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## Interview with Anita Leaning

Elena Rue

Anita Leaning

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Researcher's name: Elena Rue  
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Place: Hopewell 5 Bison Inc.

### Interview Transcript

On Tuesday, October 31 at 4:00pm I interviewed Anita Leaning in the dining room of her home. I used a Sony tape recorder.

ER: Elena, AL: Anita Leaning.

ER: This is Elena Rue interviewing Anita Leaning on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 2000 on their farm on Hopewell Road in Gambier.

ER: How did you get into farming?

AL: My husband is actually from England and when he was younger he actually saw a program on bison (buffalo). American buffalo is what they call it now. They aren't actually buffalo they are bison, but the colonists called them buffalo and it kind of stuck. People now refer to them as American Buffalo. He's always been interested in it and when he grew up and came to America he read a magazine article or Ted Turner's farm. He's the largest landowner in the United States and also the largest bison owner as well. He's the one who started the National Bison Association among his other little entrepreneurial feats I guess you could say. He [Keith] worked for a meat corporation in Dayton and we moved here (he came with Owen's Corning ???) and we started looking for a farm and that's how we started it. We've never done any kind of farming. He read on it for about five years, joined the National Bison Association and learned everything he could about it from books basically.

ER: So, when was that? How long ago?

AL: We moved here and started the business...let's see we moved here in 1996 we bought our first buffalo in 1997 so it's been about three years since we first got our first buffalo.

ER: So, have you always wanted to farm?

AL: He did. Growing up in England obviously they were pretty cramped and everything and he never really liked living in town or anything. He always wanted to live out on a farm. He would have preferred even being out even farther than this. I grew up out in the country so I was okay with following him and saying "Yeah, if you want to do this." I really never imagined it turning into what it is.

ER: Where did you grow up?

AL: I grew up in Southern Ohio just outside of Chillicothe??????

ER: Okay. Has the operation changed significantly since you began?

AL: Yes, when we started this...we had always intended on selling meat from the animal and the hides and things like that, but we had not intended on getting into this as heavily as we have, as quick as we did. Because of the financial issues I suppose, but we decided that "If we're going to do it lets just do it," and we threw all of our money into it at that point. Then I started approaching restaurants and I really hadn't started to sell retail. We mostly started selling wholesale. I started doing that and found that there was a huge interest in it. Almost to the point were I couldn't keep up with it 'cos I had the kids at home. And then what we did then, because we already had the meat here to sell, we were selling another bison owner's meat because we didn't have ours on line yet to do that, to be able to process them. When I started selling and then the kids started getting sick and everything, then we started advertising just to the local public to come here and buy it. We do probably our largest portion in retail now just to the local people - a lot of the people who have heart attacks and who have had heart attacks and cancer and things. Bison meat is extremely healthy so we have regular customers because of that.

ER: Okay. So, how does the farm operate is it mostly family run?

AL: It is, we don't have any employees right now. What we do...how we do it is we don't actually do the farming of the land. We do a 50/50 crop split with a local farmer. His family actually owns the land or he has cousins that own this land, some relatives somewhere down the line that had owned this land before us and he had always farmed it. So he cuts the hay and he used to plant some crops and stuff and then we'd split the money. We would sell him our half of the crops 'cos he has a dairy farm. So, he'll take half of they hay and we keep half the hay. Other than that we don't actually do any farming other than what we do with the bison themselves.

ER: How many bison do you raise?

AL: We think, my husband should have looked that up or we should have sat down and figured that out, we've taken some for processing this year (I hate saying slaughter, it sounds awful doesn't it?) about 36.

ER: Has that grown over the years?

AL: Yeah, it moves around a little bit because we sell some and then we process some and also then every year they're having babies. This year we had seven born, I think four of them were females no were males so we'll have three in two years that will start having babies as well. So it grows that way and also by us bringing in some butcher animals and breeding animals as well. So, we have to move the breeding bulls out and get new ones after so many years so that they're not inbreeding or anything.

ER: So, are they primarily grain fed or grass fed or is it a combination of the two?

