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## Interview with Dennis Shinaberry

Casey Lewis

Dennis Shinaberry

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Casey Lewis  
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Fieldwork: The Family Farm

The following is the transcription of an interview with Dennis Shinaberry, family farmer in Knox County. The recording took place on February 19, 1996 at 2:00 P.M. at the Shinaberry farm. The interview focuses on seasonal cycles, growing up on the farm and technological advancements in farming.

CL: This is Casey Lewis interviewing Dennis Shinaberry at his house on February 19, 1996 at his house. Today I am going to be talking about seasonal cycles and ask you a few questions about that. How do the seasonal cycles effect how you operate here and do they? I don't even know if they do.

DS: As of spring, winter, fall...

CL: Yeah.

DS: Well, everything is planted and harvested by our seasons. So, you know we plant corn in the spring and make hay in the summer and harvest in the fall and then in the winter we have to get all of the animals in cause they have nothing to eat and feed them what we harvested. So...

CL: So those are the cycles?

DS: Yeah. Spring, summer, fall harvest and winters... of course we don't... some farmers are just grain farmers- they don't have animals. Why then winter is kind of an off time for them.

CL: Do the seasons effect the animals at all?

DS: As far as caring for them- yeah. We have to make sure in the winter time that they have shelter. Animals are pretty hardy though. If they have a place to get out of the wind, like in a woods, even though it was cold like this winter they get along just fine as long as they can have something to eat. Of course this year we had a very wet spring and summer- now that effects our grass for the summer grazing season because the grass can get when it's wet kinda what we call wooshy- it doesn't taste as good to 'em, the nutrients aren't there. Actually, you have better... and also it hurt

our haying season this year. We had a hard time making hay because the fields got wet, the hay got too big. Hay has to be made at the right time. It should be made at every 30 to 35 day intervals and we started out a month late on our haying season this year so we lost a cutting of hay. Because I didn't get my hay made until June- I believe it was June 20th or something- usually I have my first cutting of hay made by May 25th.

CL: Is that because it was so wet?

DS: Because it was so wet. Then the hay got so big that it lost its feed value for the animals. So, no I have to supplement the hay with grain because there isn't nutrition value there. So, rain or dry seasons effect you the rest of the year if it's in one season.

CL: What do you do about droughts? How does that effect the rest of the year?

DS: Well, you have short crops. Although in our area here we can handle the drought better then we can handle wet weather because of the type of soils we have. They don't drain as well in wet weather. They hold moisture better. So, actually droughts, other than what they do hurt us, is on our grazing. The grass doesn't grow- you know how the lawns turn brown- well that's what we're relying on the sheep- what I raise- to eat all summer long. Well, if I have to start supplementing them with hay then that can make me short of hay in the winter season to winter them over. But usually our droughts come late, if we have one. When we have droughts they come later in the fall, generally when the crop is pretty much what we call "made". But it still will make you a short crop.

CL: And what do you do when you have a short crop?

DS: Well, you either try to make do with what you have or you end up buying what you don't have- buying off of somebody that didn't have a drought. Like out West, if I run short of hay out West if they grow a tremendous amount of hay why you can buy it. But then you can't buy it as cheap as you can raise it. Not always.

CL: And how many acres do you have in total?

DS: We own a little over 300 and am farming 375. I rent some ground.

CL: And what do you grow?

DS: Corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay.

CL: And do you sell that off at all?

DS: The corn is all fed through the stock except if I have excessive amount then it is sold. The soybeans are a cash crop. The wheat is a cash crop in a sense but the main reason I raise wheat is for the straw- the stems of it to bed in the winter, to bed the cattle and bed the sheep. The hay is for feed, strictly for feed. That's for the cattle and sheep for the winter.

CL: I have a little question about technology. Has technology allowed you to overcome the seasonal cycles at all? For example, say there was a drought, have you been able to kind of manipulate growing? Maybe growing in a greenhouse?

