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Interview with James R. Hopkins

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James Hopkins

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Researcher's name: Brent R. Shank
Event: Interview with Cassell family: Alan, Traci, children Grant and Carter
Place: Cassell Farm in Mount Vernon, Ohio
Date: January 25, 2000

B. I don't know if you saw this but it was on the front page of the New York Times a couple weeks ago. It was about barns in rural America - old barns - and they're just tearing them down now.

T. It's sad.

B. Yeah, I think it's real sad. And the ones they put up in place, if they do, are generic metal barns and every farm looks the same.

T. Our bank barn is over 100 years old and it has all the original - we had to replace the roof last year, but it's in really good shape. It's sad. There's not a lot of family farms left in Ohio, anymore hardly.

B. Has it declined a lot?

T. Oh yeah. Over the past ten years you've really seen realtors coming and buying up the farms and splitting the acres off to build homes on the lots and they can sell the lots for \$20,000 an acre rather than selling a farm for \$1,200 an acre.

B. I understand that you just took over the farm?

T. We just actually this month we have become owners of the entire farm. My husband has worked on the farm forever and has really been in charge of the cattle part of it. I'd say that within the last month it's been fully ours.

B. Did you confront any of those pressures from developers? Did you consider not taking over the farm?

T. No. My children are the seventh generation to be on the farm. So that never even crossed our minds. We realize that one of these days the farm will sell. If Grant or Carter don't want to take it over that's up to them. They're going to go to college, and if they decide they want to do something outside farming or the career they choose, they can't farm also, there's no pressure on them to take over the farm. We realize that one of these days it will sell. But my husband is a farmer and that was really never a question.

B. Did you have developers coming to you?

T. No. There's been a thing where they want to put a bypass, and it would go right through our farm. So we've fought that every time it's come up and you can't say it's not going to happen, but progress is progress and things like that do happen and it would be naive of us to think that it would never happen, but the chances of it in my generation or the years to come, I don't think it will. But we fought it tooth and nail, didn't we (motioning towards older son Grant).

B. What do you think about taking over the farm someday? (directing question to Grant)

T. He's the one who probably would. He loves the farm. He's right out there with daddy and me working on it working on it all the time. My younger one - I don't know about him. He's the outdoors man.

B. Are you in 4-H?

G. Yes. I go fishing, hunting, take a steer to the fair.

T. He raises the steer, he works with it everyday, and when fair time comes he shows it.

B. Are most of your friends interested in the same sorts of things?

G. Some of them like fishing and hunting. Most of them don't take steer.

B. Do most of them live on farms?

G. (shakes head)

B. They don't.

T. A couple friends do. The rest of them don't. It's a different lifestyle, for sure. I didn't come from a farm so when I married Alan it was all new to me. I didn't know anything about farming, so it's been a learnign experience for me too.

(Alan comes in).

B. We've just been talking about taking over the farm, if there have been any development pressures, if you ever considered not taking it over.

A. Not really any development pressures because it's all in the flood zone. We're kind of lucky in that way because there's not too much places to build. The only thing you could do would be a gravel pit or something. So we don't really have to worry about it.

T. I told him about the bypass problem that we've run up against, but the chances of that happening aren't very good. How old is the barn? It's over a hundred years old but it's not as old as the house.

G. (too faint to discern)

B. ... What I would most like to know is what you would want people to know about living here and living along the river and what that means to you.

T. It's great for our kids. Our kids have learned so much from growing up. Grant is a fisherman, he loves to fish. He quit playing baseball in the summer so he could fish, and he's learned a lot about the wildlife and so many things in that way from the river. They spend a lot of time over there.

A. The whole layout here is really nice, except for 13 goes right through the middle of it. Yesterday grant saw a bald eagle out here. You don't run into that everywhere.

T. It's a great place to raise a family because there's always something to do and they never get bored - I mean they do, but they can't say I don't have anything to do because you can find something to do on a farm. All their friends love to come over here and they like to go down to the river and play and play in the barn. I think it's a really nice place to raise a family. I wish we could just be on the farm full time, but the way things are you have to work to run a farm you have to work outside of the farm. [quarter way through]

A. I work midnites, midnight to 7. Five, at least, you have to work five or seven a lot, but I miss alot of that extra because I just can't do it. We work 12 to 7 then I come home, do chores, then I come in, she goes to work, then we get Carter on the bus, then I either go to bed or if I have to go back out for a little bit I do and then I come in and go to bed and, I usually sleep for four hours during the day.

