

Interviews

Family Farm Project

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## Interview with Robert L. Rauzi, Lawyer in Knox County

Amanda Feld

Robert Rauzi

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Amanda Feld  
10-26-95  
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Fieldwork: The Family Farm

### The Family Farm in Community Life

The following is the transcription of an interview with Robert L. Rauzi, lawyer/developer and twenty-four year resident of Knox County. The recording took place at 10:00 a.m. October 26th at the law offices of Zelkowitz, Barry and Cullers located at 121 East High Street in Mount Vernon, Ohio.

AF: -the twenty sixth of October and I am here at the law offices of Keltzowitz

RR: Zelkowitz, [AF laughs] Barry

AF: and Cullers with Mr. Robert Rauzi. This is Amanda Feld and we are doing an interview on developing the perspective on the ways that family farming is viewed within this community. First, how long have you lived in Knox County?

RR: 24 years

AF: wow, that's a long time. How long have you been in your current position?

RR: 24 years

AF: wow [laugh]. Do you come at all from a farming background?

RR: no, though I lived in a fairly rural community, we- no one in my family were farmers.

AF: I see. To what extent do you come in contact with family farmers in your work?

RR: regularly and frequently. A lot of our clients are farmers. We also do work for lending institutions who lend to farmers almost exclusively, farm credit services

AF: oh, I see

RR: is one of our clients. So, we come into contact with farmers on a regular basis.

AF: okay. Beyond your work, what kind of contact do you have with family farming?

RR: beyond my work, very little, really. I mean I have some friends who are marginally involved in farming. That, by that I mean that they have other jobs, so also farm or own land but I'm not knowledgeable about the day to day operations of a farm or farm life. Didn't grow up that way and [AF laughs] just don't visit on a regular basis either.

AF: right. Well before this study, I wasn't either. So, no worries. What do you think about when you think about a family farm?

RR: Well, I think about an institution that is historically interesting and probably represents the ideal, in many peoples minds, the sort of the ideal family life. That is, growing up on a farm, all the freedoms associated with that. All of that, the control over your own work hours, and the closeness that people are there, at home and the "Waltons." Those kinds of things. I think that's and in also, I'm mindful of the, having listened to those tapes and having an independent knowledge of the demise of the family farm as well. I think it's soon to be a historical thing.

AF: You mean with the development of agribusiness?

RR: yep. Yes.

AF: Absolutely. What values do you associate with family farming? You touched on them before, freedom and control.

RR: I think that the whole- In my mind there is an association when you talk about family farming, with the emphasis on family and you know, that the idea again, literally almost like the "Waltons." There's family values that everybody works together as a family unit both physically and otherwise. And so the association in my mind with family farming is the the problem, the epitome of family values that we've talked about recently as disintegrating, but that that's sort of the last bastion of true, American family values that's associated with the family farm.

AF: Absolutely. What do you think forms your images of family farming? Be it your involvement in the community or your work with people who are farmers-

RR: Well, it's a little bit of both. But, I have, in the cour- I'd say, primarily in the course of in my work. We've, over the years, I've dealt with farmers in all sorts of aspects. Through what I would call complete economic cycle. In the late 70's and - the value of farmland around here was skyrocketing. It was increasing at an annual- values were increasing at a rate of ten, 12, 14 percent a year. No farmer could make a mistake in buying land. Financing was readily available. Farmers went out and bought and bought and bought. Speculators bought and bought and bought 'cause you couldn't- there was always somebody

AF: the land boom

RR: that was going to pay you more and as a result, we did a lot of estate tax planning for farmers because any farmer who owned any farm of any size at all had a federal- potential federal estate tax problem because at that time the threshold was \$250,000 before you became subject to federal estate taxes. So, we spent a good deal of time talking to farmers and planning for the reduction or elimination of federal estate taxes. And in a very short period of time, the whole situation did a 180. Interest rates went through the roof so that carrying those loans was

extremely expensive and as a result, the value of farmland went into the basement. It was- crop prices dropped and the very same farmers that we were working for to do estate planning because they were so wealthy, we now worked with to file bankruptcies. In a matter of five years. And a whole new, a whole new chapter of the bankruptcy code called Chapter 12 was developed

AF: right.