AL: It's a combination. All summer long they eat out in the fields. We don't put any hay or anything out. We grain them all throughout the summer because it's breeding season so we have to make sure that they stay - my husband says "flushed"- I'm not sure what that really means other than staying healthy and making sure the females do go into heat and that the bulls will breed. We grain them everyday and we do not have a grain feeder so next year we're buying a grain feeder. All of this stuff is so expensive. We have trays tied to posts out there and we literally filled each tray. It would take us probably 45 minutes to grain all the animals every single day we would fill these trays with buckets. We would just put the grain in a wheel barrel, push it up along the fence, and fill these trays and push them under to them.

ER: That's creative.

AL: Yeah. Well, in the winter we don't grain them we probably do it every other week or something other than the animals we're taking to slaughter. Right now during the winter since we keep them in pens we actually have another guy here in Ohio that if we need butcher animals we buy them off of him. He keeps them on his property and grains them for the period of time that they need to be grained and he delivers them to us and we take them to the slaughterhouse. We really don't have the extra pen in the winter because we keep them all back there so they don't tear up the fields.

ER: How many do you take to be processed every year?

AL: It's changing and growing each year. That's how, sorry I digressed on that question on how it's changed, it's changed because it all happened rather quickly (as getting into this). We went from really having animals running and people stopping to now we're selling it, I'm delivering it, we have people here all the time visiting and buying meat as well. As far as processing goes this year we were getting ready to do our eighth one. We'll do our eighth one in about thirty days I think.

ER: So you take them one -by - one?

AL: Yeah, we take them one- by- one, as we need them.

ER: Does the number of animals that you take each year reflect how much people are buying?

AL: Right, and we sell the skulls and some of the larger ones we put in the head mounts, (I know it's disgusting) and we also sell the hides...

INTERUPTION

AL: We wouldn't take an animal just because we need more skulls or something like that. The Kenyon Inn in Gambier - he's selling our steakes right now. He wants all of our steaks and then he wants a whole loin that doesn't include the whole burger. So we actually have to take another animal in thirty days to get more steaks 'cos he's going to

clean us out on our steaks. Now suddenly we'll have this surplus of burgers so I have to spend the next couple of weeks trying to find another outlet for our burger. So, we kind of do it like that. Really if I had more time, I have the little ones with two of them home most of the time, it's kind of hard for me to move that meat. Obviously if they were in school it wouldn't be that big of an issue. I'd probably be already moving that burger so now I'm just going to have to go out and find an outlet for the burger. A lot of the people come to us as well, but that's how we decide when to...we watch the levels of our freezers and see where they are and make the call depending on what time of year because it varies. They'll buy through December and then it will kind of be slow in January for a while.

ER: Do you sell mostly locally?

AL: Yes, I've sold to anywhere from Chillicothe up to Mansfield pretty much in between those two cities. I don't we've spread out much on the east or west. I'm sure we could 'cos there really aren't that many people in the area that are selling bison meat even though there are a lot of farms they aren't actively selling the meat. They might have some on hand to sell occasionally to someone that might stop by, but they aren't really pushing the meat right now.

ER: Are there a lot of other farms?

AL: There are several. In Ashland there are three farms up there that have more than fifty bison each. And then in this area there's a guy outside of Mt. Vernon that has three animals, but they're more for pets they smaller business the more likely it's just a more of an exotic animal pet. We look at them as cows basically as the locals would look as their animals.

ER: Kind of like llamas.

AL: Yeah, we don't look at them like llamas.

ER: So, where do you guys sell mostly?

AL: Probably Mt. Vernon, it's very local. Mt. Vernon, Jonstown, Newark, north of Columbus, like the New Albany – Gahana area, and probably not much more north than Fredericktown. I know we've sold some in Centerburg too so it's pretty local. Probably not more than an hour radius.

ER: Is it mostly to restaurants and things?

