

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER STAATS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Joseph Westendorf: This is my interview for the oral history program at Rutgers. Thanks for having us. If, at any time, we ask you questions you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer. Thanks for having us again.

Shaun Illingworth: Why don't you say the name, the date, and the place.

JW: This is an interview with Mr. Pete Staats at his farm in Bridgewater, New Jersey. Mr. Staats, how much did you know about your family history?

Peter Staats: Quite a bit.

JW: Are you, by chance, related to Revolutionary War hero, Abraham Staats?

PS: Not that I know of.

SI: Could you tell us a little about the family history?

PS: This particular farm that we're on was the Van Nest Family Farm. (Joachim?) Staats married Mary Van Nest, and that's how we got into this farm. (Joachim?) was born middle-1800s, I guess, and was born in the area of North Branch. His father's name was Peter Staats. Off the top of my head I don't have it, but we do have genealogy going back to 1645 or something like that.

JW: What was it like growing up on a farm?

PS: Well, it was never boring. There was always something to do. When I grew up, I was with adults almost all the time. There wasn't a lot of other kids around. There was a farm across the street, from our farm. My grandparents' farm on my mother side was in Martinsville, which is ten miles from here, maybe less. That's where I spent most of my time, on one of the farms. Basically, I was with adults and I learned to do jobs at a very young age.

JW: What type of farm was it that you grew up on? A dairy farm?

PS: This farm, when I grew up, it was a general farm. We had sheep. We had pigs. We had some cows. I got into 4-H in about 1957 or so, and had a dairy project. Then in 1959, we built a dairy barn. At that point, it became a dairy farm.

JW: How was it growing up in the 4-H?

PS: In 4-H, when I was in it, was much more agriculture than it is today. I've seen big changes in 4-H over the years. I was a member, I suppose, for ten years or so. Then I was a leader for twenty years, I guess. Then my kids went through the 4-H program, and also [became] leaders. Now their kids are in the 4-H program, all in Somerset County.

SI: For the record, could you tell us where you born? Was it on this farm or in the area?

PS: We moved into the house in 1948. No, that can't be right. I was three or four. Only because this house at that time didn't have heat or electricity. My grandmother had a house in Somerville. When my father came out of the service, World War II, and I was born, he started fixing this up so we could move in here.

SI: You were born in Somerville.

PS: Technically, I was born in New Brunswick at Saint Peter's, but we lived in Somerville, yes.

SI: What date were you born?

PS: March 16, 1946.

JW: Did you have any siblings?

PS: I have a brother. He is nine years younger than I am.

JW: How was it growing up with a younger sibling?

PS: We really went in two different directions. He was enough younger than me that we really-- we were in the same family, but we really didn't do a lot of stuff together. From the time I was fourteen, I was milking cows twice a day and doing all the other associated stuff, besides going to high school.

SI: Growing up, what would a typical day be like on the farm?

PS: You would get up around five. We milked about thirty cows. I'd have to be finished to get to high school by eight in those days. You came home from high school, change your clothes, go up, sweep the barn, feed cows, do the night milking, and repeat the next day.

JW: Do you have any interesting stories about cows or animals getting out?

PS: [laughter] Oh, no. Our cows never got out. [laughter] We rented another farm about a half mile down the road. We kept dry cows and heifers down there. There was a farm next to it, and it was an older couple. They were probably in their eighties, I suppose. I get a phone call one morning that our cows were out at their place. We go down there and got the cows back in. We knew the people. Everybody knew everybody back then. Well, cows apparently had been out since midnight or one or two in the morning. They had a swimming pool. They were afraid the cows would fall in the swimming pool. So they sat outside all night by the swimming pool to make sure the cows didn't fall in it. I said, "Well, why didn't you call us?" "Well, we didn't want to bother you." [laughter] That's the attitude people used to have back then.

SI: What year did you say it turned into a dairy farm?

PS: '59.

SI: Before that, would you have been doing any work on the farm?

PS: Yes, actually, I started helping milking cows for my uncle, and the people across the street was a dairy farm. But actually, I was about ten, and another neighbor down the road was paying me to sweep hay under the cows, and got a dollar an hour back then.

JW: Was it hard juggling working on a farm with high school?

PS: No, I didn't think so. Just was what I did. But school did come second. I didn't like school. [laughter]

SI: Did they have a vocational education course there?