RR: specifically for farmers. So, in the, in that context, I've developed my feelings and knowledge about family farms. And also, in doing the estate planning for not wealthy farmers, I find that there is a- there's a recurrent theme in farmers that you don't find any- in any other area and that is that there is a feeling for the land, a feeling for the family farm that, that's manifested in their planning for passing the the farm on to children. Where, by that I mean they, there's seems to be frequently an overriding sense of, or an overriding desire to preserve the family farm in, as a unit, even if there's no one yet, you know, in the family who's going to to farm it; to the point that sometimes it leads to conflict sometimes between me and the client about whether you can really accomplish what they want to accomplish or whether you should, you know.

AF: right.

RR: For example, requests for provisions that the farm never be sold

AF: right.

RR: Or, that, you know, it only be sold to a family member so- you don't see that in other areas. I mean, not very commonly. But you do see it frequently when you're talking to farmers about what they want to say in their wills and there's this sense of 'this farm has been in the family for, you know, a hundred years' or whatever it may be and their desire really to continue that into the future as far as they possibly can.

AF: It's quite impressive.

RR: Well, yeah. It, it's sometimes, quite frankly, I find it unreasonable [laugh]

AF: yeah, absolutely.

RR: but, but, I see that in that context that I do- and I don't see it in other, other contexts at all.

AF: right. Like the idea that, that the family as a, as a unit is also a business sort of arrangement and they make decisions based on family values which is

RR: yes, yes. Exactly.

AF: quite different. Do you know people who belong to the Grange or 4H

organizations that are geared toward farming?

RR: Oh, I'm sure I do but I've never, I've never conversed with them about that. Its, its just, you know- If you asked me which of my clients belonged to the Grange or to

4H, I would have no idea

AF: but, oh, obviously some do.

RR: Some do.

AF: Have you ever gone to the County Fair?

RR: Yes.

AF: What are your feelings about it?

RR: I haven't been back.

AF: [laugh] Do you think that-

RR: I went, I think I went a couple of years, fifteen years ago and then I had, well, I had, I had children who were in 4H

AF: oh, you did?

RR: But we're not farmers. You know, that's a fairly

AF: right.

RR: popular thing to do even if you're not a farmer. I think the last time I was there was when my oldest daughter had a dog in a dog show. That was a good long time ago. So, I do not frequent the family- errr, frequent the County Fair.

AF: [laugh] Do you think that your involvement was like for community building and for the, the responsibilities associated with it?

RR: No. I went, I went because I- With what the fam- What it provides, I mean I enjoyed

AF: right.

RR: walking around and you see a lot of people there that you know. But, it obviously wasn't something that I enjoyed so much that I continued to do it. So, but

AF: [laugh] And what about your daughter's involvement? Do you think that that related to giving her a sense of values or responsibility or just something fun?

RR: Oh, I think that any involvement in an organization, for example, like 4H (but it could have been another thing as well) helps, you know and you're part of a team in an essence- and there's a- I, I don't recall the details 'cause its been so long ago, but I know that that particular 4H group had different projects and they were working as a team to get, to achieve some sort of overall core standing or whatever it may have been. I'm sure that helps develop some responsibility but not any more so than a lot of other

AF: right.

RR: things like that.

AF: How important do you think that farming is to the community?

RR: This community?

AF: yeah.

RR: It's big business. It's very important. Agriculture- I, I don't have the statistics- I have, they're up in my office, I mean, I have, I have 'em. I don't know- Have you seen the report on Knox County that they put out every year

AF: yeah, [rest of phrase inaudible]

RR: that tells how many acres are under and what's planted and what crops?

AF: yeah.

RR: So, it's big business in this community.

AF: right. Do you think it defines the community in any certain, huge respects?

RR: Yes. I think it does, yeah. Knox County is probably not unlike a lot of other communities. We have a mix of industrial sectors and other commercial retail and so forth. But, when you get right down to it and look around you, it's predominantly farmland.

