

10-24-1994

Interview with Bill Westenbarger

Rachel Balkcom

Bill Westenbarger

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.kenyon.edu/ffp_interviews

Recommended Citation

Balkcom, Rachel and Westenbarger, Bill, "Interview with Bill Westenbarger" (1994). *Interviews*. 21.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/ffp_interviews/21

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Family Farm Project at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Rachel Balkcom. Interview with Bill Westenbarger at Westenbarger and Sons, Mt. Vernon. October 24, 1994. 7:00 PM

R: First of all, tell me how long you've been here; in the area. That includes your family.

B: I was born here in Mt. Vernon, which was in 1952. My wife is from a little further north, Bellville, and, course we was married, gotta stop and think! Been 21 years. But when we was married we lived here in town. I have three children. Theresa is our oldest. She's 20. I've got a son Bill and he's 18. And a daughter Christina and she's 16.

R: How long have you been working here and how did you end up in the business etc.?

B: Well it's my father and brother's business, OK. And I'm service manager. Well actually Dad started the business back in 1959, is when he started the welding business, and then in '69 we started the tractor sales. Tom and Dad went in to business together for that. We started out as a [something] Ferguson dealership. And myself, I started working here really right away when he had the welding shop. And when we started as a farm machinery implement dealer I started out as a parts man.

R: Why was there that switch? Why did he decide to switch over form the welding to the dealer?

B: He had an opportunity to take over the dealership; the individual who had the dealership before got killed in an automobile accident. They was looking for somebody to take over the dealership and we was already established and they wanted somebody that could just come in and take over and start selling the equipment and machinery. But like I said I started out as a parts manager, did that for roughly three years, I left, went in to the service, was there for four years, and come back and started then in '76 as a service manager.

R: Now what does a service manager do?

B: Well, simple enough, I guess manages the service that comes in. Any repairs that need done; tractor repairs, customers call and I have to schedule appointments either to go out on a service call and work on the equipment out in the field on the farm or schedule it to be picked up and brought in to the shop. and then of course we repair in here too.

R: This may sound like a stupid question, but is it always farming equipment that you deal with?

B: Yeah, yeah.

R: So you're always dealing with farmers.

B: Yeah. The only other equipment we work on is maybe our own trucks, to keep them serviced.

R: Ok. How did you learn all this stuff? All the mechanics and so forth?

B: Well, really on the job training so to speak. I didn't grow up on a farm, so.

R: Did your father already know mechanics when he switched over?

B: No, none of us really knew. My brother, when he was in the service, he was in the Navy for three years, he had had hydraulic repairs and worked in hydraulic shop that way. And myself, when I went in to the service, I also worked in hydraulics, so that gave us a little background for the hydraulic end of the tractors. Then of course we've always had mechanics that were knowledgeable enough to work on the engines and transmissions and things like that.

R: The next question was "How often do you come in to contact with farmers in your work," but it sounds like that's pretty much who you are in contact with.

B: Yeah, right.

R: Ok, do you have... Well, that doesn't make much sense. The question was, "Do you have more or less contact with farmers now than in the past." What we're trying to figure out in that question is how, sort of, farming has changed over the years. Actually, a good question would be, since there's a lot more big machinery used now, has this business really picked up in the past years?

B: Well it's changed quite a bit. When we first started; in fact I should say when I got out of the service in '76 the farm implement business was tremendous. A lot of things going on; selling a lot of equipment, we had six mechanics working for us at the time, we sold a lot of combines, which is, you know, very big PC [?] equipment. But in '78, the bottom really dropped out of farming. We've seen a lot of farmers go under Due to, well, the loan institutes was closin' on 'em and stuff, and it made it really rough on the farmer. Interest rates went up too, and that made it really hard on the farmer. We've seen a change going from basic all-farm equipment to selling a lot of lawn and garden tractors; we've always sold lawn and garden, but that area has picked up quite a bit.

R: Why?

B: Well, basically because the community here's gettin'; we're gettin' a lot of people moving in to the area. It's gettin' built up, more homes out in the rural area. There are more homes in that area than there are farmland, and it's starting kinda to move away from town. So we're gettin' more people that's needing small tractors, implements for those, garden tractors, things like that.

R: Do you expect that trend to continue?

B: Yeah. I think the big farming for us is really gone. We still have a lot of farmers around that are farming maybe 1000, 1200 acres or more, but they're far and few between. We have more small farmers, that are farming probably 50, 60 acres.

R: And do they not need the big machinery?