PS: No. They do now. Somerset VoTech has one now. Actually, my one grandson is in that program.

JW: What made you decide to stick with agriculture? Did you ever consider leaving the farm?

PS: I always either wanted to be a cowboy or a farmer. I never considered anything else.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit more about the area and how that's changed? It seems like, from some of your stories, there were a lot more farms around. What are your memories of how that's changed?

PS: I can almost describe it like dominos. It started from [Route] 28, which is about two miles from here, and which is a state highway. One farm after the other became houses right down the road. The farm that attaches to ours, he sold off the area that was closest to us around 1960, and that was the first houses that came this far down the road. But the entire Somerset County, I suppose the entire state of New Jersey, through the '50s and '60s just became house after house.

SI: How does that make you feel as a farmer, as a farming family? Does that add any pressure to you?

PS: Naturally, there's a financial pressure. There's a temptation to sell because of the value of the land. But the other thing, from a farmer's standpoint, a marketing standpoint, those people that are living in those houses are there to buy your product. In 1970, we put in a pasteurizer and a bottling plant. We pasteurized, processed our own milk, and sold it directly here on the farm. You couldn't have done that if you didn't have houses close by. It's a two-edge sword. There's good things about it and there's bad things about it. I think today any young person that wanted to go into agriculture is going to have to use some kind of direct marketing, whatever the product they grow. But sell it directly to a person, cut out the middle man.

JW: How long did your family bottle milk on the farm?

PS: From 1970 until 1987.

JW: What made you stop?

PS: Financial reasons. It was a business decision. There wasn't one thing. There was a bunch of things. I had two kids getting ready to go to college. My knees were bothering me from getting up and down, milking cows, and working between the cows. A lot of our equipment was worn out. We were out of (hock?). So, did we want to borrow a whole bunch of money and go back in and replace some of the equipment? Or did we want to get out of the business? We chose to get out.

JW: After that, did you shift to a beef farm?

PS: Yes. You can't see when I nod. Thank you. [laughter] Yes. Once the dairy cows were gone, we did get into Hereford cattle. We cut back on our crop farming, but did more hay and started selling hay too.

SI: Did you have that same direct marketing to the local area?

PS: To a certain extent. Naturally, the hay. You're selling that locally. But even with New Jersey's farmland assessment program, we would sell people yearling calves, feeder calves. They'll keep them for the summer, and then sell them in the fall. They can qualify for their farmland assessment that way. A big part of our market was selling calves directly to these people, different landowners. You supply a certain service along with this. We're getting a lot better money than the market, a lot more money than we would get selling traditionally, like through an auction for instance. But also, we see that the calves are wormed and have all their proper shots. We deliver them. In some cases, we'll take them to the auction or wherever the person wants to sell them in the fall. We did have a couple--we would make arrangements at a slaughterhouse, take them to the slaughterhouse for the people's own use or whatever they were going to do with it. Technically, we still do direct marketing. Now my grandsons are doing it with pigs and with lambs, with sheep.

JW: Going back a little bit, more about your family. How did you meet your wife?

PS: Our parents were friends.

SI: You mentioned the 4-H. Can you talk a little bit more about what you've done with them over the years? First, you were a member for about a decade. What kind of activities would they have for you?

PS: Well, the big one, naturally, was the Somerset County 4-H fair. Through 4-H, besides what you'd learned about your project area, you also social activities. You had square dances, skating parties. There was 4-H camp. You had what we called, in those days, demonstrations; they now call it public presentations, where you would get up in front of a group and show how to do something or give an illustrated lecture. As you got older into the program, in Somerset County, there was 4-H council, which was instead of your individual club, it was members from all different clubs in the county. You learned some parliamentary procedures and things like that.

JW: One question is you said as this area became less farmland and more houses moved up the road, has that created any problems with other houses complaining about the animals or the smell?

PS: We have been extremely lucky and have had very, very little problems in that area. I think the biggest problem is moving machinery and bigger stuff on the roads than any of the neighbors giving us a problem.

JW: How has the machinery changed through your life? How has the farm equipment you've used changed?