AF: yeah. That's what I saw when I came to Kenyon. [laugh] Lots of farmland.

RR: But if we- [laugh] I guess I became aware of that, sort of in a painful way when we picked up an exchange student who came in from Japan and was going to spend three or four months with us. And her English was marginal at best. And so as we are driving back to Mount Vernon from the Columbus Airport and the way we go anyway, it's mainly backroads at least and we had been pointing out different things and trying to build some English vocabulary and I must have said 'corn' I don't know how many times and 'cow' I don't know how many times. [laugh] So, you didn't say 'factory' or 'apartment building'. No, you said, 'corn,' 'cow,'

'soybeans,' 'tractor.' I mean, that's what you see when you drive.

AF: absolutely. How do you think Knox County has changed in the twenty-four years that you've been here?

RR: The truth is Knox County hasn't changed hardly at all in twenty-four years. And if, if many people would have there way about it, it wouldn't change in the next twenty- four years either. And I don't say that in any derogatory way.

AF: right.

RR: I think that people in Knox County are predominantly happy with the community in its make-up. I think if we had an opportunity for example, to have a General Motors plant come in and provide jobs for ten thousand people or five thousand people, the community would say, 'no thank you, go someplace else'. I think what, and in a sense the community therefore struggles with itself in terms of how much progress can we make because we need to do some things and yet not change the character of the community. How much business can we get into the community and not change the character of the community. And as a result, most of the economic development-new economic development in terms of factories and so forth- has been small-factories, that's not also because we've gone out to look for them but because that's what we can really just attract here-

AF: right.

RR: or, additions to the growth of existing companies here. I think that you see a great reluctance in this community to make any kind of radical change whether it's manifested by a new road, a bypass, a new factory or whatever it may be- anything that's gonna' change not only the character of the community but even how the trucks or cars go down a particular street. I mean there's a real reluctance to change. And I don't know that that's really peculiar to this community. I think it's probably true everywhere but I think that we rank right up there in terms of its strength.

AF: yeah, absolutely. How does that interplay with the developing that you do?

RR: Well, first of all, I'm really a lawyer.

AF: right.

RR: I'm not a [inaudible] developer. We have one project that we've been working on for nearly fifteen years and it only involves 35 acres and it's, you know, adjacent to town. So, its

AF: right.

RR: and I lost your question. How does that affect my- Well, let me say this. In this community there has not been a significant residential real estate development,

that is sub-divisions, where you can go in and build a, other than a few minor small two or three, four lot apartments in thirty years.

AF: oh, wow.

RR: And as a result, there was a real large pit of dis-demand for a place to build a house. People have been frustrated for years now that there's no place that you can build a house.

AF: I see.

RR: And it's sort of all just sort of broken lose in the last year or two and now there are hundreds of places [laughs] that are available to build a house. But, but there was really, not a real friendly- I won't say antagonistic- but there was really no encouragement to anyone who wanted to do any of that kind of developing. I don't think it's related to the family farm

AF: right, absolutely.

RR: I don't think it's that issue at all. It's just that the atmosphere was not very conducive to developing. In terms of utilities, getting sewer and water, and so on. So, it's been- no one, and no one really cared. I mean, that's what I'm also talking about. Except for the individual who was looking for a place to build a house, no one else really cared.

AF: huh.

RR: They didn't i don't think even people in area development and the chamber of commerce and so forth, they were kind of interested because they would say "look, we try and get a business to locate here. There are several things that city, they're interested in- they're interested in, first of all, what's the business climate- is this a strong union town or is this-how, what kind of cooperation do we get from

the you know, are they gonna be able to provide us with sewer and water and all of some of the things that we could actually get out, our factory built. But they're also interested in what kind of schools are available to the people who're gonna' come in here to be employed. What kind of housing is available and that's where we come into- well, there isn't a lot- there wasn't a lot of housing available.

AF: So, you did get support then from city planners. [laugh] That's good. What benefits or problems do you see in the expansion of Columbus?

RR: Well, the benefits to this community are probably marginal in the sense that we will probably find more, (this is my personal opinion), we will probably find more and more people wanting to live around this community or in this community who are employed in the north/northeast part of Columbus. It's a fairly decent commute, not too bad. For all those reasons why people don't like to live in bigger cities, they like to come out and-

AF: right.

