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Interview with Dwayne Grassbaugh

Andrew Legant

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Andrew Legant

4/2/95

ANSO 67-68

Interview with Dwayne Grassbaugh (Dwayne is the oldest son. He is 23 and has graduated from Virginia Tech University)

Tuesday afternoon. 4/2/1995. 21461 Schenk Creek RD. Howard, OH 43028

AL: OK I think we can just get started. First how old are you?

DG: I will be twenty three this next month.

AL: So you are two years older than your brother.

DG: Yeah.

AL: And you graduated from Virginia Tech?

DG: Yeah.

AL: What made you want to go to Virginia Tech.

DG: What made you want to go to Kenyon?

AL: It's the same thing I guess.

DG: It was the best school in my major.

AL: Are you glad that you went to college then?

DG: I guess. I suppose. I am not glad about the money.

AL: Do you think it helped you quite a bit?

DG: I don't know if it helps me now so much as if anything ever goes wrong I got something to fall back on.

AL: Was farming something you always wanted to do?

DG: You might say. Pretty much.

AL: Is it something that you think you were kind of born into? Or just kind of grew up in?

DG: I don't know it's just something I do. I don't know.

AL: Do you feel that you are pretty well prepared to take over the farm in the future? Are you ready to do that yet?

DG: I guess. I don't know. I suppose. Doug and I own about a third of the cows now. I kind of take care of the dairy stuff. Doug does most of the crop stuff. So we kind of...we don't run the whole show like Dad does but we have individual facets that we run. So I suppose.

AL: Does that work pretty well with Doug out in the field and your doing the dairy and cows and stuff?

DG: Yeah it does. Someone's got to specialize in something I guess.

AL: How did you divide that up?

DG: Doug has always been the crop person and I have always liked the cows more. That's just the way we fell into it. We've always liked our certain things. Doug would rather be on driving the tractors and I would rather be working with the cows.

AL: How about your sisters? What do they do?

DG: I don't know. You'll have to ask them that. Feed the calfs I guess.

AL: Do you think you plan basically on staying here for a while if everything works out?

DG: Yes. I am here now I guess.

AL: Becuase I know one of the things your Dad was mentioning was that he is a little worried about when he retires...about the future and what might happen. Do you ever think about that? It seems like it is a huge responsibility to take control of the farm. Does that ever worry you or bother you?

DG: I don't know. The way it looks like now it won't be a sole proprietorship. It will be probally...looks right now it will probally be a partnership with me and Doug because I don't think the girls have any interest in it.

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AL: Do you think that will ever...is that ever a problem? Now you have three opinions but do you think that will ever be a problem having two opinions that you have to kind of connect?

DG: Oh I think if you got the same goals in mind and the fact that

we pretty much separated our specialties...that just as long as you have a person who doesn't get out in left field on their ideas and specialty...you really don't need to encroach on what they are doing.

AL: Do you see yourself getting larger and larger still?

DG: Yeah. You got to. In my opinion if we want to. What business doesn't expand.

AL: So you see farming as a business then?

DG: Oh it is. I don't know...That's why people go broke and lose there farms...so most definitely.

AL: Do you think the kind of family run operation is going to continue for a while in the future?

DG: Oh yeah. I mean yeah I don't see any problem with it. The family operation changes. I mean well what's considered a family operation. I mean I had this question posed in ag-econ class. People would like to think of family farms as I have got five cows and 10 acres and blah blah blah. But I think of the Earnest and Gallo winery that's owned by a family. Is that a family farm. Family controlled but it's huge. The dairies in California with 10, 15 thousand cows a single family owns them. That's not what people romantically think of a family farm but they are families. What is a family farm I guess is the most important question. If the family farm is going to continue what do you consider a family farm. Everyone talks about the family farm but I don't think anyone knows what a family farm is.

AL: It seems like there are so many definitions of what it could be.

DG: Yeah I mean there's...it's undefinable so. Of course everyone is for the family farm. It's just what is a family farm. No one ever defines it, they are just for the family farm. A family incorporates, it's a corporate farm them but a family owns the corporation. For tax reasons you incorporate. For liability reasons you incorporate. Are you no longer a family farm then?

AL: Do you see any problems in the farm getting larger and larger or is it just something you have come to expect?