PS: Well, I came in luckily after the horse era, so I didn't have to put up with that. Back in the early days, we had one tractor and you switched it from this piece to that piece, and some of the machinery we had wasn't the best. It made you a good mechanic. Then as time went on, we got a little better equipment and eventually got to where we could afford to buy new stuff. Up until today, the newer machinery now is very complicated, a lot of electronics, a lot of computerized, and very expensive. So it's gone the whole thing from basics to very sophisticated. Equipment has gotten much bigger and we can get a lot more done with a lot less time.

SI: What about other facilities? You mentioned the bottling plant you had for a while. Any other of those types of operations that you set up as the farm changed?

PS: No, not really. Processing-wise, because the meat, when we do sell that that has to be done in a government-inspected facility. No, the only processing we ever did was the milk.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with the county agents or how that program has changed over time?

PS: When I was younger, you had a county agent, and that county agent was pretty much a jack of all trades, if you want. I mean, whatever your question was, he was the man you went to. Then as time went on, they changed their philosophy, and they had area agents. Area agents were more specialized. So one agent instead of doing just one county might have two or three counties, but he was a beef and crops guy or a dairy guy or whatever. As you got down South Jersey, more vegetable guys. So where you used to go to one guy, now you had to go to whoever specialized in what you were looking for at that time.

JW: When you milked, how difficult was it to get all this stuff you needed to set up your own milking plant? I know New Jersey has a lot of regulations. How difficult was that process?

PS: Things were a lot different in 1970--well, it would've been '68 and '69 when we started planning. But I had a friend, a neighbor named Dick Merritt, and Dr. Merritt was a dean at Rutgers at one time. Coincidentally, he had been to a program of some kind, and met a guy who worked for Ralston Purina, and they were promoting on-farm processing of milk, and that was this guy's area [of] expertise. Dr. Merritt got me in touch with this guy and we went from there. He helped us figure out what size we were going to be, what type of equipment, helped me contact several different suppliers, and that's how we got going on that.

JW: I know there's a large movement in New Jersey that wants raw milk. Even back then, did you have a lot of customers who requested raw milk?

PS: We always had some customers for raw milk. We always used raw milk ourselves for our own family. You always had a few neighbors that were looking for it, but not like today where it's the, I don't want to say, "in-thing." That's not what I want to say, but people seem to be looking for it more and more. I have very mixed feelings about the raw milk problem because there's a lot of nonprofessional people that would maybe be cutting corners and maybe wouldn't be as clean or as up on health regulations as they should be. So if they do put in raw milk, and I can't believe I'm saying these words, but it would have to be regulated just for the safety of people.

SI: In general, how has government regulation changed over time? Can you talk a little bit about ways that that does impact your work?

PS: The biggest impact, what would be paperwork and the amount of time you have to spend filling out forms and keeping records. In 1960 and through that area, we never had to worry about it. I mean, back then, your biggest thing was financial records for income tax, and in some cases people wrote it on a barn wall or kept it on the calendar. Of course, as time goes on, we've gotten more and more--we have to keep track now of when we spread manure and where we spread manure, which if you said that to one of the old-timers, they'd laugh at you. So, that's basically how it affects us.

JW: Once you started the dairy operation, did you have to hire any laborers to help you?

PS: We always used family labor. At one point, we had a friend's son who didn't know exactly what he wanted to do after high school, and he worked for us for a while, but mostly it was always family labor.

JW: Your two children, they were included in that, I'm assuming?

PS: Well, yes. Joanne was always interested and went onto Delaware Valley [University] and stayed in agriculture. Right? [laughter] And Ed wasn't as interested, but now that his boys are involved with the 4-H and the sheep program, he has gotten more interested and more into it.

JW: What other animals have you raised, besides cows?

PS: Cows, beef cows, sheep, pigs. I have one grandson that has some goats now. Always had a few chickens around. I guess that's about it. Horses. We always had a couple of horses. When I was growing up, we always had horses.

JW: Which of those animals would you say was the hardest to raise? I know with dairy cows you have to milk them each day, but what other challenges did the pigs or sheep present?

PS: I don't know. If you like what you doing, even though there's difficult things, you don't find them as being that difficult, I guess. When I was younger, we had a bunch of sheep, and I didn't particularly like the sheep then. I've mellowed towards the sheep lately. They're not as bad as I thought they were.

JW: You said you baled your own hay. Describe how that process has changed?