RR: and in a sense, I think we'll benefit from that. It's really the proverbial two-edged sword though and you do get the benefit of people living in your community presumably owning homes and paying taxes and all those kinds of things but, what- there's a parallel between what happens- I'll draw this loosely- with the family farm versus agribusiness and what happens with people, with the small town community and it becoming a bedroom community and I've drawn this some time ago as well- When Mount Vernon developed, like many small communities, we had some family owned businesses, I mean that became successful, and these people, who were your local industrialists if you will, and had more money than anyone else, lived in town, they had the nicer homes in town. They were the presidents of the chamber of commerce and the rotary club and so on and they spear-headed projects like a new hospital or the community trust or the downtown improvement association. I mean, their hearts and their bodies were literally in town.

AF: right.

RR: When you- those people have died, retired, moved off to Florida, Arizona, Hilton Head, those places. Their homes have been sold to people from Columbus who were the ones who would come in and buy the homes in this community. And the end result is that there is sort of a vacuum that is created because there isn't that same sort of leadership, those people are gone and the people that occupy their homes don't occupy their positions. But instead, they stroll into town at seven in the evening and leave at six in the morning and they are not members of the chamber of commerce or whatever. They don't have a sense of community that their predecessors had. And I think that's sort of an example of what's happening to small towns. They, when they become bedroom communities, there is really no sense of, there is a loss in the sense of community.

AF: right, absolutely. How do you feel about the proposed bypass in Knox County? (Or Mount Vernon actually).

RR: Well, actually it, yeah, it's really a bypass for Mount Vernon but it involves a substantial portion of the county really. I personally think that we need some change in the way traffic is moved around the community but, the bypass was, (as was shown in its initial stages), was overkill, too much, way too much

AF: you think so?

RR: way too much for what we need and will never be approved in this community as shown by the results of the recommendations to regional planning by the various township trustees and municipalities who, almost overwhelmingly rejected-

AF: we read about them. absolutely, they have rejected it.

RR: yep.

AF: How do you think the changes in Knox County will affect farming?

RR: The things that will affect farming most are not changes in Knox County. They're global and national changes. There's very little change alone in Knox County that's going to affect farming.

AF: okay, Would you ever like to live on a family farm?

RR: I, If I believed in reincarnation, [AF laughs] I've said this before, I would like to come back as a farm dog [AF laughs] because I've always thought that the idealic life would be, a big, you know, like Old Yeller or something [AF laughs] and, living on a family farm where someone was always around and you could chase chickens and go out and run alongside the tractor and all that stuff. So, in answer to your question, only as a farm dog [both laugh], but not as a farmer.

AF: It's interesting to me that your job gives you the vantage point of being able to really see the detriments and benefits of farm lifestyle because we've come into contact with a lot of people who - and including ourselves- who really romanticize the family farm as an institution. So,

RR: I think that's the problem with the family farm. I think it, it is a romantic thing, but it's not an economic reality. There's a joke that people tell, you know about the farmer who won the lottery and they ask him what he was gonna' do now and he said he was probably just gonna' keep farming until it was gone. [AF laughs] And, you know, that's what I see more and more happening is that farming becomes, is becoming or has- in many instances an avocation that people take factory jobs, or at least one of the members of the family unit or more will take factory jobs so that they can continue to farm.

AF: right.

RR: The economics of it are that you simply cannot survive and maintain a family unless you have an operation of a certain size which requires- and I don't know what that size is, I'm sure it depends on what you're doing- and that size requires if you don't have it already, requires a substantial commitment of money in terms of buying or leasing land and additional equipment. And, if you're not prepared or able to do that and you want to stay on the size farm you have now, you can't make a living so you have to go get a job (but they still like to do that). I mean, there's is something you don't, there is a tremendous reluctance to give up the family farming part of it.

