

NORTHERN ILLINOIS REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER

HISTORY 497 PROJECT: FARMING AND FARM FAMILIES IN DEKALB COUNTY

Oral History Interview
with

JACK KUHN

17 November 1986

Shaefer Road
Clare, Illinois

By Kelly L. Keister

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER

FARMING AND FARM FAMILIES IN DEKALB COUNTY

General topic of interview: Growing up on a farm near Warrenville in the fifties and sixties; Move with father and brother to farm in DeKalb County.

NARRATOR: Jack Kuhn
DATE: 17 November 1986

INTERVIEWER: Kelly L. Keister
PLACE: Shaefer Road, Clare, Illinois

PERSONAL DATA

Jack Kuhn was born in 1946 to a farm couple who lived outside Aurora, Illinois, near the small town of Warrenville. With his father and brothers, he helped to maintain the family's dairy farm. During his high school years the dairy operation was sold. On his father's advice, Jack sought a trade (plumbing) to augment his income from farming, and worked as a plumber in the Aurora area for ten years. During the Viet Nam Conflict he served as a pipe-fitter aboard a small destroyer. He met his wife, Beverly, in her native Australia while on R and R there, and they were married after he completed his term of service. Around 1971 the Warrenville farm was sold to developers and Jack, his father, his brother and their families moved to Clare, Illinois and settled on their present farm. Jack and Bev have three sons; the eldest may be a farmer, and all three are good workers on the farm. Jack loves his life in the country and the variety of his jobs as a farmer, plumber, and carpenter.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

Mr. Kuhn had hurt his back unloading a truck earlier in the day and was in some discomfort during the interview.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: FARMING AND FARM FAMILIES IN DEKALB COUNTY

NARRATOR: Jack Kuhn
DATE: 17 November 1986
LENGTH OF TAPE: 1 hour

INTERVIEWER: Kelly L. Keister
PLACE: Shaefer Road, Clare, Illinois

TAPE COUNTER NUMBER

Side A

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004

021

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047

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064

084

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214

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SUBJECTS COVERED

Introduction

Background information: born into a farm family in 1946 in Aurora, Illinois

Criticism of city life

Home life on the dairy farm; chores, animals raised, crops

Schools (Catholic)

Friendships with town boys; spending time with them on the farm

High school activities: dances, movies.

Church attendance; church social activities

Neighbors: trading labor with a nearby uncle and cousins

Hired help: father hired a man to help with cows

Other high school activities: basketball games

Parents' expectations. Own desire to be a farmer and to be his own boss. Father's advice to get a trade. Participation in plumber's union in Aurora.

Experiences as a plumber's apprentice.

Work as pipefitter in the Navy.

No regrets about not going to college.

Graduates from high school in 1964.

Family's first television and favorite shows.

Vacation to Australia to visit wife's sister

Bad experience learning to read in school.

Hunting on Sundays

Typical weekday.

Typical Sunday.

Emphasizes independence of farm life.

Marriage to Bev, a native of Australia.

Courtship.

Experience in Viet Nam. Effect of his and brother's absence on the farm in Warrenville.

Mother's work.

Acquisition by father of farm in DeKalb, c.1971.

Father, self, and brother work there.

Land prices then and now.

Crops on DeKalb farm.

380	DeKalb farm has not changed in size and probably never will.
385	Decision not to raise livestock.
405	Marketing crops. Government influence on the market.
442	More on government embargoes and effects.
475	Use of fertilizers and pesticides.
490	Use of DDT by father.
500	Use of hybrid seeds.
517	Machinery.
551	Off-farm work: nine years as a plumber. Honesty of customers.
580	Dislike of practice of trading labor.
601	Wife's work off the farm.
624	Effects of off-farm work on lifestyle.
646	How government policy affects his and his brother's decisions about farm.
663	Participation in Farm Bureau.
Side B	
010	Plans for expansion. Land prices.
016	Foreclosures in the area.
032	Plans of and for children (three, all boys).
037	Work of his children on the farm.
044	Wants to see Americans own their own land.
065	Disturbed by foreign purchase.
084	Land development in Warrentonville area.
092	Love of farming. Variety in his trades as plumber and carpenter.
098	Wife's feelings about farming. Her work.
	Emphasizes need for American ownership.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORIES OF FARM WOMEN: DEKALB COUNTY

NARRATOR: JACK KUHN

INTERVIEWER: KELLY KEISTER

DATE: NOVEMBER 17, 1986

PLACE: CLARE, ILLINOIS

LENGTH OF TAPE: 60 MINUTES

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

KEISTER: Hello. It is November 17th, 1986. I'm here in Clare, Illinois interviewing Jack Kuhn. My name is Kelly Keister. Mr. Kuhn our first question is do I have your permission to record this on tape?

KUHN: Yes.

KEISTER: OK, and then we get another simple one. Where were you born?

KUHN: Aurora.

KEISTER: OK, were you born on a farm?

KUHN: My parents lived on a farm, yes. Yeah, when I was born they lived on the farm.

KEISTER: So was your dad a farmer all his life?

KUHN: Yes he was.

KEISTER: And your mother?

KUHN: Yeah, housewife, farmer, yeah.

KEISTER: OK, OK. Were there any other members of your family?

KUHN: I have three brother and two sisters.

KEISTER: OK. Did your father do any work off the farm?

KUHN: I think once he got into farming he was into farming. He was pretty handy. He was a carpenter too but he pretty much made a living off the farm once he got started.

KEISTER: OK. Was he drafted during the war?

KUHN: No. He had a... I don't know he had a medical problem and he got out of it.

KEISTER: How about your mother, did she mostly work on the farm too?