AL: No, our retail is the largest part of the business right now and it's mostly, there's always the novelty to people who have never tried bison and they want to try it and then there's the health food. It's kind of...the people who are into it for health, because we're also organic – our meat isn't labeled yet, but our farm is organically certified. So the big health craze – we sell to them and we also sell to the people who have had heart attacks,

high cholesterol, and high blood pressure because it has less fat, less calories, less cholesterol than chicken and turkey. Some of these people haven't had red meat for ten years and suddenly they can eat this more than what they could chicken. It's a lot of retail and of course we get the sporadic people who drop in and buy a pound or two or maybe a hundred dollars worth and we never see them again. Then we get the ones who come regularly of course.

ER: Do you sell from here?

AL: Yeah, it is all state inspected. We used to be USDA inspected, but the slaughterhouse we were going to was not an organically certified slaughterhouse so we had to change slaughterhouses. We'd rather be organically certified than USDA 'cos we are still state inspected. We'll still go through restaurants and everything as long and we stay within the state. So we had to change slaughterhouses because of the organic certification. But we do sell from here. We do not kill the animal here we do nothing here it has to be done at the slaughterhouse. We don't have a shop we basically have five or six freezers out there that we sell from. We're actually building a small shop, it actually looks like a small shed, that we'll put everything in so people will feel more comfortable coming here and buying probably.

ER: Do you go to the producer's livestock at all?

AL: No. The lady that used to work at the restaurant there sold our burger. There actually was a little diner outside of the producer's and she still has a diner, now it's a little bit up the road, but she still sells our burger.

ER: Oh, neat.

AL: But we don't sell any animals there or anything.

ER: So, what equipment and facilities to you guys have?

AL: I can show you when we go outside. The biggest difference between having bison and having cows, (there are a lot of differences) but the main thing is the fencing and the handling facility. When they take cows through to de-worm or to do preg. checks and any time they're sick the handling facility doesn't have to be a big deal. With bull evidently it does I don't know that much about cows, but I would imagine they would have to be a bit strong. With the bison what we have is called sucker rod. It's the long rods, this is all new to be too, that they would use with the oil wells around here and they're like pipes that are all welded together. They're about 10 feet high out there. It's all welded and the support on those is unbelievable. It's a system of pens so you can have the animal separate and then there's a part called a "tub" and then you have the "shoot". The animals when they go into the tub then you push them forward into the shoot. The shoot is what holds the animal. You squeeze them in, they can't get out, and it's bolted down into concrete. It shakes and they just go nuts in it, but it squeezes them it holds their head so the vet can't get hurt or anyone else. And then when you're finished with it you release

them back into the field. So with bison it's when the most money is involved. Being ready to set up to take care of bison they should be taken care of. Our fence is all 6 feet high. It's high tensile fence it's all electric of course. What we did to save our money - every third post we did a higher post we didn't do every single post at 6 foot and then we just ran a six-foot wire across the third posts. But other than those facilities they really need shelter or any help in calving either.

ER: So, how long to do raise them before you take them to be processed?

AL: We take them between 24 and 32 months and then we feed them out anywhere from 1 month to 3 or 4 months depending on how soon we need them, but never less than one month.

ER: The cuts that you sell...you said there are steaks...

AL: I can give you a list of that as well, but it's the same as what you would get off the cows. We sell tender loin, new york strip, sib, sirloin, rounds, and then we have the burger and roasts and we do have some summer sausage jerkey and things like that as well.

ER: How do much you sell them for? Does that stay the same or does it change?

AL: Well, we haven't really...it's come down a little bit, but it's really quite expensive. The burger starts out at \$5.50 a pound, (these are retail prices) and the serloin is \$14 a pound and then upwards to the tender loin which is \$24 a pound.

ER: Do you feel that's fair price?

AL: It's the going retail price of bison. To buy bison is very expensive. Once to get the butcher bull you're paying anywhere from \$1100 to \$1500 - those are for the low-end bulls. Then you have to pay anywhere from \$400-\$600 for the processing fees as well. And the of course keeping them - there's the expense involved in that and everything. They aren't as cheap as cows are. To feed them it isn't quite as cheap, especially being organic as well. It's not like we're trying to rape the public or anything like that. It is expensive. We're probably more reasonable on our burger than most people. Most of the places that we have seen sell their bison burger at \$6.50 a pound. I know some people here in Mt. Vernon that sell their lamb burger at \$5.00 a pound. So \$5.50 is actually fairly reasonable.