DS: No. The only way technology would help us in a drought is if we irrigated. But technology can't help us unless we know what the weather is. And, you know, a drought comes and sometimes they can't even, they don't even know that a drought is going to be here. Or, just like this spring when we had a cold, wet spring, that was never anticipated to last as long as long as it did. Technology doesn't really help us that much because you know how accurate the weather people are. They're fairly accurate most of the time but you can't go three months down the road. You couldn't use a greenhouse unless you're gonna cover 300 and some acres with a greenhouse. So, as far as weather patterns our weather technology is not going to help you any.

CL: I don't know how it used to be a hundred years ago or whatever but for example, did calves used to be born only in a certain season? Has that changed at all?

DS: There are changes. Sheep now they're trying to use accelerated lambing on them which a sheep is pregnant for five months. Then she's required to have the lamb... the lamb needs to be on her sucking for six weeks. So, that makes seven months. Then you have another six weeks of what they call "fleshing" which means you feed her and get her back into shape again before you breed her again to have a lamb. So, I'd lamb once a year but some places they are breeding them right back after the fleshing period and then lambing again- so, see, you're not a twelve month period, after nine months you've re-breed that ewe. So, I figured that out, I think every four years you could end up with two crops of lambs in one year. The only problem with that is you change times of lambing, you know, like I lamb in January and I also lamb

in March. Well, if I went through this whole period of time I would be lambing next time in May, during my busy planting season, and then maybe again in October with the other bunch of lambs. So, see that works alright if you have the time but if your time gets coincided with another busy time something is going to suffer.

CL: So, say if you didn't have crops then it wouldn't be a problem...

DS: And also, the other problem is you start lambing in May and June you can get into fly problems. And so, I started lambing in January here about six or seven years and that used to be unheard of. Well, not unheard of but very rare because of the cold weather. Well, now you can have pretty much controlled environments, you know, to help that. The reason I don't lamb them all in January is because of size- I don't have enough room in my controlled environment to have all of the sheep in a controlled environment. So, that's why the previous lambing period was usually March and April. The weather started to warm up and that was what it used to be for many years. Of course, wool used to be their main income, too, for sheep and now it's become a by-product for us. So, that's something that's changed, too.

CL: So, you think the controlled environment has had a lot to do with the change?

DS: Well, being able to... you can't have a lamb out in the cold real handley. Of course, the sheep know are breed to be hardier. Some people do lamb outside and get along just fine. You know, technology has improved breeding...

CL: How has it improved breeding?

DS: Well, we're getting multiple births more regularly. You can control that by... like I'll keep twin ewe lambs- twin female lambs because that's the same way as a human. If you're mother had twins chances are you will. So, we try to do that. There breeding in different types of sheep. There are some sheep that will have as many as four lambs now and they're trying to incorporate them into other breeds.

CL: And do they inject them with anything?

DS: No... this is just cross breeding female and male. And of course you've got embryo transplants now that you can put in the

female and artificial insemination and control that. It's very hard to do on sheep- they're just experimenting now.

It's extremely hard to find a sheep when she comes in heat. Cows, when you're milking them every day, you see them everyday, you see them when they come in heat but sheep it's very difficult to do that with.

CL: Yeah. I know that the farm that I went to was a dairy farm- the last farm I went to- and they used artificial insemination.

DS: Most dairy farms- 99 percent of them- do use artificial insemination. But like I said it's a whole lot easier to catch them because most generally you turn your sheep out to grass in the summer and they're out there taking care of themselves virtually. They don't need any requirement but grass and water.

CL: Are there some seasons that you consider more profitable than others or is it just one big cycle?

DS: For the livestock farmer it's all seasons- not necessarily more profitable. I guess summer for the livestock is more profitable because if you have grazing ground it's not fit for farming at least the grass is nutritious. You know, if you're growing grass on there and you're not growing crops at least they're getting nourishment and growing off of grass that grows there- not that it's free. I guess there's not any particular time that's more profitable because somethings going on all seasons.

CL: Is there any way of predicting whether... I don't know, is there a farmer's instinct or anything whether springs going to be this way or winter's going to be that way?

DS: Nothing other than wise tales. No, not really. I mean all you can do is just think what you think is going to happen and try to prepare. You know, if you think well other than... a lot of times when you see a rain set in like we'll see a real slow rain come in in the morning we'll say well this looks like an all dayer because it just starts in real slow and you can just tell kinda that this thing is going to last all day where as a thunderstorm sweeps through and of course you never know how much rain you're going to get. No, there is virtually no...