B: Right. They've more or less bought their equipment a long time ago and they still maintain it. They're not really looking for larger equipment now. That'll phase out too, but you always have somebody coming out to buy more equipment. But it's changing for us. If we was further out in the country, it would probably

start picking up a little different. You get out in to the farming community; Mt. Vernon always has been a farming community, but as I said it's changing to the point where more people are moving in from Columbus and Mansfield, expanding that way.

R: How does that change the community in your view? I mean, what's your view of farming in KNOX County, as a community?

B: Well, you've got more weekend farmers, or "truck-patch" [?] farmers, more or less individuals that are having large gardens and sell fruits and vegetables that way. So that area has changed quite a bit.

R: Ok, the next question, it's sort of what I just asked, "How would you describe farming in Knox County," the next question after that was "What forms your image of farming." What we're trying to get at there (it's a very vague question) is I guess to a certain extent, as a community, how do you see the community; not necessarily just how they farm, but I guess maybe as a people. And then, what in your experience has informed that opinion. (Laughter from both). It's a vague question because there are any number of answers that you could give for that.

B: Well the farm community themselves, the farmer, they're a down-to-earth individual, so to speak. They're very basic. We have a lot of large farmers that are big businessmen. They don't usually have just themselves in farming but usually their whole family is in with them. One individual I'm thinking of, he's probably close to 20 miles from here, he has two sons and they're both farming with him. He probably farms in the neighborhood of 12-15 hundred acres, which is a considerable amount. Now not all that ground does he own, but he rents too. He probably stays right around the area where he lives, which is toward Merengo [?]. Then you still have your, like I said earlier, your small farmer, and they live in the community, they farm just a small amount, but it's enough for them to get by on, they've either raised their family and they're up in their 60's and 70's, and still making a living at it just doing what they can do. I don't know if that answers your question.

R: It does, it does. What kind of contact do you have with farmers outside your business?

B: Well you may see them at a store or something like that. As far as going to their homes or visiting friendships like that, I guess we don't have anything in that respect.

R: I don't know why, but that surprises me.

B: Well, we've got our things we do, families and stuff to raise, but you may see one at a restaurant or at a store or something like that, you visit for a while or something.

R: Are the communities separated between farmers and non-farmers at all, or is it not so much that?

B: Well not so much in this area. Actually the grain bins here in Mt. Vernon are really right downtown almost. The store and everything was built around the farming community. You know, the farmers are really in and around town all the time. A lot of hardware stores that the farmers go to. So they're interacting, I guess

between the farm community and what we'd call city people, but I guess we're not that big of a city.

R: Do you consider yourself a city person?

B: No, [here I think he may have misunderstood my question] rural people, I guess. We have a few acres out in the country.

R: You sort of answered this: "How important do you think farming is to the Knox County community," but I'll ask you one more on the same subject. To what extent do you think the local economy depends on farming?

B: Well, basically if we didn't have the farmer, we wouldn't have the crops and the food that's necessary for us to survive. Technology's getting larger and they're able to produce crops, fruits, vegetables, things like that, indoors. It's just not the same. They can't produce the quantities and acreage indoors as a farmer can. He's well needed, and if anything was to happen to farming in general where it's gone by the wayside we'd see a lot of things happen as far as starvation and things like that.

R: Is that true in specifically the Mt. Vernon area? I mean obviously that's true of the country.

B: In general, yeah. Not necessarily in Mt. Vernon.

R: So how much do you think the Mt. Vernon economy depends on it?

B: Quite a bit, really. Every community has its share towards the economy. The farmer really doesn't get the price out of the crops that he used to get years ago. In fact, I can't quote you the price of grain right now, but when Grandpa, so to speak, was farming, he was getting maybe a dollar or more per bushel than they are today. Today it costs them more to farm, but they're getting larger yields than they had back when grandpa was farming, so to speak. It's kind of balancing out, but if you listen to the Futures market on grain and stuff, it's always going up and down. the prices, and farmers can lock in at a certain price. Hopefully it will get them through, and take care of their business, their farming business, through the year.

R: Have you or any of your family members actually farmed?

B: No, we haven't.

R: Do you like living in a farm community? Why or why not?

B: Yes, I do. I think the city, when you get right down to it, there's a lot of hustle and bustle there. The farm community's a little more laid back but yet we're still pushed. I mean there's a lot of things that has to be taken care of in a day's time and when a tractor or combine breaks down in the season, they don't want it two weeks from now, they want it yesterday. The want it fixed now. So yeah, i do like living in this area.