KUHN: She didn't have a job outside of it, no. If that's what you mean.

KEISTER: Yeah, that's what I meant. Did she sell things that she raised in the town?

KUHN: No.

KEISTER: No.

KUHN: No.

KEISTER: Did she have a garden or anything like that?

KUHN: Every farm has a garden. [laughter]

KEISTER: We've just checked that tape to see if it's working and it is. Do you have any special memories of living on the farm, growing up on the farm?

KUHN: It was just a good life. I don't think too much of city life. I would never want to live in a big city.

KEISTER: How often did you go to town?

KUHN: Whenever we needed anything.

KEISTER: What kinds of things did you do in town or what kinds of things did you buy?

KUHN: Whatever, you know, just whatever anybody needs but we went to school in town but, you know, we didn't, we didn't hang around there too much like the kids on the street corners do now or did then too. We just got what we needed and went home, that was about it.

KEISTER: Maybe this would be a good time to ask what sort of a house you lived in on the farm. Was it one of those old white ones with a picket fence type?

KUHN: Yup, that was it. Two story white house with a picket fence. Yeah.

KEISTER: OK and did you take your meals together as a family?

KUHN: As a family? Yeah, always.

KEISTER: Your mom cooked?

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: Any male help there?

KUHN: Not if we could help it. [laughter]

KEISTER: What kinds of things did you do? Were you expected to...

KUHN: It was a dairy farm that I was born on and he had... my dad had cows until I was, I think I was about a sophomore in high school when he sold the dairy herd.

KEISTER: So did you have a lot to do with helping with the cows then?

KUHN: Every other morning.

KEISTER: milking?

KUHN: and every night, yeah.

KEISTER: Did you help in the fields at all?

KUHN: Yeah, whenever there was something to do in the field.

KEISTER: What kind of crops did you grow or did he grow?

KUHN: He grew, dairy farmers have to raise hay and oats to feed their cattle and he also grew corn and soybeans.

KEISTER: You mentioned your school. Tell me about that. Where was it?

KUHN: Went to a catholic grade school, Saint Irene's, that was in Warrenville, Illinois and I went to Saint Frances High School in Wheaton. Graduated from high school and that was about the end of it.

KEISTER: And how did you get to school?

KUHN: Bus. We used to ride... well there was a car pool for a while but most of the time it was school bus, both ways.

KEISTER: Did you have any friends from school or in the area?

KUHN: No, didn't have any friends. I was very unpopular. [laughter]

KEISTER: You must have some or did you concentrate on your family?

KUHN: No, we had friends. Yeah, they used to come out and hang around on the farm but... yeah, we had friends, sure.

KEISTER: Well, I'm just interested to know what you did with them and how you got together.

KUHN: They'd always come out to the farm. Once in a while we'd go to their house and goof around but most of the time they'd come out to the farm.

KEISTER: Were they from the city then?

KUHN: Yeah, they were town kids. Warrenville's not a very big, very big town or sure, it wasn't then it's bigger now.

KEISTER: It's gotten much bigger.

KUHN: Yeah, there's people living in it now but at that time there was, you know, maybe a thousand was about it.

KEISTER: What kind of things did you do then when they were out there?

KUHN: On the farm?

KEISTER: Yeah.

KUHN: We used to do chores when they would get there.

KEISTER: You put them to work.

KUHN: You dare right. I had to do the work too, you know, and we had to do the work before we could goof around and when we got done with the work we could go in the hay mow and play around or whatever.

KEISTER: Did they enjoy coming out then?

KUHN: Hunting and that kind of stuff. Yeah, they wouldn't come back if they didn't. Yeah, they enjoyed it. I'm sure they did.

KEISTER: Did you go to dances or anything at school?

KUHN: In high school, yeah.

KEISTER: And tell me about those.

KUHN: I didn't know how to dance. I still don't. [laughter] But we used to have fun anyway. Just kids, you know.

KEISTER: Did you go to movies?

KUHN: Oh I suppose after I got a little older.

KEISTER: Tell me about church. You said that you went to a catholic school.

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: Your catholic?

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: OK, did your family go to church regularly?

KUHN: Yes, once every week, Sundays.

KEISTER: And was there any other kind of social activities connected with the church?

KUHN: Not an awful lot. They used to try to promote things but it's up to the kids too to help promote things and nobody cooperated very well. [laughter] Just about like it is today.

KEISTER: Is there anything you liked about the church?

KUHN: Not an awful lot. It was... I still go to church because I think I should but I didn't like anything about that church especially. I think that they've improved a lot in the last few years because the priests are more with the program, they're more earthly. That's about all.

KEISTER: So you maybe feel a little more comfortable going now then...

KUHN: Yeah, but maybe that's because I'm older now. Maybe when I was a kid the priests were old farts, you know, and now that I'm more their age I can maybe I relate to them as much as they relate to me. But I think they're more down to earth now and they understand a little bit more about common sense, life, and things in general.

KEISTER: Did it appeal to you as, you know, coming from a farm going to the catholic church? Just my own kind of... ?

KUHN: I don't... did it appeal to me...

KEISTER: I guess that was it. What was the appeal?

KUHN: My parents went there. That's why I went there.

KEISTER: OK. Tell me about your neighbors. Any near by?

KUHN: Then?

KEISTER: Uh-huh.

KUHN: Well we had... we didn't have much to do with any of the neighbors, farmer neighbors. My uncle lived a few miles away and we used to trade labor back and forth with him and my cousins a lot.

KEISTER: What's a labor?

KUHN: Farm labor. Whatever had to be done we did it and the kids always helped. I used to think we were great workers. I don't know if we were or not I suppose my dad would have another opinion.

