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2-21-2000

Interview with Tim Norris

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Tim Norris

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Recommended Citation
Shank, Brent R. and Norris, Tim, "Interview with Tim Norris" (2000). *Interviews*. 11.
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Accession number: LAK-BS-A022100.A
Researcher's name: Brent R. Shank
Event: Interview with Tim Norris
Place: Mount Vernon Farmer's Exchange; Mount Vernon, Ohio
Date: February 21, 2000

B: Since you're an expert in farm technology, we can talk about the changes in that recently or over the last 50 years…Tell me a little bit about what you do here, what the Farmer's Exchange does.

T: The Mt. Vernon Farmer's Exchange is a cooperative which is we're owned by the people who do business here. We were formed in 1918, so we've been around for almost 82 years. Basically, we were designed and established for the sole purpose of developing markets and a place to buy products for the farmers. A group of farmers got together and put the coop together and we've been here ever since.

Right now we have a feed mill out on Kinney Road where we grind and mix complete feeds and we also deliver the minerals for the farmers to grind their own feed. We have a hardware store where we provide hardware and supplies for farms, for homes, buildings. We have a grain elevator where we receive grain, both corn, soybeans, and wheat. It's a place where the farmers can bring their grain directly from the field and have it dried and then we sell that on the market.

We also have an agronomy division where we go out and we will apply the fertilizer and the herbicides based on our recommendations.

B: Do most of the farmers in the county in the area use this facility? Do you find more and more of them going to other places?

T: We have a good market share. It's not – I wouldn't say most of the farmers. We're probably, I'd say 50% of the farmers in Knox County do business with us more than any other.

B: Have you seen that number change over the years at all?

T: It's been fairly consistent. The main change I'd have to say is due to less farms in the area. You know, more consolidation among the farmer group. So naturally we have less people, but I think everyone has less people coming in to do business. And farmers are more mobile. The majority of farmers now have their own semi-trucks so they can take their grain on to a terminal. A lot of the big terminals like in Columbus and up in Toledo and Cincinnati, they were always terminals that grain elevators would take their product to, and now that the farmers have semis, more farmers are starting to deliver there, kind of bypassing the county elevator. They're taking more of that county elevator role rather than a collection point for elevators. So that's changed a little bit.

B: Is this an important place for the community, for people getting together?

T: Over the last 10-15 years, we've tried to be more of an educational coop. So we've tried to basically inform our customers…it's more, are they using it more of a place to talk to one another?

B: Yes, in my tainted vision of how it used to be, the Farmer's Exchange or coop was a place where the community got together.

T: I don't think people sit out here and congregate like they used to and talk amongst themselves. But, like I say, we're trying to go more towards education. We have a lot of meetings in the winter months where we talk about the precision agriculture, we talk about different herbicide programs, different weed control strategies, different fertility strategies. We try to educate the customer on what the proper use rate of all the products are. And then this gives a point for them to come in and talk to other people that are doing the same, that have very similar operations, and they share ideas back and forth. That has greatly improved over the last 15 years, we do a lot more of that. And I think the farmers find a real value in it.

B: How was it different before, say than in the last 15 years?

T: I would say that people were predominantly coming in and telling you what they needed. And now we see the customer coming in wanting to know what the best solution is for their farming operation. There's a lot more products out there. It takes a lot more technical expertise to answer their questions and make sure we have the right product in the right place at the proper rate. I think they're relying on the industry to provide that information more now than they used to.

B: So it sound like farming has gotten much more complicated.

T: Yes it has. Basically, when a farmer goes to create a crop plan, probably the first and foremost thing people think about is what crop I'm I going to plant. That's fairly simply. But then it's, you go on to what variety do I plant? There's over 100 seed corn companies out there, and each one of those seed corn companies probably has a minimum of 30 varieties of corn. So, you're talking over 3000 varieties to choose from. So, how to know which variety to use, that's the first big decision they need to look at.

The next thing would be what kind of a crop protection program do I want to look at. There are several different herbicides to choose from, and now with the genetically modified crops, you can use different herbicides only with certain varieties. So you have to make sure the variety you plant matches up with the herbicide that you plan on using. As well as any crop protection program as far as insects go, you need to know, first of all, whether you have a problem then use the proper precautions to take, whether that's choosing an insecticide preplant or a scouting, coming in to see, you know, if you have a problem field, you need to keep an eye on, so then you need to come up with a scouting plan to look at that field at the critical times and make sure there's problem. If not, we're okay, if there is, we need to spray it. Or plant a resistant variety.

B: Has the increased complexity of farming changed the type of person who farms?

