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Interview with Chuck and Rita Dudgeon

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Chuck Dudgeon

Rita Dudgeon

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Interview Transcript

On Friday February 13, 2001 I interviewed Rita and Chuck Dudgeon in the living room of their home. I used a sony tape recorder.

ER: This is Elena Rue interviewing Chuck and Rita Dudgeon on February 13, 2001 in their home on Grove Church Road. How have you guys been farming in the area? I understand your families have been farming here for a while.

CD: I am second generation on this farm. My father purchased this farm in 1958 I lived here when I was two years old. This is the only house that I know and there's only one way to get me out of it. Rita my wife here she was a city girl, had no agriculture background whatsoever, but has adapted quite well.

ER: Where are you from?

RD: I'm from Mt. Vernon I was born and raised in Mt. Vernon.

ER: In that time have you seen a decrease in the number of new farmers that have come to the area?

CD: I think farming in general you're going to see a decrease in numbers of farmers. The equipment and technology is 20-30 years ahead of us, but the economics of it is 30-40 years behind us. Therefore it's not economically feasible you're seeing one or two things, you're seeing a fulltime farmer farming several thousand acres and getting along and that's about it and then people such as ourselves that are supplementing our farm with off the farm income.

ER: Do you think that if someone were to come and want to start of small farm do you think niche marketing is the only way for them to do that?

CD: At this present time yes. And it's only going to continue to get worse. Right now soy bean prices is at \$4.50 a bushel that is a break even price. Within the next ten years you're going to see that cut in half.

ER: Why is that?

CD: Brazil has an unlimited source of land that they're now putting a rail system straight through. Their hold up is transportation once they have transportation for the soybeans to the world markets our market will be done.

ER: What do you think farmers are going to do here? Do you think they're going to try to turn to something else?

CD: You're going to have the big farmers that are working for pennies on the dollar, they just need to turn over lots of dollars. People like ourselves will survive by leasing out barn space to someone with a horse. Providing hay for that horse, providing services and cleaning the stall for people that have hobbies. That will be our niche in the world as far as agriculture. The next twenty years is going to be a whole lot different than the last twenty. It's going to be so far out there that I can't even guess what's going to be there for us.

ER: Do you think there's any room for people to start producing locally?

CD: That has possibilities, but the problem you are going to run up again - and organic farming's great I think it's a good idea although I don't practice it - where are you going to market your products? Especially when it comes to livestock. Slaughter houses are becoming a thing of the past. There used to be several in Knox County and right now there are only two. If I was to call and make an appointment for beef it would take for months to get in there. They're booked that far ahead and you go back to organic farming - can we put that beef on the table right next to one that's been injected with hormones and stimulants - I don't think so. You're going to have transfer of fluids from this animals to this animal and then you've contaminated your own meat. (Continues with this thought about organic farming).

RD: I think if people are raising sheep or raising cattle it's going to be the die-hards who really don't want to give up the lifestyle. It's not because they make money at it, it's because it's what they know and it's what they want to do. And they'll do it at whatever it costs. A lot of people do it and don't make money at it, but it's what they know and it's what they love. I more or less becomes an expensive hobby, but you don't want to give it up because it's your life.

ER: Do you think a supplemental income is required now for people coming in?

CD: I can't name any farmers that I know that don't supplement their farm income by one way or another. They either have some construction equipment where they do some backhoe type work, they sell seed corn out of their garage, their wife is employed off the farm etc. There are some out there that don't I just don't know them.

ER: Do you have any advice for a city person coming into the county who wants to do some farming?

CD: I have a theory on work in general. If you want to make a living and just put food on the table you can work 8 hours a day at any job. If you want to succeed you have to put in 14-16 hour days. I think you can succeed at certain aspects of agriculture. You can do it cutting firewood etc. You can make a lot of money, but when you're working that much you life expectancy is cut in half. Your body cannot take it. To someone that wants to come in and start agriculture I applaud them. I understand why they want to do that, but they better have another source of economics.

ER: How do you feel existing farmers react to people moving in? Are they skeptical or are they helpful?