KEISTER: Did you or did your father have to hire outside help then or...

KUHN: He did when we were small. He had a hired man because he was dairy which is a 7 day a week job, twice a day. And I think that'd get to be a little tedious and pretty involved too. But after we got older then he didn't need the hire man any more he kind of depended on us more.

KEISTER: So what happened with the hired man?

KUHN: He died. [laughter]

KEISTER: And did he live there with you?

KUHN: No, no, it was just... he would come to work in the morning and go home in the after... go home at night.

KEISTER: Was that his only job?

KUHN: It's a pretty long day. Yeah, yes, it was his only job. He was a younger guy. Actually he didn't die. I lied about that. [laughter] He was a younger guy and just kind of getting started. He probably wanted to have a farm of his own someday. Whether he ever got it or not I don't know.

KEISTER: Just lost touch with him?

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: OK, you said your uncle lived close and he had children?

KUHN: Yeah, he had... he had four kids. Two older than me and two younger. But we used to hang around a lot together, worked together. When the work got done we used to goof around together.

KEISTER: I guess we've covered almost everything. Ah-hah. Were you in Future Farmers of America?

KUHN: No. I went to St. Frances High School. I told you that that was a college prep school and I went to college for two nights and decided I didn't need any more of that. I wanted to take a drafting course, this was the College of DuPage, and when I got there they... that class was filled up and I had to take some prep classes for it and I decided that was a bunch of bologna. I quit. What was your question?

KEISTER: Whether you were in Future Farmers of America?

KUHN: No I don't think that... I know that St. Frances High School was not a ag oriented school. And whether or not they had Future Farmers then or not I don't know. I know that I'd be willing to bet that St. Frances' still is not ag oriented and they don't know what a future farmer is. It was city kids. They all came from Lombard, and Glen Ellyn, and in towards Chicago. They use to commute, they use to drive a long ways to get to that school. I don't know why but they did. I guess it was the only catholic high school around the area. But I was not in Future Farmers, no. There you go.

KEISTER: OK. Any other high school activities you were in?

KUHN: I tried to play basketball but that didn't work. No I didn't really have any activities. We use to go to basketball games on the weekends and stuff like that but I did not participate in any sports in high school at all to speak of. You have to be sports, you have to be athletic to be in sports and I'm not.

KEISTER: You found out when you were playing basketball? [laughter]

KUHN: It didn't take long either.

KEISTER: My father was the same way. He found out when he got out on the court the first day and they said OK, you're going to be manager. [laughter] Stay off. So he got a nifty jacket.

KUHN: Glad he got the jacket anyway I didn't even get that.

KEISTER: Did you parents expect you to be a farmer or did you talk at all with them about the future?

KUHN: We always wanted to be farmers, all the kids, because we liked it on the farm. It was good living and it was a... well you're your own

boss. I don't think anybody wants to... I don't think any kid wants to spend the rest of his life working for some other person who is in authority over them and if you're a farm you can kind of do what you want to when you want to. Well if you don't do it you go broke but if you can put it off for a while anyway. You know you don't have to do it right now. If somebody else... if you're working for somebody and he says go do this you go do it whether you want to or not. I, yeah, I always wanted to be in farming and my father told us to go out and get a trade first if you want to go be a farmer that's fine but have something else you can fall back on because to raise cattle or hogs is subject to the market, you might money and you might not. It cost a fortune to get into it. So I did. I went out and got a plumbing trade and I was in the union in Aurora for about 10 years before I started farming. And my brother that I farm with now, he's my partner, was a carpenter and I don't know how long he worked at that. Now we work at out trades part of the year and we farm when we have to. We are our own contractors. We work for ourselves. If it's time to farm it's time to farm. Then anybody, then people wait for us. They don't... they understand that farming comes first. Maybe we don't charge enough per hour. Maybe that's why they wait for us. We should raise our rates.

KEISTER: Now what about your other brother? What's he doing?

KUHN: My other brother is a plumbing contractor in Oswego. He's the one that got me into the plumbing trade. And I have a... my last brother works well he's kind of self-employed. He used to work at Caterpillar but things got pretty slow there and they laid him off and him and about 5,000 other people, and he does gardening work now and house cleaning or carpet shampooing that kind of stuff. He just does odd jobs whatever he can make money at.

KEISTER: Not bad.

KUHN: It pays I guess. It pays the bills.

KEISTER: So tell me how did you learn the plumbing trade then? You said from your brother?

KUHN: I served an apprenticeship in Aurora for... well actually I was a plumber for about two and one half years and then I enlisted in the Navy for two years. And they counted part of my time in the Navy. I was a pipe fitter on board ship and they counted part of my time in the Navy so I came back and finished a little bit of an apprenticeship and got my card and that was about it. Took a test and got my card.

KEISTER: Do you have any regrets about not going to college?

KUHN: No. No, I don't mind working with my hands. I think if I went to college I could sit at a desk and tell somebody else what to do but I don't want to sit at a desk. I want to work with my hands. I'm happy when I can build something or do something even if it's in your house or somebody else's house. If it looks good when I leave I'm happy with it. I would not... I'd go nuts sitting at a desk. I could not handle that. No, I have no regrets about not going to college. If my kids

want to go that's fine. I'll support them all the way but I'm not sorry I didn't.

KEISTER: How old are your children? I guess I should ask that now.

KUHN: 16, 13, and 12.

KEISTER: Back on your family here, I am getting the idea you grew up during the 50's?

KUHN: I was born in '46.

KEISTER: 46.

KUHN: So I grew up during the 50's, yeah.

KEISTER: Right, OK. We have some questions...