ER: You might have answered this before, but how much meat would you say that you sell? You said retail is more than wholesale so how much...

AL: Percentage wise?

ER: Yeah

AL: Honestly it would have to depend on how much burger I'm going to... Right now...I'm not sure. I would say that retail is 60% and wholesale is 40%. Now, that can change really quickly just because of this restaurant. If he continues buying the way he is then I have to move a lot of burger to be able to buy him steaks. Obviously every time we do an animal to buy him steaks we have all this burger left over. If I can move that amount of burger then it's going to probably end up being...those numbers could switch over. It could end up being 60% wholesale and 40% retail.

ER: Does that change a lot during the course of a year?

AL: This is the first year. Before I would have said we did 90% retail or maybe 80% retail so it is kind of changing. We are selling more wholesale this year than what we did the year before?

ER: Why do you think that is?

AL: Well it wasn't my doing going out and finding restaurants 'cos like a said I really haven't put that much effort into it. Basically the restaurants have contacted us. There's a meat market in southern Ohio, very southern Ohio, that contacted us as well to get out meat and we do sell it to them. It's word of mouth is how that's got out. That has to be because they came to us. The only other restaurant that sells a lot of it, actually she may have come to us to – she's been selling our meat for the three years now.

ER: So, do you think that you're going to want to expand from where you are now or do you want to keep it as a smaller operation?

AL: We'll keep expanding right now. At some point we'll have to...we'll have to expand as much as we can expand. My husband works full time for Owen's Corning at Grandville at the Tech Center so it's not like he can be here all the time. Right now we only have so much land. Either we're going to look to buy more land as well, and there may be a day where he would change corporations – which wouldn't be unlikely he's traveled all over the place. Since my family's here and I thought we would keep moving I said let's get a place that's a home so we kind of look at this as something to be able to sustain this farm and this home so that we can always come back here. We will expand as much as this place allows us and really my husband doesn't look at anything and say, "We'll stop at this point," for all I know we may decide to buy another farm and keep expanding. That would not surprise me at all. He is just nuts about buffalo. I get aggravated about how much time he spends with it, but in the same respect it's a good stress release for him and he loves it. It makes him happy. I don't care to deliver meat I can do it. I always had this image of people with bloody aprons and I thought "How do they do this?"

ER: So, what do you feel that challenges are for you guys?

AL: Oh gosh. The biggest challenge with all of this has to do with our family. Just trying to balance this with the children. We have five children combined, I have the three with



him and he has the two older ones now. Sophia lives with us, but his older son lives in England. He's planning on coming here to live in the summer. For him it's trying to balance his fulltime job and this – that has been the biggest challenge for him. He read so much, he's a very very clever person. He read everything, he did the handling facility himself and everything. It's been a challenge for him because he's doing everything on his own as well. It's not like we have tons of family around, because we don't, where you can call someone up and say "Can you come and help me do this?" and he's not one to go across the road and ask a neighbor to come and help. It's trying to get... fighting the weather, you need to finish things here and finish things there, do this fence there so we can get the buffalo to move across...it's those small things. Doing it on his own and then trying to balance that time with spending time with us as well. That's the biggest challenge with having your own business especially with me at home. I don't work - this is what I do. I kind of pick up the loose ends as best that I can here and there, but I don't put anywhere near as much time into anything as what he does. I don't know anyone that does.

ER: It sounds like, from when I was trying to get a hold of you guys, that he's very busy.

AL: He is. He works all the time – he likes to. He'd much rather do this than fighting all the political stupid things that go on in a corporation. If he has a hard day at work he comes home and he can go out there, do some work, come back in and it's gone – the stress is gone. Then he can settle down with the kids – of course the kids follow him around out there "helping". So that's the biggest challenge is you know...you can't have your own business at home and be able to drop everything all of a sudden and go play with the kids every second that they want. You almost have to plan and set aside a time. Literally for him to not work out here we have to leave home. Because if he's here he can't just not go out and do this little thing or that little thing. We literally all have to leave and go somewhere.