CD: Personally it worries me. People move from town to the country and every community has it's own way of doing things. When people move to the country they sometimes don't understand that that farmer is 20 ft. from their bedroom window at 3am. I understand why they're upset, but it's a fact of life and you have to accept it. There's dirt, dust, and smell of the animals. That goes with the rules of country. We have people out here that are very nervous whenever they see a spray going across the field - the farmers applying poison to the fields. I can document that there are more chemicals put on golf courses and football fields than in the production of food. I'm intimidated my city folk moving to the country.

ER: Are there certain myths that they associate with the country that they come to find out are different?

CD: I've got a prime example of new house next road over. "We live in the country and we should be able to do what we want to do. We have 5 acres and it's a good place to bring our dogs." I personally witnessed 12 dogs in this yard Saturday morning. 12 dogs

on the loose around livestock is a deadly situation. (talks about harm brought by dogs for 1-2 minutes)

RD: Well I think a lot of them do move to the country to come out to the peace and quiet and fresh country air and then forget that all the animals live in the country and it's not always fresh country air. You do get a lot of complaints if you haul manure or even if you drop manure on the road they'll complain 'cos it gets on their cars. They just don't understand everything that goes along with what you have to do out here in order to raise the animals. They get mad when there's farm machinery on the road and they have to slow down when they're in a hurry to get to town. There's just a lot of misconceptions about that.

ER: Have you seen a lot of people get scared away by it?

RD: I don't know that they're scared away by that. I think a lot of people moved out here to live in the country and then 10-12 houses built right beside them so they could have a house and live in the country. Now there are houses all beside them so they move out and you have people moving in and out every 10 years. You kind of lose that piece of community that you had because you don't have the stability and the longevity to you have with the farmers who have been here.

ER: I've heard from several sources that existing farmers are always willing to help and always answering questions. Why do you think that is?

CD: Farmers in the past have always been a close-knit family oriented group. You may not be related to them, but there's nothing that he couldn't borrow from you or you from him. They always wanted to see each other succeed. It was never a competitive thing. We're getting away from that. We're losing that.

ER: Do you think it's still there with those of you who are still here, are you trying to hold on to that?

CD: It's slipping away very fast. There's very few farmers who cooperate to that extent anymore. They're friendly and they'll do something if they're asked, but they don't volunteer.

ER: Do you feel that new farmers have to prove themselves first to be taken seriously by the community?

CD: Oh sure. Anytime you introduce a new farmer who's got a new idea – you just kind of sit back and watch. (talks about a neighbor with a no-till method for one minute) Anytime someone bring something new we're all interested in them, but we all have a lot of caution. He has to prove it to us before we'll accept it.

ER: Do you see people come in that don't succeed?

CD: Oh yeah, it happens everyday. There's a lot of people that buy 60-80 acres of ground and they have well-meaning ideas, but before it gets off the ground their finances run out.

ER: What do you think the most difficult aspects of farming are for people who are just coming in?

CD: Economics. That is the most difficult thing to work out. Having an idea that you can farm, but economically it's not feasible. (talks about specific costs of farming for 2 minutes) That's why people coming in with no agricultural background are really fighting a tremendous uphill battle. They have to have the finances behind them and some knowledge of what they're doing. I've seen people with the finances come in and buy the equipment and not have a clue what to do with it. They won't last very long.

ER: Do you think it's a good idea for people to work their way up into larger scale farming?

CD: For any business you have to learn to crawl before you can run.

ER: What size would people start with or what sort of product?

CD: I really don't know how to answer that. They have to be prepared for a lot of heartbreak and failure and if they're farming full time and they have a bad crop one year will wipe them out financially and emotionally. If they start out small with 100 acres something to do on the weekends, if it fails they can pick up their pieces and go on. I wouldn't advice someone to quit their job to farm full time if they've never done it before.

ER: What do you feel are the benefits or qualities that new farmers bring to the area?