KUHN: I graduated from high school in 1964.

KEISTER: '64. My dad did in '60 I think so he's an old foggy compared to you. [laughter] When did you get your first TV?

KUHN: Oh, geez, I don't know. I was a little kid. There weren't too many of them around when we got our first TV so maybe that makes us rich, I don't know. I remembered it was a black and white Emerson, ugly looking thing but it worked.

KEISTER: And what did you watch?

KUHN: Uncle Johnny Kuhns used to be on at noon and don't really know what else we watched. There wasn't... my wife's from Australia and we over there about 2-3 years ago, near the Barrier Reef. One of her sister's lives and they have one station that's on part of the day and I suppose that's what our TV was like in the beginning. We didn't have something on all the time like they do now. My god they've got... that's why you've got to have a VCR now to record half of what you can't see.

KEISTER: Did you go to a library regularly or...

KUHN: Not if I didn't have to. My mother used to... when I was in grade school they... when I was in first grade, I guess that's when you learn how to read, they taught us sight reading. We were not taught to actually I guess went to St. Mary's in West Chicago the first year cause Saint Irene's didn't exist. In second grade I switched to Saint Irene's but Saint Mary's in West Chicago taught us to sight read. We didn't look at a word we didn't sounded it out and I can read but I don't, I don't really enjoy it. I don't like reading the newspaper and magazines. To read a good book is OK but I'm not hung up on the newspaper. I think that's the schools fault. They screwed my whole life up. I could read better if they would have... they were experimenting. They did that for about two years and I slid by and they didn't catch me or what I don't know.

KEISTER: Some kind of a new program?

KUHN: Yeah.

KEISTER: And you were the guinea pig?

KUHN: Yeah, failure. Yeah I was the guinea pig. We were the guinea pig, our class.

KEISTER: Kind of like new math. Did they try that on you?

KUHN: No, no, no. I think that's a new thing isn't it, you know about 8 years old, maybe? They still have new math?

KEISTER: I don't know. That's why I'm asking.

KUHN: Who the hell knows what old math is. [laughter]

KEISTER: Right. Any other hobbies that you had when you were a younger?

KUHN: No. We used to go hunting. There was a creek that ran through our farm and a small woods out in back and we used to go out there and goof around and spend a lot of time some days when there wasn't much going on. Farming is kind of a seasonal thing. Dairy farming is everyday but it's not all day every day so we used to have a lot of free time because we stayed home.

KEISTER: Can you tell me about a typical day maybe a typical weekday when you're planting?

KUHN: On the farm then or now?

KEISTER: Then.

KUHN: Well we used to get up at 5:30 in the morning. I used to get every other day and my brother would get up on the other day. The two of us alternated back and forth and my dad got up everyday. And we'd take an hour, hour and a half to milk probably two hours to milk and do chores. Then you could come in eat breakfast cause you did something and you were hungry and then you'd... well we'd go to school but if like on a weekend we would... you could be out in the field by 8 or 9 o'clock easy, working, spend all day out there. Used to always be the first kid to have a decent sunburn. [laughter]

KEISTER: And you did that even when you went to school? Got up at 5:30 and did the whole routine?

KUHN: Oh yeah, every other day. Seems like I used to get up more often than my brother. [laughter]

KEISTER: Have you been able to get back at him for that?

KUHN: Oh I will. In time I will.

KEISTER: What about a typical Saturday or Sunday?

KUHN: Sunday we used to get up and do chores, milk the cows, feed them, and clean the barn out, go to church, come home and go hunting. We used to spend a lot of time back in the woods. It was a good life. I would of... I am very happy. That's the best part about farming maybe is the... uh... living in the country and my kids don't live in the city... in town. They might not amount to anything more or as much as some city kids but well I've given them all I can anyway. It's up to them the rest of it.

KEISTER: Your getting into the position with them that you'll have to make some decisions about college soon.

KUHN: They'll have to make some decisions about college. I'm not going push them. Yeah, it's getting close. One of them's a junior this year.

KEISTER: When did you get married?

KUHN: I was 20... I don't know I was probably 25... 24, 25.

KEISTER: You said you're wife's from Australia.

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: How did you meet her?

KUHN: In the war... Vietnam. We were pulled in Brisbon, Australia on 3 days R & R. Australian people are really friendly and there were a lot of them down on the peer and I happen to meet her. We went out the first night and the third night. And then she was coming to Canada anyway up to Banff and we wrote back and forth. And then she came to Warrenville where I was living with my parents yet at the time and after I got out of the service. And we dated for about 8 months or something like that and then got married. I have no regrets about that at all.

KEISTER: Getting married?

KUHN: Yeah, I think its... I think everybody needs somebody.

KEISTER: Now you served in Vietnam. Would you like to talk about that?

KUHN: There isn't much to talk about. I was on board ship. It was a small destroyer, old ship. It didn't have much on it for fire power so we went around the back side of the island or of the country. We didn't go where there was much action. There was about 160 guys I believe on board my ship. They were all nice guys. You could learn something from all... any of them no matter how smart they were or dumb they were. You could, I don't know, they were, we were a very close bunch of guys because you depended on one another. Few times we got shelled and you, uh, you know everybody has to work together and they did too. It was really a great feeling to know you could count on somebody. You didn't have to worry about anything, anybody stealing from you because they were all friends. You could leave you money laying on your rack and they would, uh, it would be there. Nobody'd steal it.

KEISTER: And were your brothers away in the war too?

KUHN: No, yeah, the one that works at... worked at Caterpillar. He's a year younger than me. He was on, I think, it was the Enterprise, an aircraft carrier. There's 5,000 people on that ship. He didn't like it. He fought it. He hated it. But there's too many guys in there. You couldn't get very close to anybody like we were. I don't think I'd like to on a big ship like that either. Hell that'd be like living in a city. There you go! Little ships the country, big ships the city and you can have the big ones.