ER: Do you feel that there's a lot of competition between cattle and bison?

AL: No, and there never will be. The amount of cattle that are slaughtered in a day would wipe out the entire bison population. So, because of the price and people love their beef. It's just ingrained in them I guess. So, no not really.

ER: What benefits and liabilities can you see from building a local food market?

AL: We did the Farmer's Market, I don't know if you know much about.

ER: Umm humm.

AL: Okay, is this involved with this as well? I did that on the weekends, my husband actually stayed out here and worked.

ER: This summer?

AL: Yeah, I get out there and I sell...we both do to some extent. We do advertise and we draw people here. But, I think speaking, not just for ourselves but for the other people who did the Farmer's Market and who are selling locally grown things. I don't even know how to say it. I watched them at the Farmer's Market and there was this one guy who sold hundreds of dollars, one to two hundred dollars every Saturday. Just selling corn. I think it's just made people appreciate the locally grown stuff. I think it was a benefit anyway and I think with us... some days I didn't sell enough to stay there because people usually come there to get produce and everything. But, we have had so many visitors come to our farm. I think it raises the awareness that you don't have to go to the grocery store to get these things. There are people around where you can go buy your meat and you know what's going to be in it. Especially if we're taking it to a slaughterhouse and things like that. I think it's really helped some of these smaller farmers and stuff. Because a hundred to two hundred dollars on a Saturday every week for 3 or 4 months is a lot of money to them. It's well worth their time to come and do that by all means. It helped us as far as our advertisement too like I said some Saturdays I didn't sell all that much out there. It was kind of social time. I don't know if that answers your question or not, it probably doesn't. I'm not sure how to answer that.

ER: No, it's very helpful. Have you also seen improvement since homegrown has come out?

AL: Yeah, we have had a lot of people actually come here from that. The books that they put out were great. Yeah, it was a good experience and it was good advertisement for us. Even though we advertise there were so many people that didn't even realize until that came out that we were here. I'm not sure how that happened 'cos a lot of times I can call a repair man to come out and they said "Where do you live?" and I say, "Do you know where the buffalo farm is?" and they say "Yes." But there's a lot of people who don't. There are a lot of older people as well, and so many people that are concerned now about what's being put into their food. I think this Homegrown, once it came out, and they're thinking and you're hearing that you're being bombarded by all these chemicals being sprayed on your vegetables and your fruit and injected into the animals. Suddenly there's another place where they can go. They know, with the Homegrown, it doesn't have to be in the summer. They can find it other times of the year. I just think that it was a great thing to do. They did such a good job on those too, with the books and everything.

ER: Yeah, they're really fun to read. Do you feel that there's a farming community here in Knox County?

AL: Yeah.

ER: Or do you guys feel sort of isolated or do you feel that there's a good...

AL: Now, I guess you would have to live...and I don't know coming from Iowa [ where I am from] what would you...but, from where I was in Ohio I grew up...I actually say Chillicothe, but it was actually Waverly, hardly anyone knows where Waverly is...it's in Pike County. It's a very poor county, and there wasn't the farming down there. We were

out in the country, but it just wasn't a farming community. You would that's what there would be there, but for me to move to Knox County, I think that, especially around here. Most of the people around here are farmers, where we are here in the Bladensburg and Martinsburg area. I'm not sure what... 'cos I didn't grow up in a farming community I don't know what a person would call a farming community other than just everyone you know is a farmer.

## **END OF SIDE ONE**

AL: I look at this area and what I found is, even though I grew up in the country, people around here are so willing to help. If our tractor breaks down there's a farmer down the road who's going to come and help. Everybody is so willing. Because we have to have a tranquilizing gun here, not to tranquilize the animals, but after we've already taken through if one of them were to end up with pink eye or something instead of taking them through the handling facility – it would stress them out – we dart them with the antibiotic. Of course not everybody has these guns so suddenly the farmers look at that and say “Wow, we can use that!” so anybody who has a bull that they need to put a ring through their nose (which I have no idea why they do that) they'll call Keith and ask him if he can come down and tranquilize their bull. It's almost like everybody has something to offer to somebody. Everybody's got something that they can help. People don't care to ask and they won't care to offer either. It's kind of a neat community. It was kind of shocking at first. I never grew up in a community like this.