CL: I didn't think so- I was just asking. What about the Farmers' Almanac, is that any prediction do you think?

DS: I've never went by that. No. Fact is it's kind of interesting I just a Farmer's Almanac from a spray company or a seed company-

it was a get for using their chemical or whatever- and it was the first time I've ever looked at an Almanac was thing year. It was interesting but I don't think I want to base my bottom line on that.

CL: Before we were talking about droughts and really wet springs- is there any way to prepare for that at all or does it just come and you deal with it?

DS: The only thing that's happened that's taught us in the past is a lot of people- of course that's come with genetics and technology- now we can start sooner because the genetics of the plants will withstand colder weather. So, like we didn't used to plant til after May. At least the 15th of April was determined a safe time to plant, relatively. I think Ohio still has a frost date up til the 10th of May- it has been known to frost up to- a killing frost not just a frost- but anyway...

CL: So, the difference is a killing frost wipes it all out?

DS: Right. The killing frost will kill it where as a light frost you know it may blacken the plants but they'll come out of it. So, but know they've got seeds that are hardy. The problem was planting in April 20 years ago was the seeds would root if the ground was too cold- not warm enough to germinate them. Now, guys with the technology that we have on the plant breeding they're finding out that hey, the first day of April, if it's fit to plant we can now feel safe to go in there instead of loosing a nice week in April and wait until the last week in April or something. They're a little braver I guess you'd say and not afraid to go in there by the 15th of April and start planting if we have good April weather which we did. Last year we had a week or ten days in April that was good but not everybody... you know everybody thought well this is just a little bit early yet. Some guys went ahead and planted and some guys didn't. But now... you learn from that. Not necessarily you're preparing for a wet season or a dry season but you're not necessarily looking at the calender anymore saying, well it's not the 15th of May. I don't want to start planting yet. It's good weather, it's spring time and we can go ahead and do this.

CL: So, they're hardier...?

DS: Right. We have more vigorous plants, they withstand things a little better, withstand the elements a little better.

CL: And do know how the people who decided to plant early their crops compared with the others?

DS: That was a toss-up. It was the same way... you can talk to a neighbor down the road said I had to re-plant 40 acres and the next guy a mile and a half from here said I had the best crops I ever had. It's just a big variable. I mean I can see the difference between some of my fields right here that I got planted... For instance, my father-in-law planted and it seemed to have effected more than just him... but there was two days in May that all that corn was planted those two days in May I would say that 60 to 70 percent of it had to be replanted and why just those two days. Now it didn't effect me but my father-in-law lives a half a mile from me and he had to replant about 25 acres of his corn and I've heard of guys re-planting up to a hundred acres. And it was just those two days. I planted the same day.

CL: So, it's not necessarily dependent on the weather.

DS: No. Certain conditions can just be right and they don't realize what all those conditions are yet. They're still not explained. It was just sections in the field that were effected. Whether they were wetter, whether they were cooler they don't know. So, you can't base by what the other guy does. You know your fields. You know when they're wet, when they're dry and when you think it's the right time to plant on them.

CL: How long have you been operating this farm?

DS: Well, full-time since 1979 but I've worked on the farm all the time- I mean all my life. I've worked on both these farms cause my grandfather when he retired why my father done the farm down here most of the time.

CL: So, do you think moving to a different farm- say for example, I know this would probably never happen- moving from this farm to another farm, would that be a completely different experience for you? Just because you said before you know this land...

DS: It would be... yeah. I mean the basics would all be the same but learning the ground- how it... where the wet places are, you know you've always got places that are wet two days longer than the rest of the field. Or just certain places that just stay wet- they take longer to dry out. Learning that and where good places are in the field and where it's going to raise good crops and where it's going to raise poor crops. So, whether you want to put corn there or whether you want to put hay there or wheat there, that sort of thing. So, yeah it would kind of a learning deal.

CL: Kind of a silly question but what is your favorite season on the farm and why? Or do you not have one?