-Counter 78-

DG: Twenty Five years ago Dad started with 20 cows. And now it is 150 cows. In twenty years I would think we should probably be close to 8 times larger. Why not? I am not saying we will. I am not

saying we want to but if it has been expanded 8, 9, whatever times in 20 years why shouldn't the next 20 years expand that much.

AL: Your Dad you said started with 20 cows.

DG: Oh I don't know...but 10, 15 cows whatever he really started with.

AL: That was something I was going to ask him. I can't remember what he told me. So you...do you see farming becoming more specialized. It seems like it has now already. It seems like you're strictly...at least your operation seems dairy focused. A lot of your crops...

DG: You gotta focus on something. But we are definitely not...we raise all our own crops commercially. We raise corn, soybean and everything that are sold in cash purposes. So we're not specialized by no means. Compared to some people. Some people only milk cows.

Other people own a grain farm. I don't think you can piddle around with other things. Some people do and that is the lifestyle you choose to live. But a lot of people that farm that way also have one or two members of the family with a job in town. You know. Get good at one thing or do a lot of things not so good. I don't know. You got to have a focus. It just comes down to how many businesses...well we'll specialize in this here but we will do this because we have always done it whether it makes us money or not.

I don't think it will...If it don't make money it's not worth doing. You know. We continually or will. And really we have never done it officially...I don't think Dad has but he has always kept track of things. If it doesn't make money we don't do it any more. I think Dad and Grandpa used to raise hogs but they quit doing that.

I don't know why they quit doing it. But they realized that they couldn't make money doing it.

-Counter 110-

AL: What sort of changes have you seen basically....

DG: Changes in what.

AL: In farming as you have kind of grown up. Has it gotten...you already said it has gotten larger. But has it gotten a lot more technical too. Is there a lot more that you have to know these days in order...?

DG: Oh I think so. I just think that is the nature of everythings gotten. I don't think it's probably changed anymore than what it's changed over Dad's life. I mean because you live in it you think

it is more changed than what anyone can ever possibly have had. But I imagine people going from horses from tractors was a world of a change. To us well tractors is all there have ever been. Or we think computers coming in is a huge change but...I mean it is a big change for us but it couldn't be any bigger change than what there has been in previous times.

AL: Have you pretty much always wanted to be a farmer?

DG: I guess.

AL: And work on the farm?

DG: I suppose.

AL: Why is that? What is it about farming that you enjoy?

DG: It's what I do. I mean. Yeah if I could host ESPN sportscenter that is what I would rather do. But that's not possible so.

AL: So it was something that you were raised to do? It's all you know?

DG: Yeah. I mean I think I can do a good of a job raising dairy cows as good as most people. I think it's a talent. I don't know. Maybe it's not. It's what I have done.

AL: So you see then basically yourself...I know you can't define a family farm...but a smaller family operation as opposed to a large corporation of some kind?

DG: Well we're constrained to what land we have and what we can expand to. I don't think we can ever get bigger than 400 cows with the land we have here. I don't think our land can accomodate more than 400 cows so maybe we have a limit there as to what we can go to.

Do I want to get to there? Right now I don't think we can get there. Shit am I open to the possiblity that we probally have to go there.

Yeah if we can. I don't think up front you should say Oh no I'm never going to get bigger. No no no, were going to stay this size." I don't think you can do that. I mean if prices are so that you are operating on a margin that you make five cents a hundred or whatever for milk...I mean you gotta make more hundreds of milk in order to sell to make a living. I don't think farmers should have to...you know if we want to do this for our living...we shouldn't have to make 10 thousand dollars a year. When other people get to make 30 or 40 thousand dollars a year. I don't know.

AL: So is there anything that bothers you about it getting bigger and bigger? Are you eager to get larger or would you kind of like it to stay where it is right now?

DG: I mean it is more work I suppose. It's different challenges. I mean most people would like things to stay the way they always were. I mean that is what people like to have. You know you gotta change and you gotta be willing to face it if that's what needs to be done. That's what we'll do I guess. You just gotta always be open to the possibility of getting big. I am not saying we're going to get bigger but I think it is reality that we should consider it. We definitely don't want to close the door to that.

AL: What are some of the biggest misconceptions about farming do you think?