R: You also already answered this to a certain extent. How economically successful do you think farmers are in Knox County, and what do you think is responsible for their level of success?

B: Well, how successful they are, over the years I've seen a lot of farmers come and go. Usually the ones that have persisted and stuck with it they've come out ahead. You'll hear a lot of farmers even talking that they don't have any money, but they do seem to have some nice things in terms of automobiles and trucks, of course they depend on those things for the farm and that's some of the things they have to have. But all in all I think the farmer in this area is doing his share and he's getting paid generously for what he does.

R: You said "The farmers who stick with it." It seems that you think it has a lot to do with perseverance.

B: Yeah, definitely.

R: How do you think, I mean, why do you think some farmers are able to stick with it and some farmers aren't?

B: Well it just goes back to the same thing. I'm sure you've heard that you're better off if you pay for what you get rather than charge it. And the ones that have taken out loans in the past, of course loans you've got larger payments. It may break it down in a longer period of time, but if you happen to have a bad year when you're farming, you've got no income, or less income, so your bills don't get paid. So the ones that have more or less paid for what they get when they get it, they're the ones that's really sticking in there, unless they're just really good managers of money. And there's a lot of big farmers that have to be that way. They have to control every penny they spend.

R: If you would, talk a bit about the politics of farming and of farmers? How political are farmers in Knox County? Do most farmers think the same way politically, to your knowledge? And how much do they influence politics around here?

B: Again, I think that each of them does their share, but there's a few farmers in the area that are in touch with the government in that respect. I couldn't name any for certain. But they have to be on the wise all the time. Listen to TV programs or news forecasts or broadcasts, to know what's going on. They do have local meetings, some of them, community. Again, I couldn't tell you where or anything. I think they keep on top of things that way, just in head knowledge, so they know what's going on. There's a lot of farmers that have what they call a "set-aside program," where they have property set aside that they can't farm, but the government does pay them for that.

R: Why does the government pay them for that?

B: So that they don't have an overabundance of grain.

R: Oh, that's right.

B: Like this year it's an extra good year and they've got bigger yields, so that in a sense didn't change anything. I think they're in touch with the government as much as they can be.

R: Do you think that farm families hold certain values and how are those values sustained and expressed? We're getting in to sort of the morals and the values that they hold.

B: Well I think there's a lot of different people in this world, and a lot of different farmers. I know a lot of farmers that go to our church. They have good moral standards and they're raising families and teaching them good moral standards. But there are some that go the other way too.

R: So it varies, like anywhere.

B: Yeah, really. You see more of it both ways than you did probably 20 years ago.

R: Why is that?

B: Time, I guess. People are changing. But it's hard to say. I can't predict anything, but all in all we're going to see more people coming back to basic morals again.

R: This may be a tough question, but can you define what you mean by "basic morals"?

B: Speaking specifically for myself, I am talking about the basics, and that's knowing the lord Jesus Christ, and coming back to those standards. knowing that God created this earth, and he created it for us. He created it for us to use and take care of.

R: And you think that people, aside from the ones who stray, generally that's what people define as the moral, sort of, backing?

B: Yeah, that's, our country was based on those morals and society has basically taken us away from that. If we just turn the TV off and forget about it I think we'd all be in better shape.

R: That's interesting, yeah. We've talked some about changes, and so forth. How interested are youth in farming today? Are the young people staying in it at all or not?

B: There's quite a few, and again it goes right back to the farm family. Those that have been raised on a farm, they're pretty much going to stick with it. We have FFA in this community which is very strong. They have regular meetings, I think, once a month, and maybe even more than that. They're strong in the community and they're not just based here, but they go to larger meetings in the Columbus area and things like that. So they stay in touch. Some of the young men that I know of, and the ladies too, I mean it's both boys and girls in the FFA. They're doing what they can do, and the class and training that they do, and, I'm trying to search here. I lost my thought.

R: So your impression is that farming will continue and the young people will continue to do it?

B: Yeah, it will, it has to. We have to continue to duplicate what we've done in that respect.

R: We've heard a lot from older people who's children and grandchildren aren't as interested in farming and want to move away to cities and that sort of thing. So that's why we're asking about that.

B: It's rough work. It's not easy. We can't sit at a desk all day and farm. But farming has changed in that respect quite a bit. A lot of combines and equipment are computerized. It makes it a lot easier for the farmer. When you get in to grain farming or dairy farming, they have computerized feeding systems. It goes in to a big era there. It's changed considerably that way.