DS: Yeah. Spring. I like to put the crops in and anticipate what they look like. Anticipate if you'll have a good summer and a good fall for the harvest. So, it would either be spring when your planting 'em in or fall- the anticipation of seeing what your spring work paid off. I guess, if you understand what I mean.

CL: Yeah- just putting it in and seeing it come out at the end...

DS: And seeing that you done it right. It's nice to look at a nice piece of corn or soybeans.

CL: You feel accomplished. Is there one season that is busier than another? Well, obviously your daily routine changes from spring to summer to fall to winter...

DS: I guess spring and fall would be my two busiest- putting the crops in and fall harvesting. I don't know they're kinda both about the same. I guess spring would be the busier. It requires more time than the harvest does, I would say.

CL: Do you do this all by yourself?

DS: My dad helps some. He's retired but he does what he can do. But most of it I do myself. I hire outside labor to bail hay now. I mean I can't do that myself because you have to have somebody running the bailer and somebody unloading wagons and mauling them in the maul. So, I just hire occasional help is all.

CL: Yeah. I would think it would be hard to do this all by yourself. Have you ever worked off of the farm?

DS: Yes, I have.

CL: What did you do?

DS: I was a machanic for a garage from 1974 to 1979. My dad got hurt in a farming accident so he couldn't do the farming anymore so I quit and done the farming.

CL: You dad lives two farms down, is that what you said?

DS: Yup.

CL: Well, I want to switch gears here. I don't know if Mitra asked you any of these questions at all so I don't want repeat ourselves. But I just want to ask you a couple of questions about growing up on the farm. What are some of your memories from growing up on the farm and what sorts of jobs did you have when you were growing up? What sorts of chores and activities did you enjoy doing?

DS: Oh, we always had chores with livestock and we had certain things that we had to do. I always remember when spring come I done most of the plowing and I really enjoyed plowing. I really loved to go out there and plow. Although I don't do much of that anymore cause of no-till and that. As I got older dad just let me do what he felt I could do. I guess I remember I starting driving a tractor when I was seven. My dad and his two brothers owned machinery together and so that's what I remember doing all summer long was driving that hay bailer because we would bail here for my grandpa and then bail for my dad. And then my uncle then had a dairy farm and my other uncle he feed cattle. And it just seemed like when we got done bailing hay we made the round of all three of them or all four it was time to start all over again. And so that's what I remember doing all summer. But, I mean, you know I guess living on the farm, I don't think there is hardly any better way to be grown up as a kid.

CL: Why? Just cause you have so much open space and freedom?

DS: Well, yeah but... You know you don't have neighbors that's looking in your window from ten feet away or whatever. There's always something to do if you want to do it. And you're not alienated from people. When we were kids... of course, it's harder now for my kids than it was when I was a kid because you see everyone in the neighborhood here pretty much now are my dad's age, see. And so they all had kids and every Sunday afternoon we had a baseball game or a football game going at somebodies house. It didn't matter where and it didn't matter out in the pasture field or whatever. We always had something going on. And it's harder now that... we've got one neighbor here that farms up the road that has kids that are my kids age. Now, any of the kids that come out and play with my kids are from town. You kinda have to watch that because they don't understand everything that's going around. And you have to watch what they get into. Whereas when you were a kid everybody is exposed to the same thing. They knew not to go up that ladder into the hay maw or they knew watch out for this or whatever. So, it's a lot different.

CL: Are there a lot of other differences between your kids growing up on the farm and you growing up on the farm?

DS: Oh yeah. It's... the technology has done most of this. Things have advanced so fast. We never had when I was growing up there was never that great of advances so close together. I remember when dad started tiling the grain fields. That was new. Then nothing spectacular happened til we come into chemicals. Then nothing spectacular happened for maybe another ten years. I mean there was little things but I'm talking that had a real impact on how you done things. Why shoot, we went from chemicals to now no-till, global positioning, site specific farming, computers. I mean just in the last five years. Just in the last ten years we've went farther than we did in the previous twenty-five. And it's difficult to keep up with it...

CL: And to teach your children....