DG: I don't know. I don't really know for sure what people think of farming.

AL: Maybe that in itself...because they don't think of farming. I don't know. A misconceptions I've seen is I've seen quotes where...with everyone wanting to be president now...I have seen Richard Lugar say that we need to end farm programs because all farmers are getting rich. Other people say we ought to end programs because they don't help the farmer. That farmers don't make any money off of any programs. Now if the chairman of the senate-ag-committee says farmers are getting rich off it, and other people are saying farmers aren't making any money off it, and other people say wait a second farm programs are more for consumers than they are for farmers...does anyone really even know what's going on with it. Or do people just say things about farming to appeal to mass numbers of people who have know idea what's going on and just whatever sounds the best. I don't know. And in terms of what I know...I think farmers take a lot of burden and you got less than 2 percent of the food for the 100 percent of the population plus other populations of people. And seem to have almost no power. Most farmers...I think some farmers are rich of course. But other farmers struggle to get by and have always struggled and you know. I really don't know it is kind of a complicated thing and...

AL: It's kind of the same as most occupations. You have your disparity between incomes.

DG: But I don't know...I think farming is different than other occupations though. You know you check out of the factory or whatever and go home and you don't really care about what goes on the rest of the time. You mess something up or something goes wrong or whatever and you just fix it. You mess something up with livestock and you

are burying it. You know something goes wrong and you are burying it. No recovery. You can't sell it as a second or whatever. It's dead. So the margin for error in some ways is a lot different. You are completely tied to mother nature. Oh we can talk about all the rest of the stuff but if it don't rain it don't really matter. If it never stops raining it doesn't really matter.

AL: So farmers are gamblers you could say?

DG: Gamblers without a...sort of and sort of not. Because your not really...most people don't think of farming as a risk taking occupation but it kind of is I guess. It's what kind of is funny in what gets lost in farm program debates. Everyone talk about well lets put farmers on an equal playing field in the global market.

Yeah I think in the long run if we were to eliminate all government programs...I would say that farmers would probally make more money than with government programs. But only if the government stayed out completely. That doesn't mean when the price of meat in the store doubles because 90 percent of the farmers went broke raising beef...the government gets back in and says woah woah woah you know your making too much...prices are to high we've gotta stop this and then no one will make any of their money. Farmers can make money if we are willing to not have a stable food supply in America. The government takes the peaks and the valleys out of farming. It makes more stable incomes for farmers...not very high. The focus originally of farm programs was to provide...to help lower incomes and now I think it has been to insure low food prices to American consumers. I mean when you see numbers that American consumers pay...anyone in America that complains about food prices needs to go somewhere else. I mean when...something like nine percent of the disposable income in the United States is spent on food consumed at home and the next closest country is Canada and they only spend like 20 percent of there disposable income on food.

-Counter 236-

AL: So do you think the government needs to be involved?

DG: I think our country has gotten hooked on cheap food. I think that people have to be willing to accept that...it seems to me that the American food processors and the suppliers of food at the grocery store level has showed that any excuse they have to raise prices in the stores they do and they don't ever lower them. Well I don't know if there practice will change or not if the government does get out of farming. I mean will prices at the farm go up because of a short year...the prices in the store will go way up. Now the question is whether or not they will come back down. Because the prices get higher the next year everyone and their brother produces

whatever particular item got high and then the prices will hit rock bottem at the farm level because supplies will be tremendously high.

I just don't see the American consumer being able to stand prices where if they have to spend 15 percent of their disposable income on food. I don't think it will ever happen. Because then you are dealing with 98 percent of the population and politicians...I mean if you are smart you are going to appease the 98 percent. To hell with the 2 percent. 2 percent doesn't get you elected. But that's what every one wants. Judging by the latest opinion poll. Which most people don't think but politics and everything else does have an impact on farming too just like every other job. I don't know it's what I followed more closely. I don't know about historical people think of family farms whatever.

-Counter 266-

AL: Your Dad wasn't necessarily born on a farm, he worked with his grandfather...right.

DG: Yeah.

AL: And then your mom was sort of the same situation. They had kind of a small...

DG: Yeah I think she was raised in town for awhile and then they bought it for...just basically a place in the country. Really they had some animals or whatever but it wasn't a farm at all.