T: Yeah, I'm not sure that's the only contributing factor we've had. You see more and more people coming back from college. It seems like a lot more farmers have a degree of some sort. So I don't know if that's necessarily due to the complexity of the products that we have to offer as much as farmers just realize that this is not just a way of life, it's a business now. [counter 83] I would say there's definitely been a shift from farming as being a way of life to a business. Back in the old days, almost everybody ties to a farm, either their grandparents or their uncle or aunt or somebody, had a farm and they could relate to that farm. And now with only 2% of the American public being related to agriculture, a lot of the spouses young farm men are finding have no relationship at all to a farm, and they demand more time away from the farm and I think farming has changed drastically in that aspect.

Twenty years ago, if you mentioned a golf outing to a group of farmers, they would have laughed at you. No one golfed. And now, that's one of their favorite pasttimes, is to have golf outings. We have a golf outing every year and it's very well attended. It just seems like the new generation of farmers are far more geared to not maybe family life, but some time away from the farm. They see the value in getting away a little bit and having some rest and relaxation, where the older generation was just strictly work. I think predominantly the farm wives put up with that, and today's won't.

B: That's interesting, because I was speaking with the Cassell's, and I was amazed at how much Alan has to work. And I guess a lot of farmers now are working the midnight shift at Cooper's or somewhere else and also farm. So, at least from their perspective, they're busier than their parents were living on a farm. So, that seems to be a contrast to what you're saying about more time with family. Is the size of their operation why they have to work more. The farmers you're talking about, going to play golf and things like that, do they generally own the bigger opeartions –

T: Not necessarily. Probably they're more specialized. You see a lot of people get away from the livestock end and specialize in grain. So with that, there is some more free time. That could be one of the reasons that they've decided to specialize too. For one, it frees up their time. For another, livestock at times has not been the most profitable. Just look at what hogs did a year ago. That's gotten a lot of people out of the

livestock industry. The whole hog industry has tended to consolidate, and the hog industry now is controlled by corporate farms, there's no doubt about that.

B: Are most of the farmers who use the Farmer's exchange family farmers or do a lot of them farm multiple plots [that they don't live on]?

T: Just about everybody, I would say three quarters of the people that do business here rent land besides their own land. Say a farmer went out of business down the road and they pick that up, rent that and farm that as well. It's very uncommon for a farmer of any size to just farm land that he owns.

B: Is that different than it used to be, say 20 or 50 years ago?

T: Yeah, you had more smaller farms that were full time farmers, that strictly farmed what the had, what they owned. They had livestock. A good full time farm 20 years ago was probably 250, 300 acres was considered a medium size farm, and if you had 600 acres, you were considered large. Today, you're not really considered large unless you're over 2000. A medium size farm is probably right around 1000. If you're 500 acres, people tend to think that's a small operation. I don't necessarily agree with that – 500 acres is still a lot. But there's people that have part time jobs that are farming 500 acres. Maybe even a few that have full time jobs that are farming that many. But the equipment has changed so much, and with the advent of no till, you no longer have to plow and disc and work the soil like you used to. You can go out and just plant, and that's taking a lot less of the hours out to farm an acre of ground.

B: So no till is one of the things you push here, that you educate farmers on ?

T: Yeah, we feel very strongly about no till. I can't say that we really necessarily push it, but we see a lot of benefits to no till, especially if you're on a highly-erodable type of land or if you're by a crik. It seems to have a lot of advantages. Every time you till the soil, whether you're using a disc or plow, you're breaking that soil texture down. It's going to make the soil a little more compact, a little tighter. You know people think they're loosening it up, but actually they're splitting some of the soil particles, so when it settles down, it ends up actually forming a tighter bond than the soil will in it's natural state. So, once you do that for years and years, than that soil doesn't drain as well. The erosion is also several times higher if you till a field. You get a heavy rain, you can lose so much of your soil. Farmers, really, I think, in my opinion, are the true conservationalists. They're very concerned about they're soil, they don't want it leaving their farm. They don't want it entering the criks, and they're doing a lot of things like buffer zones and no till to try to keep that from happening. There's been a tremendous amount of sod waterways put in in this area. I think Knox County is one of the better counties in the state as far as their conservation practices, and I would attribute a lot of that to the Soil and Water Conservation service. I think they've done a great job promoting that, and I think we've done a pretty good job trying to promote that as well.

B: You bring up the Soil and Water Conservation District, and I talked to Doc Redmond a couple weeks ago and was amazed to hear that he spent seven years of his life walking the county and taking soil samples. I suppose the technology you have these days would allow you to do testing a sample like that in a much shorter time. Is that true?

T: Well, basically, what he did, he put the county soil survey together. He had some aerial photography and he drew in the lines where the different soil types were and done a fantastic job with that. Our technology that we use today, we're breaking fields down. Say you have a 36 acre field, we'll break that down into 2.5 acre sections, and then we'll pull several samples out of that field. We're finding that we're seeing more differences than that soil survey had in it. It's just impossible to map all the little changes that are out in a field by walking it. But I think he did a tremendous job, but now I think we have some technology to fine-tune that even further.