DS: And to justify on your operation. Can you spend \$10,000 on this thing and justify it to pay out in the next five years or whatever. And I've heard mention many of times at meetings, the way technology was if it's not incorporated within 14 months it's already old. You know, so how do you keep up?

CL: And how do you keep up?

DS: I don't. What works for one person... what works for me and what works for the neighbor up the road can be two totally different things. One farmer you can talk to says, well I like feeding calves. And the next guy says, well I had a total disaster doing that. So, everybody has their own thing that they can do and do well or feel comfortable doing it. And that's the same way with the technology. There's things that will work for some people and things that won't work for others.

CL: And what are some things that you have brought into your farming and what are some things that you left behind that you find work for you?

DS: I've been doing some no-tilling. That's something that works. That's a very weather related thing. I mean, it's more effective.

CL: Could you describe that briefly? We've talked about it a lot in my class but....

DS: No-till means that you go in and plant a crop in a field that you do nothing with. I mean, there's no tillage, no disturbing of what is there. It means like I could go to your yard right now and I could put corn in there and never do anything to your yard. I just go in there and plant it. That's what no-till is. Anything you do to disturb the dirt that is there is tillage- that is a tillage practice. And if you don't do anything and put the crop in that's no-till.

CL: And you've found that to work for you?

DS: Relatively good.

CL: What are the advantages to doing that over tilling?

DS: Less time. You save soil. I have fairly level ground here so it's not like... I lose soil, you will lose some soil wind, erosion or whatever but not as serious where the ground is more rolling. There are conservation tillage practices though, too, where you don't do... the plow is the worst thing for erosion but now they've come out with tillage tools like a chisel plow that stirs up the soil but leaves a lot of the trash- what we call trash which is what is on top of the ground now- which helps hold the soil. There's so many variations of no-till. There's different things that you can do- attachments on your corn planter to make it better, do a better job of no-tilling and that sort of thing too. I don't know technology wise other than using new advances in fertilization or chemicals, new chemicals, that's come out that do a better job using less of them. I mean, other than that, technology wise I don't know if there's really much else I've done.

CL: What is site specific? Have you used that at all?

DS: No. That is cost prohibitive, I think, on a small operation. That is, they take a field, like 20 acre field, and they mark it out into 3 acre squares. Now, we soil test to see what nutrients we're lacking and what we need to put down to grow a crop. Well, when we soil test a field, generally what we do, if it's a square field, we'll drive across it in an X shape and stop every so often and pull up samples of dirt. And then it's sent to a lab and analyzed and it says you need phosphorus or you need pot ash to grow this crop. Site specific they mark off every 3 acres and take a soil sample. Because every, even the dirt in a 20 acre field it's all different. All has different nutrient requirements. So, then they take a soil sample of that and then what you have to do is somebody has to have an applicator with a computer on it. You put this map in the computer and as you drive along it fertilizes as each one of those

grids needs it. Then also you have to have a computer on your combine. When you're driving a long you have the same field map in your computer and it will tell you the yields of each one of them grids, too. So, then you can kind of correlate. Also, if this little grid here is producing 150 bushels of corn and this little grid over here is only producing 100 bushels then you need to look at the fertility a little closer here or maybe that ground is not going to raise 150 bushel of corn. It's just not capable. So, this one went 150 so also you can vary your plant population while you're planting. Like we usually plant around... people plant anywhere from 24,000 to 32,000 plants per acre. So, if you see this one at 150 and you planted 25,000 you say well maybe next year I'd go to 28,000 and it will grow that if I fertilize it. And this one here I better back down to 22,000 and try to increase my yield that way and not put so much stress on this many plants that are there. It's a very expensive... it's got a long pay back period. It is really coming on strong. I can't see me using it in my operation. I would looking at twice the pay back period. From what I've read, you're probably talking anywhere from \$14,000 to \$20,000 just to get your basic set-up. And they're not sure what they're doing with all the data yet. They're not sure how they can correlate what happened at the end was caused by what happened at the beginning. You see what I mean? They're not sure that... maybe you need to be looking at this plot here that only raised 100 maybe you have a soil compaction problem, maybe you have a drainage problem. They're not sure what to do with all the data just yet. That all comes off of a satellite. They have an antenna on your cab of your tractor and your combine and it beams this beam up to the satellite and it comes back down and that maps out your field and tells everything where to be placed and how much the amount. And of course right now one of the determining factors in this area is everybody buys their fertilizer from a dealer. Well, if doesn't have the equipment to apply to fertilizer with this global positioning then why do you need it. What good is it going to do to you?