KEISTER: Well how did having your brothers and you gone effect your father's work on the farm? Did he have to go off and find someone else to work for him or...

KUHN: No, because it was a... I was gone for a year or better, I was gone for probably a year before my brother left. And my youngest brother then was around to kind of to fill the gap. It didn't take all of us and my father to run the farm it just took two or three. You know the more you had the less work there was to do but two or three could run it. So there was always somebody there.

KEISTER: Would you say the men then basically took care of the outside work?

KUHN: Yes. My mom worked in the house. Maybe when I was littler she might have worked out some, I don't know, but after we got older she almost didn't do anything outside. She'd take care of the yard, garden and stuff like that but she didn't run any machinery. We did that.

KEISTER: Now this farm that you are on now, was this your father's or now he's closer to Aurora, right?

KUHN: He lives in Warrenville, yeah. That's where that farm was and he traded that farm for this. He had 120 acres there and he traded that to a residential developer. It's apartments and houses now. He traded that for this land here. 120 there for 560 acres here.

KEISTER: And when was that?

KUHN: 11 years, no probably 15 years ago. We've been living out here... I think we've living here about 11 years, 11 or 12.

KEISTER: He lives across the street, right. I accidentally found your mother tonight.

KUHN: Yeah, down the road here about a half mile. They live down the road a half mile and my brother lives a half mile on the other side.

KEISTER: Which is the original farm house then?

KUHN: Now this is... I don't know if we are going too fast here.

KEISTER: Tell me a little bit, back up.

KUHN: We moved out of Warrenville and my mom and dad moved into a new

ranch house on the corner of the farm that was there, had been there for about ten years. My back hurts. It had been... they moved into this new ranch house they bought that in part of the deal. And they bought three sets of buildings on the total acreage that they bought. My brother lives in one set of buildings, in the house and that set of buildings and I live in another one and the third one we more or less demolished. It wasn't much. There was no, you know, all three of these, where my brother and I and my parents live, we all kind of moved in at the same time, in this area.

KEISTER: How did you happen to chose this area?

KUHN: It's good land, prices, probably the price wasn't right but judging from the prices now the price was great. My father said that he should have bought everything he looked at cause they were talking 8 or 900 dollars an acre for land here at the time. The land in there well went for, well now land out here got as high as 4200 dollars an acre. It's not that with depressed grain prices it's not that good now.

KEISTER: When did it get up that high?

KUHN: About three maybe four years ago. That's the highest priced farm around here that I know. That wasn't actually, that was another trade deal. Some guy owned a bunch of land in DeKalb that was sold to a developer and he had money that he had to reinvest for tax purposes within a year's time and that's what he paid for his land. It didn't, there's a other people that have paid a lot less for land then that that are losing it because of the prices now. Bank wants their money back.

KEISTER: What's it going for now?

KUHN: I think you can buy good farm land now for 17, 1800 dollars an acre. I'm sure you can probably less then that.

KEISTER: And how many acres do you work here?

KUHN: 560.

KEISTER: And what do you do with that? What's on the land?

KUHN: Corn and soybeans. The first few years we came out we raised some wheat also but well with our trades, plumbing and carpenter work, if you raise wheat, in the middle of the summer when your working on other jobs then you'd have to stop that and come home and harvest so it slowed us down on that end. It just seems, well one year we also got froze out on wheat. We had winter kill so we had to plow the crop under and plant corn to it. That was the last of it. We never planted wheat again.

KEISTER: Are you uncomfortable?

KUHN: Somewhat. My back hurts a lot.

KEISTER: Would you rather we continue this some other time or...

KUHN: No, no that's OK.

KEISTER: Keep going?

KUHN: No, that's fine, it's OK.

KEISTER: OK.

KUHN: It's gonna hurt for a long time.

KEISTER: How did you do it?

KUHN: I was loading something on my truck today and must have turned the wrong way, felt something pop in there. Are you a chiropractor?

KEISTER: No. [laughter] Has this farm gotten any bigger or smaller then since you moved here?

KUHN: No it has not changed at all. It... no it probably will not change. It can not, uh, it cost about 180 dollars an acre to rent land. They always did it at the peak now it's down to about 110 but also at the peak you could get about \$3.80 a bushel for corn now it's, now if they get \$1.50 they're doing real well.

KEISTER: And have you been tempted to raise pigs or cows or anything here?

KUHN: My son raised... this farm here was set up for cattle. They had a fire here probably 20 years ago and burned down most of the original buildings and then they rebuilt and set up a pretty nice set up for cattle. To the best of my knowledge it never had any cattle put on it. The guy that owned it then was kind of an idiot. The guy that bought it from him was worse yet. With our trades we don't have too. You ever played with water in the winter time outside or fought the elements?

KEISTER: No.

KUHN: I don't. Raising cattle in the summertime is one thing but out there in the wintertime is three things. I don't think we have to do that. My son had hogs this summer. He bought them right and sold them even better. He made out real well on it and he'll probably have them again next summer, a few. But not... we are not a livestock farm. Least I'm not.

KEISTER: Does he sell them or do you keep them for use in the family?

KUHN: No, he marketed them. He marketed them all.

KEISTER: And how do you market your crops?

KUHN: This year?

KEISTER: That's something I don't know anything about.