R: Now just a general question. In the project that we're doing, one of the main things that we're trying to do is work with the farming community to produce something, and we don't know what. For instance, Howard, a couple years back, produced a museum exhibit, which was necessary then. So what we're trying to do is sort of work with the farming community and find out what they might need, in other words how we might do a give and take on this. Do you have any suggestions for how we might serve the community with the work that we're doing?

B: Well I think that maybe the farmer really needs to be recognized more for what he does give back to the community. How you would do that, I don't know. But he needs to know that he is still needed. Each of them are out there doing what they can do each and every day and there's days they don't have to work, but when spring time comes they're out there in the fields. They gotta get their crops in. When harvest comes they gotta get the crops off before they get damaged from the whether, rain or whatever. So he's got a lot on his mind. If that crop fails, he's under. He's lost everything. And they've been around in the communities for years. I mean farming's been the backbone of the community; of the whole country. In some way I guess they need to be recognized for all that.

R: So you think that the country at large doesn't recognize all that.

B: I don't think so, no. I don't watch that much TV and I catch a little news and stuff, but the only time the news will broadcast anything about the farmers if something drastic has happened. You know, the floods that happened last year, the floods that are happening this year down around Texas. That took out a lot of grain and a lot of crops that normally would have been used up throughout the country. Devastation, I guess, is what they're after, but they don't want to recognize the farmer for what he really does.

R: This is just a personal question; Have you come in to contact with many women farmers? I'm asking because I'm doing my special project for this on women farmers and I'm just curious.

B: Yeah, we've probably got, most of them is husband and wife, of course. There are some ladies that stand out a little more in the farm than their husbands do basically because they probably wanted to get away from going to work. And they wanted to stay on the farm or whatever. There's two that I can think of in general. One is down around Newark, and one is here just at the edge of Mt. Vernon. They have a fruit farm, Vernon View Fruit Farm, and she pretty well controls most of the what's going on in the farm.

R: In terms of the business end or even, everything.

B: Everything. She could tell you more about that than I can.

R: Are there any questions that I haven't asked or anything that i haven't covered as far as finding out as much as I can from you about the farming community?

B: The only thing I think we haven't covered, basic cost of equipment today

R: Is huge.

B: Yeah. Even a garden tractor, they're the price of what cars were five years ago. If you talk to some of the old farmers, they'll tell you that when they first started in farming a little, what they call two-plow tractor, which was at that time maybe a Ferguson TO20, or an 8M Ford, tractor and all the equipment, plow and disk at that time, would have cost somewhere around 1000 to 1200 dollars. That's everything ready-to-go farming. Today if you was to put in that same perspective, you're looking a good 20 to 30 thousand dollars or more. It just depends on the size of the tractor. If you compare tractor to tractor you're probably looking right in that same price range. 20-30 thousand with all the equipment.

R: Here's another stupid question, but why is it that it's so expensive now?

B: Economy. It's brought it up. One of those same tractors today, one of them Ferguson 20's or 8M Fords would bring anywhere from 23-25 hundred, maybe 28. And that's a used tractor. So it's just basic economy has changed. We can't get gas for what we could get gas for 20 years ago. So everything's up.

R: Is there anything that you as an independent business can do to alleviate that for farmers or is there nothing that you can do?

B: Our hands are tied in that respect. Prices are set above us, and we get equipment in, and there's money to be made there but it's not that much.

R: One thing I forgot: Do you belong to any organizations?

B: 'Course our church, and between my wife and I we have the 4-H club, which contributes quite a bit to the farming community too. That's about it. 4-H can take up a lot of your time. I've kindof let my wife take it over the last couple of years. We've been 4-H advisors for probably 6 or 8 years.

R: Now my impression was that that was mainly a farming organization. Is that not right?

B: Well see our club that we got involved with basically we wanted to start out by having some hogs in the fair and there was no 4-H clubs to take us but one that was in town. They're called the variety pack. It was mainly just kids in town, and they got a variety of everything, so that's why they called it the variety pack. They had everything as far as hunting and engine repair, but when we got on board we brought the animals in to the picture. Usually the kids will have three or four projects. Most of them, well this year we had, well this year we didn't have any animals. Year before we had rabbits and cows and hogs, beef cow.

Can you think of any other referrals? Farmers you know, anyone who has a lot to say about farming?

There's probably quite a few in this area. There's an older farmer, Jack Coe. (Rest is referrals; I wrote them down).