ago. He was really for the farm; he was a real estate agent.

Joan: From where?

Alvin: He was a farmer from Hutchinson. He was always real supportive of the farmer. When everybody stood up for Dole, he didn't stand up.

Joan: Was he in the congress, or just one of the members in AAM?

Alvin: Just one of the members.

Joan: How about Nancy Kassebaum? Do you remember anything specific about her?

Alvin: Was she in there then?

Joan: She was a senator.

Alvin: I don't remember much about her.

Joan: Any other politician that you thought was good for you or not good for you?

Alvin: I don't remember.

Joan: Of course, Carter was the President, and nobody had much good to say about that.

Alvin: That's right. Carter I thought was going to be wonderful; he was a farmer. But he put the Russian embargo on and ruined our wheat market. That's right, I'd forgotten about him. And then Billy, his brother.

Joan: Yes, I heard some jokes about him.

Alvin: He was probably better than Carter, his brother.

Joan: So you flew in for the Tractorcade. How long did you stay?

Alvin: Oh, I don't know. Probably three or four days at least.

Joan: And you were married at the time?

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: And Judy stayed back home here?

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: Where did you stay when you were in D.C.? In a hotel or one of those trailers.

Alvin: We stayed in a hotel. I stayed with Rocky Snyder.

Joan: Did you actually ride in any vehicle during the tractor part of it? Or not? I know some people who did, like Jack Wolfe, who didn't get to go because of the accident. I think he rode in Lester Derley's truck. Did you do that?

Alvin: No, I was just on foot. Jack and Dosca had that accident. Dosca was a great gal. She was all for it and had been through it all her life, you know.

Joan: How did your wife feel about it?

Alvin: How did she feel about it? Oh, she grew up that way too.

Joan: So she was real supportive. Did she help in the office here in Lewis?

Alvin: No.

Joan: Of course, she had a new baby, or one that wasn't very old by the time this was going on.

Alvin: I don't remember.

Joan: No, you didn't have a baby. What was I thinking of. 1957.

Alvin: Amy Snyder, Beverly's adopted daughter. Judy took care of her.

Joan: During the day, while he farmed?

Alvin: While they was gone.

Joan: He didn't go. He stayed home and she took that tractor all by herself.

Alvin: No, he went.

Joan: To join? So there were two weeks while she was getting that tractor there and he was farming and Judy was taking care of the baby in the day.

Alvin: Well, Judy took care of her while they were in D.C. So she was part of it too, kind of.

Joan: Was your son Aaron, was he farming now too? He would have been around 20.

Alvin: I don't know what he was doing then. He's farmed about all his life, went to college a little.

Joan: Did he participate in any of the... or any of the kids. Did you take them along up to Topeka or anything?

Alvin: I don't think I did.

Joan: Let's see. You drove a truck to Topeka. Did you stay with the tractors and drive up with them?

Alvin: And supported them if they had trouble. Anything you had trouble with, somebody was going to be able to fix, because there were so many different people and a lot of World War II guys could fix it out of nothing. Really.

Joan: Do you remember the route you took up to Topeka?

Alvin: I don't remember.

Joan: Did you go through Hutchinson, maybe?

Alvin: I know my dad took his camper and we stayed in it some. Ed Scheufler's son, (*Mark*), was in the deal too.

Joan: What did you do in Topeka?

Alvin: Well, a lot of the guys thought they were going to get parity. "Parity" was what we called that.

Joan: Can you define parity? How would you?

Alvin: It was what you should be getting to keep up with the rest of the economy. That's parity; it was the deal. At one time, the farmers had parity; it's getting there again. I think that food and water is going to be the big deal now. Someday, we're going to be short of food, I really think we are. But it seems like we keep advancing and getting things better all the time.

Joan: Had you inherited your land, or were you still farming with your father?

Alvin: I had inherited some, and I bought most of it.

Joan: So at this time, were you in danger of losing your farm?

Alvin: I probably was, but I had some equity and I'd bought a lot of land. I made money on cattle and stuff and I just kept putting it into land.

Joan: You mentioned that earlier, you did have cattle also.

Alvin: Yes. I've had up to 10,000 head before.

Joan: My goodness, that's a lot of cattle.

Alvin: I've run them in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas, Utah and Arizona. I still run them in Colorado.

Joan: And you had cattle in the '80's also; you've always had them.

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: Do you think the fact that you had both the cattle and the grain helped?

Alvin: A lot of times, if one made money, the other one didn't. That's just the way it was. I hardly ever had both of them make money at one time.

Joan: And back in '79 and the early '80's, the farm was your sole source of income? You or your wife didn't work outside?