AF: yeah. On the economic side of it, do you think that there is room for the growth of the family farms that are in Knox County? I mean, just in terms of in-

RR: Oh, yeah, we've seen it. yeah. I mean, if you just- I don't have any statistics, but

if you look around and see what's happening, at least to farmers I got as clients, they'll tell you that they have to farm so many acres and there's more and more- they're leasing ground to produce-

AF: right.

RR: So, even within our county the successful farmers, (I would suspect)- are all, they're probably all dealing with at least 500 acres.

AF: I see.

RR: I mean, I would think that's about the minimum economic unit that you can survive on. But, it may be different for dairy farmers, I'm not sure what they need but- and, I'm no expert on that, but I know that the guy who's got a 120 acres isn't gonna' do it.

AF: right, right. You mentioned before that you worked with state tax planning, the-

RR: estate, as in est

AF: Oh, 'est'

RR: yeah, as opposed to 'state'

AF: got it. What do you think about the proposed cutting of farm subsidies?

RR: Well, I, you know- I'm opposed to subsidies of all varieties, farm included.

AF: right, What are your reasons for that?

RR: Well, my undergraduate degree is in economics and I happen to pretty much believe that if you subsidize something, you get more of it and if you don't get more of it, you get a continuation of it. And that, it's an insult to farmers and to the rest of us to say that, "we will subsidize this institution because we simply like it." [AF laughs] And in essence, that's what they've done. There's, you know, just a tremendous cost. We have the most productive farmers in the world and they can produce more than we could ever consume and that creates price problems and so they have to- prices have to be supported so that prices have to be supported so that we can continue this. And then we have to store the product and then we have to try and give it away and, I mean, when you figure it all out, it's ridiculous. I think most farmers would be just as happy if market, if they could just go to the market and produce

AF: and sell.

RR: yeah. I mean, that'll lead to larger farms and

AF: right.

RR: so on, there's no doubt about it. But, transition- yes. You know, in terms of- as this thing gets phased out and that's what we end up with- we end up with Croton egg farms you know

AF: right.

RR: if you seen that

AF: yes,

RR: or been down there, but that's what were headed for and there's this rough time in between where the family farm is on its way out and there can maybe be some subsidizing that can go on there, but I don't see any reason why guys who have a 100,000 acres in Texas or Louisiana growing cotton should get subsidies.

AF: right. Do- then you think that the demise of the family farm as an institution is inevitable?

RR: yes.

AF: absolutely? okay. What might we do, as a project that you're familiar with to serve family farming in this community?

RR: [long silence] I really don't know. I'm just not prepared to answer that.

AF: I do realize that, I just-

RR: I don't know that there's anything that you can do.

AF: okay.

RR: Maybe just document that it existed and that it was a neat institution for

AF: for the time that it was here

RR: [simultaneously said]- for the time that it was here. [chuckles] But other than that, I don't think that there's any saving the family farm as- as we think of it historically.

AF: right. Well, in that sense do you think that the values you spoke of before, that you associate with the family farm are worth, not necessarily saving, but putting into the community through other means?

RR: Oh, the values (the values, like I said earlier) of the family farm are really the emphasis on family not so much on farming

AF: right.

RR: It just happened to be that that was

AF: right.

RR: that no one had to go to the factory and you know, therefore, you got to have more emphasis on family. The reason I think the "family farm" and the loss of it or attack on it is so, sort of demoralizing right now, is that it's occurring right now, in the- at the time where the family unit itself has disintegrated and the family farm is the last bastion of those historical family values. At least, that's the way I view it. When you look and see- though I'm not sure that anyone's done studies on the divorce rate among farmers but, for example, but you know

AF: it's pretty low.

RR: but, we walk around and the nuclear family is- I won't say it's gone, but it's certainly not predominant anymore.

AF: right.

RR: And, the family farm seems to be sort of a symbol of the last bastion of those family values where it can still thrive and where it can still be maintained. And I think that's why there's maybe an overemphasis on the family farm because the emphasis is really on the family values and that's what we're seeing destroyed.

AF: right. Do you think that modernity or in other words the movement of agrarian lifestyle to a more industrially dominated lifestyle has anything to do with that?- the demise of family values, I mean.

RR: yes, umm hum.