AL: Do you think it is difficult for somebody that hasn't been raised on a farm to get involved in farming?

DG: Not really. If it is what you want to do you can get a job for any farmer if you are willing to work.

AL: It's certainly a lot easier for someone who has been. For being self employed farmer or not so much self employed because I realize they have a lot of regulations...but owning it would be...

DG: Oh I suppose it's easier. When you are around it all the time you realize it's more than just oh yeah I want to be a farmer. I know a lot of people who want to be a farmer until they find out it takes 15, 16 hour days and then they don't want to be farmers no more. If you are willing to put in the work I think just about anyone can get into farming. It makes it a lot easier if you have a lot of money before you become a farmer.

AL: Do you see farming as a lifetime investment?

DG: I guess. Something they always say about farmers is live poor die rich.

AL: I know your Dad was saying that farming is something you get into and it's hard to get out.

DG: Oh yeah that's what I mean live poor die rich. When you die everything is sold and yeah you have a huge estate but if you try to get out one you end up selling everything all at once so it all goes to taxes. 50 percent of it whatever. And then you really have no skills for any other job. Depending on what age you are. People really don't want to hire 40, 50 year old people without any skills. That are used to being they're own boss. Hot commodity in the workplace. Yeah I think once you make the commitment you are pretty much stuck to it.

-Counter 305-

AL: What are some of the biggest advantages of working on a farm?

DG: I mean that is one way of being your own boss I guess. I mean you don't have to...unless you are borrowing money or whatever you tend not to have to worry about red tape and beaurocratic stuff. I don't know.

AL: Another thing your Dad mentioned is that a farmer has to be many people and know many things. Is that something you find too?

DG: Oh yeah. If you have any employees you have to be a people person. You still have to...I mean you have got to be a business man dealing with all the money. Then you have to be the nurturer or whatever of keeping your animals alive. An agronomist if you raise any crops. I mean you've gotta kind of...and then you've gotta work on machinery and be a mechanic whatever. We can hire some of that stuff out but there is only so much money in the pot.

AL: With 15 hours days and working 365 days a year why do you think people would want to get involved in farming these days?

DG: Because they are crazy. I don't know. It's what we have always done. I mean I have always done. It's what I always wanted to do.

A lot of people don't have that much time involved in this stuff. I mean yeah some people get by with work less days...some of them do it and then you go to their sales after a while because they are not willing to put the time and commitment in. They say well I can work 8 hours in town now I can work 8 hours out here...and I want to work 8 hours out here. If you can make a living at it that's fine. We don't think we can make a living doing that. Not without 15 hour days. We get up about 5:30 in the morning and we're done about 7:00 at night whatever. On call...if the cows get out your their to chase them. If you got a cow having a calf you got to help her. Whatever. I don't know to me I don't see it much different

than anyone else, someone wanting to be an accountant. Why would someone want to be an accountant it's not something I would want to do? There aren't many people going to farming saying oh yeah there is a lot of money in that. I mean I went to college with people who picked a major because they read the little survey that said people with this major make more money when they get out of school.

That seems to me to be a hell of a way to pick a career profession.

Who makes the most money now and five years from now if that's all your doing you are going to be changing jobs in five years. Who care's whether you like it or not...it's pretty stupid myself.

-Counter 360-

AL: So you are doing something that you enjoy?

DG: Yeah...at this point in time it is still something that I still enjoy.

AL: Well is there anything you haven't said that I haven't asked you that you have been waiting for me to ask?

DG: I don't know. I haven't really thought about it.

AL: We covered quite a bit...What do you think can be achieved with the community starting to become more aware of what's going on in agriculture and farming?

DG: My only...I don't know. I think the main things is...just to realize that it is a business to and some things have to be done on...we have to make money with what we are doing to. We're not just out here to provide a nice little scenic place for people to drive by and say well isn't that nice. I want it to stay just like that all the time. I don't own the land and I don't have nothing to do with it but I want it to stay just like that you know till the end of time." I don't know that's all I can think of. Oh the more people that understand where their food comes from the better.

And they understand what we are trying to do. I don't know.

AL: Well thank you very much for talking to me.

DG: Yeah.....

(End of Interview) -Counter 400-