Alvin: I drove the school bus. Do you remember when I drove the school bus?

Rosetta: No, I was gone by then.

Alvin: No, I was farming with my dad. He didn't get around so early, so I just drove the bus before he

got around, and then Judy would drive it at night if I was busy.

Joan: Did you do that to help pay the bills?

Alvin: Yes. At one time, I lived in Ulysses, and I drove a Rainbow Bread truck. I had 3,000 head of sheep out there and Judy'd check on them and haul water (we had to haul water) and then I'd check on them after I got the bread done. So at 1:00 in the afternoon I'd go check on them. I had a sheep herder. Then I'd go back in the afternoon and pull more bread up on the front of the racks and I'd have an hour or two of bookwork to do on the bread stuff. I worked all the time.

Joan: What years would that have been, about?

Alvin: That would have been in the '60's.

Joan: So again, trying to make ends meet?

Alvin: Trying to get so I could get back to farming. Then Dave Britton gave me a chance to farm some ground. I helped him and we bought some ground, and he gave me a chance to farm it for awhile. That's one way I got started. Then my granddad died and my uncle moved away, and I started farming with my dad.

Rosetta: What was your dad's name?

Alvin: William H. Wheaton, or Bill Wheaton.

Joan: What impact do you think that the AAM had on farming and legislation?

Alvin: I don't know if it had so much right then. But they still put a feed on for the legislature. They have a real good meal for them.

Joan: Still today?

Alvin: Yes, still today, and they come to it. I think Larry Matlack does most of that.

Joan: So this was a big effort, but you don't think it had much impact then?

Alvin: No.

Joan: Is it something you would do again if you were young?

Alvin: Yes, I'd do it now. I've got a little Ford tractor out there. It goes 20 some miles an hour.

Joan: That was about how fast they went, right? That was fast for them.

Alvin: Yes. I was trying to think if there was anything else there in Washington D.C. I think somebody drove in the Lincoln Pool didn't they?

Joan: In the reflector pool? Maybe they did, I haven't heard that story.

Alvin: There was a guy about turned his tractor over in Topeka, turned sharp.

Joan: Doing wheelies? No, donuts.

Alvin: Donuts.

Joan: Do you remember who it was that did that?

Alvin: No, I don't. I remember it was a Minneapolis Tractor.

Joan: Do you remember any instances with the police or anybody in D.C.?

Alvin: Just that one time.

Joan: Any other good stories you can tell on anybody else?

Alvin: The one thing I know is, there was quite a few guys in our group that never got to do their dream of farming. They just lost it, you know.

Joan: They lost their farms in the '80's, just after this.

Alvin: They sure did, and that's a terrible shame. Mary Ellen Schinstock's husband lost his. Did you talk to Mary Ellen?

Joan: Yes, that's a sad story. It still hurts.

Alvin: And let's see, his brother, he died here. (*Harold Schinstock*) I think he lost his farming deal too. He got to be a janitor over at Greensburg.

Joan: Whose brother?

Rosetta: Schinstock.

Joan: So it would be another Schinstock?

Alvin: There's one lives across the section here. He's pretty young yet, I think. (*Melvin Schinstock*)

Joan: What role do you think the banks played in all of this?

Alvin: Well, of course, they was trying to foreclose on people, you know. They have their rules, you know, that they have to go by.

Joan: Had you started to irrigate? Some of the people we've talked to had these bills from the irrigation equipment they bought.

Alvin: Yeah, I started in the '60's. I think I started in '68. So yeah, we had irrigation.

Rosetta: Was that the circle, or was that...

Alvin: We had the circle, and we had tow-line. You still had to pull it from one end to the other.

Joan: So were you working with the banks too? Getting loans too?

Alvin: I was working with PCA.

Joan: What does that stand for?

Alvin: Well, Production Credit Association. Of course, I had a co-signer; I had my dad.

Rosetta: We've heard people talk about the Federal Land Bank. Were you involved in that?

Alvin: I have had a loan. I had a starter farmer loan from them, and then I'd gotten where I had quite a bit of equity. So they came to me and said, "Well, we've got to see what your equity is." And I said, "I can't pass your test." So I had to get out of that, because I had too much equity.

Joan: Some people have had the feeling that there was a desire on the part of the government or the banks to bring in the big corporate farms and to take over. Have you ever had that feeling. Of course, you were a pretty big operation yourself.

Alvin: No, I never really thought that. At one time, I got more government payments than anybody else in Kansas.

Rosetta: There was a while, about this time, when foreign people were coming in and buying up all the land they could.

Alvin: Yes, there was.

Rosetta: That would have been later, that would have been in the '80's.

Alvin: We didn't like that.