KUHN: This year we gave it to the government. We sell it to grain elevators

who sell it on to bigger grain elevators down on the river who sell it to who ever wants to use it. But right now there is such a surplus of grain that there's no demand for it at all. Most of our grain goes to the river, loaded on a barge, and floated down river to wherever it, whatever it's destination is. Some of it goes to Chicago Corn Products. They specialize in, well, whiskey and whatever, you know, whatever uses a lot of corn. But anyway most of our grain goes to the river and down river, ends up down on the Mississippi some where. But right now all the barges that we would normally ship grain on this winter are sitting full of grain in the river probably rotting. Then we'll ship it over seas and the foreigners will be mad at us because our quality of grain is not where it is. So we won't sell anymore grain. We're kind of cutting our own throats.

KEISTER: You are or the government is?

KUHN: No, not me and not the farmers. The farmer, I don't, there are farmers, there are bad apples in every bunch. There are farmers that sell poor quality grain. We have never been docked for any grain that we have sold. They take a sample out of every truck load that you take in and if it's got too much fines in it or too much weed seed in it, or too much cracked grain or too much moisture to it they dock. And we have never been, well that's probably a lie. We've never been docked very much for anything at all. Then the grain elevators, somewhere along the line our quality goes down hill and by the time it gets over seas I don't think it's very good grain anymore. Therefore our exports are way off. Plus we keep embargoing Russia and who else have we embargoed?

KEISTER: South Africa.

KUHN: South Africa. And who did Jimmy Carter embargo?

KEISTER: I thought that was the Soviet Union too.

KUHN: It might been them. Yeah, it might have been the Soviet Union. Well once you slap somebody in the face he's not going to come back and be your friend for a long time. You got to, I don't know, give and take. We just think we're too good and we don't have to do any giving we just take it all and that doesn't work.

KEISTER: So how big of a hand does the government have in your business here?

KUHN: Now?

KEISTER: Yeah.

KUHN: Way too big. It was much better when we were independent and could support ourselves but the price of grain now you need to be subsidized by the government.

KEISTER: Well has that always been so I mean since you've been out here on this farm?

KUHN: No, this is just the last two years.

KEISTER: So when you're talking about independence are you talking about back when you were a kid and your father was farming or...

KUHN: Well, no, he's had his bad times too. The government got their fingers in it I'm sure back then too. But the last couple years it was, we're getting more and more and more grain and we keep improving our years, farming more acres. If they can't farm it they'll irrigate it and they'll farm anyway and they'll get a crop off of it. And ruining our exports.

KEISTER: Major complaints there. I want to ask you a little about just what you were talking about, your yields and what sort of things do you do? I'm not familiar with fertilizers or pesticides or anything like that but can you talk to me a little bit about that?

KUHN: We have an agronomy advisor who goes out and runs soil samples on our farm and tells us how much fertilizers to use for the given crop that's going to be used there next year. He asks us what we want for a yield and we fertilize according to what he says. We have to spray for weeds, weed control. No sense in letting a stupid weed eat up the fertilizer that you paid money to put out there. And we have to spray or treat the ground for insects. It doesn't do any good to plant the corn out there and have a bug eat all the roots off the corn crop, you know, that's not the name of the game but they think it is.

KEISTER: Right. Did you use DDT?

KUHN: DDT, my dad used to use, yeah. No. DDT is a... that's a bug spray. Yeah, I guess my dad used to use that. I don't, no, we never used DDT. That's more for mosquitos which is against the law. They don't have it anymore. DDT is gone.

KEISTER: What about hybrid seeds, did your father use those?

KUHN: Yeah, I knew a guy one time that pulled ears of corn out of his crib and thought he was saving all that money on seed and the idiot planted it and it looked like he planted when he got done too. He didn't get anything. Yes, he used hybrid seeds. They keep improving hybrid seeds. I remember my father would have been happy with 100 bushel an acre and he fertilized just like we do. I suppose we fertilize a little heavier. I'm sure we do. But he would have been happy with 100 bushel an acre and we're happier with 200. Therefore we need to export more. We're going back to the same thing again.

KEISTER: Export to who?

KUHN: Uh-huh, to who.

KEISTER: Do you have any suggestions?

KUHN: No, I don't, I don't. No, I don't. I don't read the paper remember?

KEISTER: Right. OK. What kinds of machinery do you own?

KUHN: We own White tractors and Massey-Ferguson combine. And side lines... our small equipment is different side lines companies, Brillion and Glencoe and Kewanee. We even have a little John Deere. But I don't think anybody should have to pay that kind money for equipment so we don't have very much John Deere.

KEISTER: Do you buy it new or used?

KUHN: Yes.

KEISTER: New and use. [laughter]

KUHN: Whatever happens. Most of it's... well when we first started out farming we were happy to get anything that would worked. We didn't have any money at all when we moved out here 11 years ago. Now a lot of our equipment is bought new. We used to buy something because it was cheaper but we figured out that cheaper usually isn't better so we buy better. But we don't buy John Deere.

KEISTER: Because of the price?

KUHN: Yeah.

KEISTER: And that's the only reason?

KUHN: Mostly, yeah. We can buy a White tractor for about 75% of what a John Deere tractor would cost and the White tractor will have more horse power and they all break down. We've got a very good dealer around so who services us and has parts for us that we need so we don't need, you know, we don't need the best equipment. Which I think John Deere is probably a little better but it ain't that much better.

KEISTER: Do you service your own equipment when it breaks down?

KUHN: Most of the time unless it's something major. We're not engine mechanics but anything else we take care of ourselves.

KEISTER: Tell me a little bit about your outside work as a plumber. Do you mostly... you said that you were going to West Chicago. Do you take a lot of jobs out of town?