B. How long have you been doing that?

T. A long time.

A. Well, it kind of comes and goes, depending on the work load at Coopers, but as long as we're busy down there I try to stay on as long as I can. It's the only good shift you can do so that I can still get my work down and see Traci and the boys in the evenings, whereas if you work second shift you have all day work, then I don't see them in the evening. If you work days, I can see them in the evenings, but I can't get my stuff done at home. Did she tell you that mom and dad just moved of the farm?

T. They built a new house - a lot smaller. In town - that's big change. That's been a big change for them. I think they're adapting okay. Art still comes out everyday to work on the farm and stuff. He had an accident last year, hurt himself pretty bad. It was touch and go there for a while, but he pulled through. He slipped on the ice and bruised his brain. He was in a coma for a while. It was pretty bad. So, they decided it was time to get off the farm and relax a little bit.

B. When did the farm get the Century Farm designation?

A. Late 80's or something like that. It was the first year they had the program. Mom filled out the stuff.

T. ...Turned in a big application thing that had the gates.

B. Has it changed anything? What does it mean to you?

A. I don't think having the award means that much. But I think it's really neat that we've been here for so long. These guys are the seventh generation and whether they'll be here or not, you never know what the future holds. Mom and Dad and everyone all the way through have always taken good care of stuff and like our bank barn is like a landmark around here. Everybody knows the big red bank barn and we try to keep it painted up and of course the big house over there is pretty nice.

T. To want to take over a farm this day and age is pretty unbelievable in itself, I think. But when you think about the family and how hard everyone has worked before you, and you are the farmer in the family, that's a real incentive to keep it going.

A. That's a problem with everything. You used to just live off the farm. Now, everybody is trying to make a living off the farm and it just doesn't work that well. We do better than a lot of people our size because we do raise registered angus and salt water breeding stock. Of course we have more expenses too with this stuff, but we do generate a little more income than someone who is just running commercial beef cows. We thought about trying to utilize all the traffic a little bit more, maybe try to do some more roadside produce and stuff like that. We plant some sweet corn. Stuff sells real easy...that's the only plus about the traffic.

T. Plus we thought that could be something the boys could do to earn money to put away for college or whatever. And it's a good business type experience for them to take care - to garden, harvest, and to sell what they've raised.

B. Can give you some specifics to how things are changing from when you were a kid on the farm.

A. Things haven't changed a whole lot as far...

T. You're family always worked outside the farm too.

A. My dad was teacher for like 36 years. So he always worked outside the farm. But of course, he had the summers off, which made it nice. Things haven't changed a whole lot as far as what we're trying to do. I've improved the cattle an awful lot. We sell, we market cattle different than when I was a kid. I sell cattle into three or four states a year, probably.

T. UAI - artificial insemination, which was never done.

A. Nothing else has really changed a whole lot as far as what we do as far as farming goes. Traci and I bought a farm, it's about four miles up the road. I rent it out to a friend of mine. It's crop ground. And I rent it out just because I don't have time to do it. Or the desire. I'm more into livestock.

T. He's actually a graduate of Kenyon College and he does nothing but grain farm now.

A. Nothing else has changed too much. A lot more traffic.

T. We move our cattle across 13 every couple times a year. And that's a real treat in itself, where before you didn't have a lot of problems with that, but trying to move them across now is pretty scary. The traffic... we worry about - there's always accidents on the railroad crossings. We worry about the cattle getting out and people running into the fences and stuff. As far as the farming goes, I don't think a lot of it has changed.

A. Everything is modernized. We do mostly round baling instead of square baling and stuff like that, but that's just not anything specific to here. That's just the way the whole industry has gone. It saves a lot of time and labor.

B. How about socially? Do you feel you still know most of your neighbors?

A. Yeah, it's not like it was when I grew up. Of course, my best friend lived right up the road here and his dad, of course he'd be dead now, but he's the best neighbor in the world. I mean you could - if I called him at midnight told him I needed something, he'd be there. The guy who lives there now, he's not like that. I don't think people do as much together as they used to. Everybody's too busy. And like I said, a lot of people work off the farm, so it's hard to get your schedule's together. We used to do more stuff together.

T. The Bouton's and us - we help each other out some.

A. But they're too busy. I always sell them my extra hay and stuff just because they're my neighbor. There doesn't seem to be the interaction they're used to be. I think a lot of it depends on who you live next to. Like I

said, the fellow who used to live up there he would come down - the older people - they come down and do your stuff first if you have trouble or something like that, where people won't do that now.