CL: Is the global positioning related to the site specific?

DS: Right. They're trying to correlate them together is what they are trying to do. They started out with the global positioning first. They put the yield monitors on the combine and go down through the field and they get determined how much their yield varied in the length of the field. Then they think, gosh, I went from 150 bushel here to 80 bushel here. Now, what is my problem. Like I said, is it soil compaction, is it fertilization or is it my soil just will not handle that many plants per acre. So, that's when they went in

to soil sampling 3 acre grids or 5 acre grids and trying to get a handle, if I fertilized what it needs and it still don't grow it then I got another problem to look at or the soil is just not capable of growing that good. But at least I'm not fertilizing it for 150 bushel of corn when I'm only gonna get 100 out of it. Why put enough on it for 150 bushel. I can see very valid points in this but cost is... and like I said they're still trying to sort out all the figures. They're not sure yet how to correlate these and get things done the way they want 'em done. But I can sure see where they're coming from.

CL: Confusing but I think I got it. You explained it well. Are you teaching your kids these different techniques like no till? It probably just kind of goes along with everything. They see you doing it and just learn.

DS: That's the way I learned. If they're interested like when I was interested I just paid attention to everything. And sometimes it's just something you just know. You just realize that you can't do that even if you've never seen it. Or there's gotta be a better way then this way. And you can get ideas from other people. You gotta do... I read a lot of farm magazines and see things there that I think might work for me or whatever and ask questions. Like I said, what works for one person doesn't always work for the other one.

CL: Did you always want to be a farmer?

DS: It kind of goes with the saying, "you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of a boy", I guess. Yes, I never... I enjoyed being a machanic but I guess I really like to farm.

CL: What brought you back?

DS: Well, two things. My dad getting hurt and not being able to do the farm and I didn't want to see somebody else doing it. Then the other thing was that I enjoyed doing it and being your own boss. If it don't work, you ain't got anybody to blame but yourself. And if it does work, then you accomplished something and you did it because there wasn't no somebody telling you that that's how you're supposed to do it.

CL: Do you think that you're way of life as a kid was different from your friends who lived off the farms? Do you think that your whole growing up was different?

DS: Yeah. There is no comparison the way I grew up and the way kids in town grew up. I mean I was envious of them sometimes. Simple reason- I had something that I had to do and they'd say well we went out and went swimming today or we just goofed off and played baseball all day at the park or whatever. But then I can see that when they went to get jobs how their work ethics were.

CL: Do you think it has effected your work ethic a lot?

DS: Yeah. I mean... I'm not saying that every farm kid gets good work ethics but at least they were exposed to the right way to do it. I mean they had chores, they had responsibilities, we had responsibilities to... dad, he bought me a few sheep to take care of. They were mine. I mean he paid for the feed and anything else but when the lambs were sold, when the wool was sold it was mine which probably something I will do with my kids. They will have something of their own.

CL: Do they have any things like that yet?

DS: My oldest boy is in 4-H and he had a lamb last year and took it to the fair and it was his. They come out and do chores with me and help me do things, reluctantly sometimes.

CL: Do you think they want to be farmers or is that hard to say?

DS: It's hard to say. My oldest one he takes a real interest in it. But see that's something different too. My oldest boy loves to be out helping me bail hay, plant corn but he doesn't care much for the animals. Now my middle boy, he loves the animals. It bothers him if one of them's sick or something, you know, he takes real interest in that animal until it gets better. So, I don't know what direction that will take them. My oldest boy says he wants to be a farmer but who knows that could change two years from now.

CL: Well, it sounds like they should work together- they'd make a good team. One more question, can I see the sheep?

DS: Sure, sure.

CL: I don't know if there is really anything else that I wanted to ask today.