RD: They're a lot more enthusiastic and they do bring a lot of new ideas because the older farmers and pretty much set in their ways. It's hard for them to see a new way of doing anything. This is the way that my dad did it and the way his dad did it –if it ain't broke don't fix it. You do have to keep changing to keep up with all the changes going on around you. You just always have to be looking for what's going to make you the most return for you money. It's hard for the older farmers to let go of tradition and to let go of what they know. Younger people do have new ideas. We see that with our kids and you're open to it they always come up with new ideas. They're new minds and they're fresh, they're exposed to a lot more things than we are. And a renewed enthusiasm and more energy.

ER: Are there certain characteristics that you see in new people coming in? Is it the same type of people coming in looking for the same things?

RD: I don't a lot of new farmers coming in who aren't somehow associated with a farming background. Maybe not that they were raised on a farm, but maybe an uncle or grandfather, somebody has that heritage behind them. They want to revive it and start it on their own. I don't think there's a lot of city people who've never associated with it.

ER: What do you think it is about farming that draws people in? Do you think it's getting back to the land or away from the city? Is it something about the lifestyle?

RD: I think it's a slower lifestyle. People who want to get into farming want to slow their life down so they can see it going by. A lot of it goes by so fast that being in the country where things move a little slower you might have the feeling that you're catching more of it. The fact that the kids aren't in the city running here there and everywhere. You know where they are and you have a good idea of what they're doing. Things are a lot more simple.

ER: Do you think these are the reasons that existing farmers stay in farming?

CD: It's a habit you can't get away from. At this point in our lives it's just a habit. The economic threshold is gone. There's not a better place to raise kids, but even if it wasn't for the kids – once the kids are gone I'll still farm a little bit because you just can't get enough.

RD: If you were to move us to the city we would probably just wander aimlessly all day not knowing what to do. If we're out here, you can always find something to keep you busy. (They both talk about all of the work on the farm and what they do for fun with their kids for about 5 minutes)

ER: Do you think since there isn't much of a future...

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RD: I really think if that's the way they were raised and if they truly enjoyed it I think they're going to find a way to be in it or near it in one way or another. I think they're never going to let it get too far away from them. Even if it means working for another farmer or doing a little something they can have on the weekends. It's sometimes a bad habit that you get very little money for. We can go out and spend 8 hours in the hay field and you come in and feel that you've just been run over 10 times with a truck, but you still feel good at the end of the day because you know what you've done. It's a lot different than sitting in the hot sun watching a ball game, it's a satisfaction that you don't get from anything else you do. You can see the product of your efforts at the end of the day.

ER: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is relevant?

CD: When people come to the country they need to be more tolerant of our lifestyles and we need to be tolerant of theirs. I'm a township trustee and one of the things that really irritates me is you buy lot on a gravel road and you build a house and 6 months later you call me and you say, "I'm tired of all this dust. I don't like it." Was there dust there when you moved here? "Yeah, but this lot was cheaper than one out on the blacktop road." So you want the whole township to pay for you buying cheap lot. "Well I have a right to live on a blacktop road." Sure you do go buy one. Or the road is rough or I can't drive 50mph because of the gravel, or the road need straightening. It's just one thing after another and we say, "Why did you move to the country?" But on the other hand they have a right to live wherever they want to live. We need to work together on this instead of fighting each other. Farmers have a way of doing things and they have a reason for it. (Gives an example of taking calves away from their mothers and complaints from neighbors for mistreatment of animals, gives another example of complaints from neighbors about cows polluting the streams – for about 5 minutes)

RD: You like to see new farmers coming in, but on the other hand you know what they're gonna face. You know that it's going to be an uphill struggle everything they do. Unless they've either inherited money or they're independently wealthy when they start. They're going to have to love what they're doing and they're going to have to be real committed to doing it and then have something on the side to make money to put food on the table when the crops don't pay out. I think it's a great way for people to go for the young ones that want to start it's just going to be a hard way. Kind of reminds me when they went across the west in their wagons, you know the hardships that they went through you can almost relate that to today. But we have all of the electric amenities, but it's just as hard in this day in age. Farmers have always basically been poor.

CD: Talks about low prices for crops compared to prices Chuck's dad's day, preservatives in food today compared to the past for about 15 minutes

ER: Well I think you answered all of my questions thank you very much. This is Elena Rue interviewing Chuck and Rita Dudgeon of February 13, 2001.