PS: Has changed? Well, going way back, we would cut and rake the hay, and the neighbor would come in and bale it. The bales would be on the ground, and you'd have to pick them up and bring them into the barn. Then we got our own baler. At that point, we were able to hook a wagon behind the baler and one person drove the tractor, one person was on the wagon and stacked the bales. Then they came out with what they call the bale kicker. So now the baler throws the bales into the wagon. So you've eliminated that person on the wagon. It stayed like that, I guess, maybe [until] the early nineties. Then we started using a round baler as opposed to the conventional small square bales. Each year since then we've done less conventional bales and more and more round bales. Round bale advantage is you handle them mechanically, you're not handling each individual bale. You can just feed one bale instead of feeding, say, fifteen square bales.

JW: If I may, how did your hand get injured?

PS: Being stupid. You want more than that? [laughter]

JW: If possible.

PS: It was a Sunday morning and I was rushing a little bit, wanted to get finished to go to church. I was green chopping sudangrass for the cows. The chopper plugged, and I shut the power down to it, but the cutter had free wheels even after you shut the power down. When I went to unplug it, I got my hand into the knives, and four fingers went flying.

JW: Has it limited you in any way since?

PS: I don't think so.

SI: What are some of the other dangers people maybe who aren't familiar with agricultural life might be surprised to hear about, such as personal dangers, but also the effect of disease on your herds that, that sort of thing? What are the challenges that you face?

PS: If you have livestock, and I don't care what species, and you get a bug, a disease, a virus, you have to move quickly to eliminate it or cure it because it will go from one animal to the other faster than you can realize. That answers part of your question. At one time, agriculture was considered one of the most dangerous occupations because everything you're working with is spinning around and trying to grab you in some way. I can't even begin to name or think of the number of people that I've known that have been killed or injured by a piece of machinery or even by livestock, some weird accident. A father and a son that I knew were moving a grain

auger and it hit a live electric line, and it electrocuted them. Just odd things that you would never think of.

JW: Tell me about the church your family goes to.

PS: We go to North Branch Dutch Reform Church.

JW: Has your family always gone there?

PS: Apparently. [laughter]

SI: Has church activity been a big part of your life, beyond just going to church?

PS: Yes, somewhat. My wife has been a Sunday school teacher for, I don't know, forty years, a long time. I have been on consistory. I've been on various committees for the church.

JW: I know some farms in New Jersey are part of a co-op. Were you ever part of a co-op or did you consider it?

PS: The livestock market in Hackettstown is a co-op; you're a member. Belle Mead Farmer's Co-op was originally set up as a co-op. If my memory's right, you paid twenty-five dollars for a membership. The advantage to it was that instead of buying individually, now you're buying as a group so you could get better prices. As a co-op, those better prices were passed on to the members. At some point about fifteen, sixteen years ago, I think, Belle Mead Farmer's Co-op became an LLC, and the co-op members were issued stock. So now, instead of it being a co-op, we have stock. As the co-op makes a profit or whatever, the value of that stock increases, but we also get paid a yearly dividend. We sold milk through a co-op before we bottled our own milk. So that's been our extent that we've been involved with a co-op.

JW: You said you raised mostly animals. What type of crops have you farmed?

PS: Well, obviously hay. With the dairy cows, we grew corn for both silage and grain. We grew wheat as a cash crop and straw to use for bedding for the cows. We grew oats to grind into cow feed. We've grown rye, usually as a cover crop, sometimes to pasture. Also, sometimes we would cut it for straw. I guess that's about it. We would grow different annual forage crops to feed to the cattle.

JW: Is there any particular [inaudible] where, due to bad weather or something it was hard to get by?

PS: Several different times. The old farmers would say that dry weather would scare you to death and wet weather would starve you to death. I really still don't know which is worse. I can remember years when it was so dry we were chopping corn for silage that was no higher than maybe three feet tall. What you would usually get off an acre, it would take us ten acres. Then I remember other years when we had the most beautiful corn you could see, and the ground was so wet you couldn't get in to harvest it. So one extreme to the other, and one is as bad as the other.

JW: When that happened, how did you cope with it?

PS: Pretty much pushed through and just got by. I don't know. Each situation needed a different management practice, a different way to cope with it. Some of the dry years there were government programs available, sometimes in the form of low-interest loans, and sometimes in the form of lower-priced grains. At one time, the government had a lot of grain in storage, and we were having some droughts, and they would release some of that stored grain at a lower price than what you would have to pay on the open market.