Rosetta: Well, no.

Alvin: But the big deal was that, well, let's see, it was Harold Schinstock, wasn't it?

Joan: It could be, we can check.

Alvin: I think that he, you know, he didn't get to do their farming all their life, you know? Which I do, I get to. I'm retired, but I farm a quarter of ground yet and whenever my son needs help I do it. Or I do it if he doesn't want me to. I give advice; they can take it or leave it!

Joan: Well, you need to keep that muscle up, too. Do you think the protest was worthwhile?

Alvin: Yes. I think it was worthwhile. It kind of let everybody know that, you know, it's not as good out here on the farm as everybody thinks it is.

Joan: One reason we started on this project is it came up in other interviews, and I was just amazed that farmers were so militant. Did it seem out of character to you to have this, this was a major protest. Or

were you just so damn mad...

Alvin: I know I'd sit there watching families eating food, and I thought, you guys, we raised that food. We'd sit there and watch them eating when we was in Washington D.C. I think they got a little uneasy with us because we was looking at them. But yes, you know, we probably were a little militant. I'd never hit anybody before in my life.

Joan: I know in the very beginning it was called a strike. Had you considered plowing up crops or anything ever?

Alvin: What I did, was I didn't harvest my wheat, like we wasn't supposed to. I pastured it off with cattle, so I didn't harvest any wheat that year. A lot of them did, they had to.

Joan: Was that in '78? The fall before you went to Washington? Or would it have been the year before that?

Alvin: The year before, I think.

Joan: So '77. Some people have said that if everyone had done that, there would have been more of an impact. But people just couldn't afford to do it. Do you agree?

Alvin: No. Allan Jenkins has never planted anything since.

Joan: He's never planted anything.

Alvin: No, he just left it to grass.

Joan: Does he run cattle?

Alvin: He didn't run cattle on there.

Rosetta: So is it in CRP?

Alvin: I don't think it is.

Rosetta: So he's getting no government payment.

Alvin: No.

Rosetta: He is still protesting.

Alvin: He is it, now. He's the guy. I mean, he could speak and you'd just believe every word of course, he could have been a preacher.

Joan: Did you meet Andy Gottschalk? Or Not?

Alvin: Let's see, what did he do?

Joan: He was the priest that went with them.

Alvin: Oh yes, he was good. He was for the farmer. I think he was an old farm kid, wasn't he?

Joan: He was in Colorado at this time. I think he'd been at Hays, though, at one time. At this time, he was in Colorado. Maybe he was from Hays or something. There's a Hays connection there. I think he was just a priest. And you said Darrel Miller was your spokesperson? (*Fr. Andrew Gottschalk was born in Scchoenchen, Kansas and attended St. Joseph's Military Academy in Hays, KS. He later became a Benedictine Monk and then a priest serving 10 different parishes in Colorado.*)

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: Do you remember anything about Darrel?

Alvin: Oh, he's a very good spokesman, you know. He was big in it. You know, it wasn't because of financial stuff with Darrel, I don't think. He was just for the movement.

Joan: They spent several months in D.C. He didn't have cattle though; he just had crops. Well, after you'd gotten back and everything, were people still supportive of the movement? Did some people think you'd wasted their time?

Alvin: Well, I'm sure some thought we'd wasted our time. But I don't. I think it was good.

Joan: What haven't we covered? You've done a good job!

Alvin: I think we've got about everything. I'll think of a hundred things afterwards.

Joan: I'm trying to think if there's... How many days were you guys in Topeka when you went up there? Was that just for the weekend? Was it just a few days?

Alvin: I think it was just for the weekend. I know some of the guys out west thought we was going to have parity when we came back. They didn't want to leave, but it didn't happen.

Joan: The Titus' went to Washington also, that's one we haven't mentioned. I think we've mentioned everybody else. Did you do any sightseeing in Washington D.C.? Did you have time for that?

Alvin: No, we didn't. Just where we was at, we seen stuff.

Joan: When you flew in, were you by yourself and came home by yourself? Or were you with some of the others?

Alvin: Just Rocky Snyder and me, we flew in there.

Joan: Yes, he was joining Beverly.

Alvin: He lost his life in a truck accident. It happened to be guys that were cutting silage for me. And little Amy, they all thought she was in front with Rocky, but she later said, "I wasn't up front with my dad; he always let me up front when we got to the highway." That's what saved her life. It threw her out, and she was out for several days.

Joan: It was quite a tragedy.

Alvin: Yes.

Joan: Well, I think that about covers everything.

Added later:

Alvin's father, Bill, and son, Aaron, flew to Washington, D.C. in 1980 to join the protest that year.