B: Can you tell me something about that technology, precision farming.

T: Basically, what we have, we have a 4-wheeler that's set up with a GPS receiver. With that receiver, it gives us the accuracy of knowing where we are on the Earth's surface within a three foot radius. So,

basically, we can pinpoint out exact location on the Earth's surface with longitude and lattiude. We then have that tied into a computer…

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B: Are the benefits of new ag technology obvious, or is it more of a long term thing? [220]

T: It's more of a long term than short term fix…

B: You used the word fix. What needs to be fixed? [240]

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[270]

B: There's this interesting contrast that I've seen in doing this project. I talked with some of the people from the Central Ohio Draft Horse Association this fall, and they seem to be totally trying to go the other way, plowing with horses only and basically no modern science involved. So, there's these two interesting trends in farming and I'm not sure what to make of that.

T: I'd say just like any industry, you have some sectors going one way and some sectors going the other way. I can't imagine why they would want to plow with horses other than just the enjoyment of working with the horses. There's definitely, you know science has proven the advantages of no till, and even the advantage of a tractor over a horses, as far as tillage…[290]…

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B: Do you think that with all the new technology farmers use today that they're somehow less connected with nature or their land than they used to be?

T: No, I would say probably more connected. I just think, if you could hear the conversation at a lot of the meetings we have, people are a lot more attuned to doing the right thing, where the mentality 30 years ago was if a pound will do, two will do better. Part of that is driven by economics – they're not willing to spend any more money than they have to. But there really is a deep connection with the land, and I think every generation that farm passes through people are more committed to keeping – you know, man, this has been in my family for four generations, I want to improve upon this land and pass it to my son and I want to make sure it's in better condition when I pass it on than when I go it. I think that the majority of farmers really feel that way.

[333] how the Fxchange brings science to farmers

[374] B: Old barns tell you a lot about place…[poorly phrased question]…The farmers are indentifying more with their land than they did 50 years ago because they understand more…[blah]…Old barns tell us something about the community, now that we don't have them, I think a lot of people are looking for something else to replace that.

T: I think I know what you're talking about. Before you could always look at a person's barn and they took pride in how they took care of the barn, and unfortunately, barns are no longer being used and a lot of them are falling down. You're trying to ask what is taking place of that barn as far as what you are proud of?

That's a tough question. I would say people are putting a lot more value on information. It's not something totally physical you can look at. Farmers are using the same technology now that we're using. We actually sell and install the yield monitors on the combines, but basically it uses a GPS receiver as well,

and every 3 seconds it records the actual yield from the field. …I think people are really starting to value that information that they're finding, and they're sharing that with other people. It's not something that the community can see but I do think they're taking a lot of pride in the information they're generating.

This one farmer was in one day, and when he left, he had a book of information on his farm that was about 5 inches thick. And one of the girls in the office commented that we look really proud carrying it out. Just to be able to look at what you've done and the database you're developing on your farm. And you can go now and show the yield. You may have two or three years worth of history, and you can compile that together and take those yields and normalize it and know that over three years this particular area of the field yielded this much of the average.

[425]

[450] T: I think it's important that agriculture explain what we're doing, how we're changing to better the environment, relate why we need the bigger equipment. We need to do a better job communicating with the public what we're doing so they can take some pride in it too. Whenever I'm somewhere and someone asks well, what's this precision agriculture I'm hearing about. They're really interested and impressed that the exact same technology that guides a missile is guiding a fertilizer spreader to to spread less fertilizer in a certain area. They're impressed that we're not trying to go out and put down 200 pounds of potash everywhere and overload the system, and the soil won't hold it, so the potash goes down through the soil profile and into the water….We need to do a better job explaining some of things we are doing.

…

[522] T: Twenty years ago, farmers wouldn't have any idea, I don't think, of how many tons of soil they were using each year due to erosion. And just about every farmer now can go out and tell you how many tons of soil they've lost off of each field. That's in their crop plan. I do think it's important for the public to know that people are watching that and trying to limit the tons of soil they lose each year. And they're doing a fantastic job at that. The Kokosing River is one of the cleanest rivers in the state. It's an Ohio Scenic River. I've seen other rivers in the state that I wouldn't be proud of, but I think that the people in the community should be proud of their agricultural community because they've done a fantastic job at keeping soil and the nutrients and the pesticides where they belong which is on the farm and out of the river. I think we have a great water supply, and that's something that the farming community and the non-ag community need to be proud of.

B: The Scenic River isn't a burden to farmers?

T: No, I don't think so. I think it's a good statement for the ag community. For years, Knox County has been labeled the no till capital of the world. …

[558] B: Is Knox County unique in the ag science that goes on here? Is it a leader in any sense?

T: …There are people who consider us a leader.