ER: Did you feel that people accepted you guys since you can, especially Keith since from a different country? Or was it kind of weird at first?

AL: Yeah, they did and I never felt weird 'cos it is kind of how a grew up. We were the odd people out. Everybody knew our names and they knew where he worked, where he was from and yet we didn't know anyone. So it was kind of odd at first, but I never felt like we were pushed out at all, not at all. I anything people wanted to get... we came here, and I remember moving from where we did and I remembering thinking, “Oh my gosh we're going to be on 90 acres it's going to be great. We're going to have so much privacy.” We just have people here all the time, and now especially with the buffalo. Our neighbors would come over and bring vegetables from the garden. They would just pop in. It was kind of odd at first and we were kind of going, “Oh my gosh!”, but it's so nice. It really is and with him traveling – he went to Europe last year and my well dried up while he was in Germany and it was like, “Oh my gosh! The buffalo don't have water, we don't have water!” and I told one person and the entire community knew. I had one farmer show up here at night with a metal detector. We couldn't find the old well because they buried it. He showed us how to point this metal detector trying to find my well. The we had the fire department wanting to bring water out for the buffalo. It was just so neat. Then we had people coming and saying, “You can bring your kids down here to use my shower.” It was really nice and it made my mom happy. She thinks that he plops me out here in the middle of nowhere and then runs off to Germany.

ER: That's great. So, what do you think the future of small farms will be? Do you see...?

AL: Oh gosh. I don't know. I don't know how they can hold their own. Obviously the bison business is a lot more money involved than cows, but regardless of that they have to have their machinery, they have to have their fencing, they have to have their grain. If they have a drought they've got to find their hay somewhere, they've got to find their food. We're doing this because my husband works full time. He has an education, is the biggest thing, that money runs this business to be able to get started. If we have a down time then we have that to fall back on. I don't know what they do. I look at...I know when we had the drought last summer I think we spent almost \$2,000 in buying more hay 'cos we only got one cutting off of our field. I just don't know what the future's going to be, but I know it's going to be hard for them. I have so much respect for the farmer's now and I just didn't know this before. I really didn't until we got out here. I don't consider us farmers really 'cos we don't put the hours and time into the farm as what they do. In the fall when they harvest they are just out until all hours of the night doing it. I don't know, but they're going to struggle I do believe that. Especially with the weather changes, the extremes that we have. That affects them – it's just amazing. That's our biggest thing. Is it going to be too wet is it going to be too dry, is it going to be too cold because the water freezes, our wells will freeze not our wells the taps on the waters. There's so many things that can happen just from one week of bad weather.

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

AL: I don't know. I always scare myself I can ramble on about some of this stuff.

ER: Oh, it's all very helpful.

AL: Oh, you would have never left if it was my husband. Gosh, I have to save people from him. It's terrible he can go on about buffalo, it's like his greatest love anymore - next to me of course. I don't know, but I hope and I think that in this [the packet of information about bison and Hopewell Farm] you might find a lot of information about the bison. I don't even know where this will go. I think bison's becoming more and more popular all the time. Right now they're starting an Eastern Bison Coop. Out west there's a lot of...you can hardly go anywhere out west without being able to buy bison somewhere. Part of that is because of what's called the Northwest Coop and the Denver Buffalo Company. They supply so much of it. Well there isn't any of that once you get past probably Missouri or something. Now they're starting the Eastern Bison Coop, which will now supply and distribute bison to the eastern coast and towards the Midwest. I think that will make a difference. I think people will start to see more and more bison now nationwide and now just the western influence I guess.

ER: Well, thank you very much.

AL: You're welcome.

ER: This is the end of the October 31<sup>st</sup> 2000 interview with Anita Leaning. The interviewer was Elena Rue.