T. And the farm on the other side of us sold, so somebody owns the acres and someone else owns the building and the house, so that's, they're not really farmers that live up there. I mean we know who they are, their child goes to school with Grant, but it is different. And that's the thing I notice - see I grew up in town where you always had neighbors and we you know always went outside and played hide-and-seek and you know you always had a bunch of kids around and everything, where my two kids don't have people that live right next door that they can hang with. That's different. That's also good, because you didn't always like your neighbors. We grew up in Mt. Vernon, so I know almost everybody who lives in Mt. Vernon. It just seems like you walk down the street - I go to the store and always run into people I know and everything, just because I grew up in this town. But Mt. Vernon has changed so much too. It's grown a lot. Getting close to Columbus.

B. How does that make you feel?

T. I don't like it at all. I like it to be small. I think once it gets - stuff like that - you just run into the school system I think is real good and I know the people my kids hang out with and they know me and I just think once you start getting big you just lose track of everything like that, stuff that's important.

B. Do you find that most people you know are involved in the community still?

T. Yes. People I work with do a lot of community service things.

A. We do quite a bit of stuff for being as busy as we are.

T. Our kids are real active in extracurriculars

A. We always try to coach or help or do whatever we need to do.

T. In all our spare time.

B. Did you have any involvement with the Del-Co water thing?

A. No.

B. Did you ever speak out against it or anything?

A. No, not really, not that matters. 'Cause I've come to find out that the County Commissioners are going to do what they want anyhow. I mean we went through that with the bypass they were talking about. I don't think it's a good idea. I didn't do any riots or terrorism...

(T. Probably should of...)

B. It sounds like you feel strongly about it.

A. I don't think it's a good idea, but that seems to be the way the world works anymore. I mean, money talks.

T. And it's an immediate solution, but they don't look down, you know, in the future.

B. Do you think the County Commissioners do their own thing, don't listen to you?

A. I'm not real impressed with them. You look - I suppose they do some good stuff too - but you look at all the problems we've got around with the traffic and the poor planning.

T. It's hard to get people out to vote. It's the same people who vote every time, so you're voting for the same people.

A. I suppose they do some good too, but some of the dealings I've had I wasn't impressed.

T. A lot of the stuff isn't thought through, I think, is one of the main problems, they don't think stuff through. Like the bypass. It was so ridiculous, they didn't think through any of that, and they just...

A. But it's hard to complain when you... I don't have any desire to do it myself, so just like the boys, like if anyone else is ever coaching them, like we usually do, but if someone else, you don't want to complain about it

because it does take a lot of time and effort, and as long as somebody is volunteering or running for an office that you're not interested in, it's kind of hard to complain about it.

...

T. We wouldn't have time to do it. You have set your priorities state.

B. Have you been following what's going on with Harrison Township and the zoning?

...

A. Have you heard about they want to buy your developmental rights and stuff like that? I don't think that's a bad idea. of course there again, means the gov't has to pay for it which means we have to pay for it indirectly, but I think it's a decent idea, b/c they want to keep stuff from being development and give the farmer a little more of what it's worth is. If you've got - like our other farm up there - it has a couple miles of road frontage, but we have no desire to develop it or whatever. It's kind of there for an emergency I guess. But they could sell the development rights and make some decent money on it, I think it's a decent idea, but there again, somebody's got to pay for it.

T. I can kind of understand a farmers viewpoint though if they're against it, because a lot of farmers, if they don't have family that they're going to leave the farm to, that's their retirement and so they want the chance to be able to sell it to whoever they want to for that reason. They've worked hard all their life, and they're self-employed so they don't have a lot of retirement or anything like that, so I can understand why some of them might be upset to not have control of their farm. Plus I think the least amount of government involvement is best anyway.

(talking about Scenic River Designation)

T. we're kind of wondering, one of these days are they going say you can't have animals around living around it. They drink out of it. It's our water source for our cattle we have over there. I know Alan was a little concerned about that. ... Once the gov't is involved, you always wonder what the end result will be. Not that I'm anti-gov't. A lot of their programs - like she said - one day they might say you can't have any livestock along the river -

B. And it makes you question who they did that for.

A. They have a lot more problems than having cattle in the river, but I'm sure - I've read in other places how they've changed some of those rules. I think we'll just have to wait and see what happens. As long as they don't bother the fish.

T. His school did a project along the Kokosing River. ..He'll go in and spend a night with a friend that lives in town and he'll come home and say, it was so boring, all we did was sit and watch TV. There just wasn't anything to do. So I know I'm glad we live out here. It's not just that you have a farm. it's how you're raised. And you know, we won't buy a Nintendo or anything like that.