KUHN: Not if I can help it. I hate driving. [laughter] I... most of it's local work. West Chicago happens to be my uncle. But most of our business is just local people. We go into DeKalb and Sycamore but not an awful lot. Most of our work just comes from country area. Malta is a small town near here, about 4 miles away and some of our work comes out of Malta. Clare's only got about 12 houses in it, if that, so we don't get a lot of work out of there. But most of it's I suppose country work. I've been in business for 9 years, plumbing business, and I have yet to have a customer that didn't pay me. I defy anybody in the city to tell me that they've got that kind of a record.

KEISTER: Do they pay in cash?

KUHN: Country people are honest. Do they pay in cash? What does cash mean?

KEISTER: Oh, I guess what I'm leading up to, it's a leading question. Whether people still will trade services or if they pay in cash?

KUHN: No, they pay in cash. I had a neighbor a few years ago that wanted us to come over and help him put a roof on and once we got up working on his roof, I hate roofing, once we got up working on his roof he decided that what we ought to do is just trade labor here and if you ever need a hand I'll come back and help you. Well it sounds good but when we needed help then he wouldn't be around so when we do something... we trade labor... we have a couple guys that we trade labor with farming. And we pay them and they pay us. And with the trades, with the plumbing trade and the carpenter trade, if I work for somebody I charge them and when they come and help me do something then they charge me. It's the fairest way. That way nobody has any hurt feelings and if they do they don't have to hire me back. I don't care.

KEISTER: Does your wife work off the farm too?

KUHN: She works for Clausen in DeKalb, he's a CPA, during tax season. Other than that she doesn't work off the farm. She help us in the fall with the harvest. She'll help us do anything. Anything I can do she can do and she'll do it too. She's a good worker. But she doesn't work... other then that tax season there's nothing going on in the winter time anyway so it gives her a chance to get away and do something different, make a little money for herself.

KEISTER: For herself... so that money doesn't go back into the farm?

KUHN: Well maybe she wants to buy groceries on the way home on pay day I don't know. That's hers but she, some of it comes back. It doesn't go into the farm it goes either for our family or for herself.

KEISTER: Would you say that if you were just working on the farm, both of you, you could support yourselves?

KUHN: Now your talking 560 acres for... to support my brother and his wife and me and my wife and our three children. I would say we wouldn't starved to death but we wouldn't have most of the... I wouldn't have a new truck. I don't have a new car but I will a few years from now. You know we wouldn't have everything but we'd do well. I'd suppose you'd stay alive but it wouldn't be near as nice as it is now. Plus I like to stay active. I get tired of sitting around bored.

KEISTER: Would you say that government policy effects the decisions you make about the future of this farm? Do you try to keep an eye on that sort of thing or just deal with it as it comes along?

KUHN: Deal with it as it comes because they don't know what they're talking about until it's all said and done anyway. They have a government program out... last year we were well into planting... we were planted before the government knew what they were going to do. They said

they thought they knew what was going on so we went along with that and that's what they did. But this year they have a new program and they, that will change a hundred times over before planting season so why try to keep up with it. Wait till it happens. Go to the meeting the last day and find out what really happened.

KEISTER: The meeting. Farm Bureau?

KUHN: The Farm Bureau meeting, yeah.

KEISTER: You're a member then?

KUHN: Yes.

KEISTER: Could you tell a bit about that?

KUHN: There isn't much to tell about that. I don't... I'm not an active member. I just get what I need out of it and that's it.

KEISTER: And what is it that you get? What sort of dealings to you have with them?

KUHN: Mostly for... oh we have... we get pesticide licenses through the farm bureau every few years and we go to these meetings and they tell us about the government programs. They have meetings in there probably every night of the week but I like to stay at home.

KEISTER: OK. I'm going to turn this over. [END SIDE ONE]

[BEGIN SIDE TWO]

KEISTER: Do you see yourself expanding this farm any time in the future?

KUHN: I would like to but I'm not going to put my life on the limb to buy land that I can't afford for the prices. Now would be a good time to buy land because prices are depressed and land is reasonable but and when prices go up again land will go up. Land was at 4200 dollars a few years ago. Corn was at \$3.83. Now lands at 1400 and corns at \$1.00, \$1.50. But who can afford to do that. Who can, you know, you can't afford to stick your neck out to far either.

KEISTER: Didn't a lot of people do that?

KUHN: I'm a coward.

KEISTER: About ten year ago?

KUHN: No, a lot of people did that about three or four year ago and now the banks saying let's have some money. So there are a lot of foreclosures. Lot of very nice people are going under.

KEISTER: Around here?

KUHN: Because they made poor judgements a few years ago. Yeah, around here.

KEISTER: Is that what keeps you from buying more than?

KUHN: Probably so. I've never borrowed any money in my life from the bank. If I bought a farm I'd have to. I hate making payments but if, you know, I bought a farm I'd have to borrow money but I don't know if that will even happen or not. It would be nice to have some more land for the kids if they wanted to farm someday but I don't think I can afford to buy enough land to keep them in a decent income. I think they should go out and find a trade.

KEISTER: Same advice your father gave you.

KUHN: Yup. I think he did a fine job by giving me that advice.

KEISTER: Do you have boys or girls?

KUHN: Boys.

KEISTER: All three.

KUHN: All three boys, yeah.

KEISTER: These questions are coming up. [laughter]

KUHN: We didn't plan it that way but that's the way it came out.

KEISTER: Do they show any inclination towards farming?

KUHN: Oh yeah. I think they like the farm too but I don't know what will

happen for sure. The oldest one wants to go to Kishwaukee College. That's what he's talking about now but that's still a year and a half away, two years away. Which is, that's an ag school. If you're in an ag area you have to go to an ag school or else move into a different area. He's talking about Kish so he'd probably like to stay in farming too.