AF: you do?

RR: yes, I mean, I can't measure that but I'm certain that, that as soon as you take- if you allow a family to exist in the context in sort of a mutual enterprise, like a family farm where everyone has chores and responsibilities and- that fosters that family unit and those family values. You move them to town, send the mother off to work, too because we now have to have two wage earners to have ends meet and send the kids off to school with no chores at home and no development of the sense of the responsibility that frequen- that you kids had as growing up on a farm where they contributed and had responsibilities. The loss of that surely contributes to the breakdown of the family, of family values.

AF: I see. Do you view, just out of curiosity, progress and sort of industrialization, since you said that Knox County, in your opinion, hasn't changed markedly since you've been here and you don't really expect it to- other than sort of transitional stages- do you view changes on a global scale, modernizing [change tape]

RR: [picks up]- with Russia to selling grain

AF: really

RR: because it would directly affect the price that they got for corn.

AF: like, this is in the '70's, '80's.

RR: uhhh, I think it seemed to me it was in the '80's. But- So, the things they produce or the prices they get are affected by whether our trade policy, on whether or not we let in sugar from someplace else or what our tariffs are on sugar or whether we let in Argentina beef or whether we're able to sell rice to Japan. I mean, they their lives are more affected by international forces than my life is, I mean, than my

income is, or whatever. So, I think the effects on farmers are, is coming if you look at Knox County farmers- the changes that are occurring with them are due to forces outside the community, not forces inside the community.

AF: I see. I see.

RR: By the way, I have to leave in about five minutes.

AF: Oh, that's fine. We're actually- we're all done. We talked in class actually about how farmers have to know a little bit about everything, economics and geography and it was really surprising to me, I have to say because I had no idea that, you know beyond milking your cow and [laugh] doing a few bits and ends here and there- like, I mean I knew it was hard work but I just, I had know idea that it was this sort of-

RR: Good farmers- good farmers are remarkably intelligent, industrious and- I, I can't think of the right- they're ingenious people because they, they're in a high risk business with a lot of capital invested and a lot of time invested and to be able to survive in that- the good ones that survive are really bright people. I mean, have you ever been to a modern dairy farm?

AF: We haven't gone yet, we're planning to though-

RR: geez, computers all over the place, each cow

AF: yeah, they're very biosecure.

RR: gets its own diet and they know, you know, the production in the the butter fat content of the milk from every cow

AF: right

RR: I mean, it's just absolutely incredible and getting off of farmers and looking, exploring- I can't think of the term they use for it- but, other than standard crops, you know, in other words we grow what?- corn, soybeans, barley

AF: wheat

RR: wheat around here. Those are very- you're subject to mass markets for those things. Same thing is true for cattle. So, I don't know that we have many around here, but I did take a trip up into the northeast part of the county last weekend and saw two ostrich farms

AF: oh, wow.

RR: You know, we're getting into more and more, kind of exotic things be- different crops. I had some farmers who were what we call bramble crop farmers, berries and things like that. I think you're gonna' see more and more of that. And organic farming- somehow to differentiate either how you're growing or what you're growing from others so that you don't compete in mass markets.

AF: right, right.

RR: I think you see more and more of that. Almost every farmer that we do tax returns for, now comes in with all their stuff on computer- I mean, printed out on computer

AF: really, wow

RR: yeah. Now, there are still those [AF laughs] [word inaudible] who are living in the last century and you know, they're just, they're just able to do it because they maybe inherited the farm and they're just hangin' on for a while, but the guys that are successful are educated, smart astute people. Have to be or they don't up there- end up there [AF laughs]

AF: Well, I wanted to thank you very much for your time.

RR: You're quite welcome.

AF: It was a great opportunity for me to be able to talk to you-

RR: Enjoyed talking with you about it

AF: If we decide ever to use any of your statements on the radio or something of that sort, in our broadcast- we're not really sure what direction our project is turning at this point, so we want to keep everything open [RR nods] -We would come back and play these for you so that you'd be able to, you know, say if you'd want that or not and-

RR: good. That's better than the newspaper. [AF laughs]

end of interview  
end of transcript