KEISTER: Do you put the kids to work then?

KUHN: Do we? Oh yeah. They do a lot, they do a lot. We set them up and they are satisfied to spend all day working. They don't seem to mind too much. As long as you can keep them interested. I don't suppose they like shoveling any more than I do or, you know, digging or any thing like that but it's interesting. They'll work as long as we will. As long as you can keep them interested they're good workers.

KEISTER: And what would you like to see happen with this land say in a hundred year?

KUHN: This land?

KEISTER: Uh-huh.

KUHN: I don't know.

KEISTER: 50 years?

KUHN: I'd like to see the... see Americans still own. I think that too much of our land is owned by foreigners. There's a lot of land around here that's owned by foreigners, foreign countries and I don't think that's a good idea.

KEISTER: Foreigners from where?

KUHN: There's a lot of camel jockeys that own land around here and France, somebody from France. I don't if it was a corporation or what it was just bought 1,000's of acres about 5 miles from here, a couple thousand acres I guess it was.

KEISTER: And what do they do with it? Rent it back to American farmers?

KUHN: Yup. I don't understand it for sure but I don't think that's it's a good idea. I think it's better that we own our own.

KEISTER: Would you ever sell this land to developers?

KUHN: Sure. But I would go find another... because if a developer comes along and says I want to buy your farm the reason he's buying my farm is because he already has the neighbors farm and there's condominiums and townhouses, and houses, and hotels and high rises there and I'm ready to do. I'll go find some more country some where.

KEISTER: Is there any left?

KUHN: I don't know. I suppose it'll be hard to find one day. Somebody told

me once that land is a good safe investment. You can buy it on the board of trade any time, stock or whatever you know but land is a sure thing. They can't make any more land. They can't either. We're ruining a lot of it. Putting roads in, shopping centers, and whatever.

KEISTER: Is that what happened to that land that you grew up on then?

KUHN: Uh-huh.

KEISTER: Warrenville's tremendous isn't it?

KUHN: Warrenville is terrible, yeah.

KEISTER: And Naperville.

KUHN: Naperville, yeah. Yeah, Naperville is very very developed. They can't find enough construction workers in Naperville to build houses. They can't dig wells fast enough to keep water to the houses that they've got. They keep building more houses and putting in more businesses. It's kind of a neat little... it's a neat big town. But they shut 'em off this summer for construction, they shut them off for about a year because they couldn't, they didn't have enough water to keep what they had happy. It was a dry season I guess I don't know.

KEISTER: I know what you're talking about. The farm I grew up on just was sold to sod a few year ago.

KUHN: Oh yeah.

KEISTER: Uh-huh. And the one that we used to buy our eggs from just across the road has been sold and they're marking it off as if they're going to build up something on the land.

KUHN: They're going to do something with it, sure they are.

KEISTER: It hurts me to walk by there.

KUHN: It doesn't hurt me to go back to Warrenville because it's too developed anyway. I don't want to live there. I, my dad hated moving out here because he had all his friends in Warrenville but I think I can make new friends if this gets too developed around here. I'm sure I can.

KEISTER: And what keeps you going out here?

KUHN: Keeps you going...

KEISTER: Uh-huh. What keeps you in this business I guess I should ask first?

KUHN: I guess, um, I have to support my family. But I like it too. I like farming I really do. I like plumbing and I like carpentry work. I don't think I would like to do any one of them all the time. But by doing the three of them, we mix plumbing and carpenter work up and every now and then we stop everything and go to farming so it kind of gives you a little bit of variety. You don't have to same thing day in and day out all the time.

KEISTER: And how does you wife feel about being married to a farmer?

KUHN: Oh I think she likes it. She likes the country I know that. She likes farming too.

KEISTER: Does she have a farming background?

KUHN: Uh-um, no, she's a city girl. Brisbon, Australia is where she's from. It's a about the size of Chicago. Well, maybe not quite that big but it's on that order anyway. But she likes the country. She'd never move back to town if she didn't have to.

KEISTER: Anything you'd like historians 100 years from now to know about farming?

KUHN: No. I'd think they'd probably know it already. Or they will be then. I do think we should try and keep our own land. Some how we're cutting our own throats by selling it to the foreigners.

KEISTER: Who is selling it to them and why?

KUHN: Whoever owns the land. Why wouldn't the government should stop this. I would think the government would regulate that. Maybe they do. Then again maybe if you come in here with the money you can buy it no matter who you are.

KEISTER: Would you sell yours to a foreigner?

KUHN: You want me to say no? Why are you shaking you head no? [laughter] No I'd probably wouldn't. No, I don't think I would. No, I don't think I would. But how do you know that? Some figure head company comes in and buys it and turns it over to the foreigner, you know. Somebody's not gonna come in this driveway driving a, I don't know, talking french buying my farm. He's gonna have a figure head that'll buy if for him, turn it over to him. So you don't know what you're doing anyway. I would not deliberate sell it to a foreigner, no.

KEISTER: We just found out... we're studying South African history and we found out that most of DeKalb Ag is centered in South Africa.

KUHN: Is that right?

KEISTER: It's kind of upsetting to learn.

KUHN: DeKalb Ag, huh? DeKalb Ag used to be a lot bigger that they are now. I don't know what they did wrong, poor management. Too many people in their work and doing nothing I think. You have to earn your keep. But then I guess if you can get somebody to pay your way and not do anything go ahead and do it. Bets going home.

KEISTER: Anything else you'd like to say?

KUHN: I don't believe so. I think we've covered pretty much everything.

KEISTER: I think so too. OK, thank you very much.

KUHN:

That's OK.