JW: Did you breed your own cows through artificial insemination or did you bring in a bull?

PS: For the most part, we always used artificial insemination. Somewhere around maybe 1990, there wasn't anybody to breed the cows--the company that offered the service to come to the farm and breed the cows no longer offered it in our area. At that point, I went to school and learned to do it myself.

JW: Do you do that with the beef cows?

PS: Yes, we have done both with the beef cows. From a management standpoint, what we normally would do would AI [artificial insemination] for a six-week period or two heat cycles, and then run, what is it called in the industry, a cleanup bull, a bull to come in to catch anything that maybe we didn't get in calf.

SI: Were there are other times where you had to add to your knowledge or get more training in a certain area?

PS: Almost continuously, and in all different forms. There were times where there were programs offered through extension. There were times when there was things offered through industry. Different companies would have programs that you can go and learn new procedures or new methods. There were times when you actually went to a formal--like a computer class for instance. I did take some computer classes, because more and more computers are involved in what we were doing

SI: Over the course of your life, how has the public view of your occupation changed?

PS: I think like everything else, some people compare it to a pendulum on a clock, swinging from one area to another. At one point, I think agriculture and farmers were not well thought of by the general public. At this particular time, agriculture is in a much better light. I think people are becoming more and more aware of the food they eat and where it comes from and are more interested in locally-produced products than since say fifteen years ago or twenty years ago.

SI: You mentioned earlier how Dr. Merritt played a role in helping you set up the bottling and pasteurizing plant. Were there any other times where you used any resources from Rutgers or the agriculture school?

PS: Through extension, different products. Also, being a product of 4-H, and 4-H worked very closely with Rutgers, there were specialists at Rutgers. Don Kniffen was a beef specialist. Frank Wright, Ed Oleskie were the dairy guys. Well, because of my 4-H involvement, I knew them, and maybe not going through official channels, but I could always draw on them if I had a question or something. It may be in a social setting. It didn't necessarily have to be that I was going for something specific. Through the years we have used a Rutgers in one form or another, even casually I guess.

SI: I live in Hightstown, which used to be a very big agricultural hub.

PS: Big vegetable area.

SI: Yes. I think chickens too. I'm not sure.

PS: Yes.

SI: The areas in the town itself where people who come in for feed or for selling their stuff became also social hubs as well. Was there an equivalent in this area, where you would go to get your news as well as your supplies?

PS: Naturally, wherever the coffee shop happened to be. But in the old days when we still had canned milk, and every morning you loaded your milk onto your truck and you went to the dairy with it, to the creamery. That was a big social event because that's where you caught up with what all the neighbors were doing. Hackettstown Auction Market, I've I mentioned before, that's a once a week thing and that's another biggie. Wherever farmers gather, they're catching up on news or whatever's going on. The feed mill, you're going to feed mill and [talking about] who's been there before and what's going on. The old days, if it wasn't a busy time of the year--and in our business, spring, summer, fall, planting, harvesting, doing hay, gets very intense. But through the winter, things slow down. I can remember one particular feed mill we used to go to. The office for the feed mill was a separate building and he had a couch in there. You'd go in there in the winter, and there'd be two or three local guys sitting on the couch, and there was a coal stove, so it was a nice warm spot, and just catching up on what's been going on and who's doing what.

SI: Do you have more questions?

JW: My dad works at Rutgers, where he deals with waste management. From the farmer's perspective, how has handling the waste of animals changed as New Jersey has become more suburban and less rural.

PS: You have to be more, I'm going to say responsible, but that gives it a negative impact. You have to be more aware of your neighbors. You have to stop to think [about] odor and dust and whatever of what you're spreading or using to improve your soils. You have to stop to think about how that's going to affect the people next to you. When there was another farm next to you, it didn't matter because he was doing the same thing you were doing. But now that you have--I don't want to say city people--urban neighbors, you don't want to go spreading a stinky

load of manure next to their property when they're having a picnic, for instance. So there's a lot of common sense involved. A lot of this stuff, if people use more common sense, maybe we wouldn't need as many regulations too.

SI: Regulation is obviously one way that the government has an impact on your industry. Have you been involved in any kind of political voice for farmers? Because I know agriculture is a field that politicians sometimes pay attention to, sometimes don't. How do the farmers in this area organize or make their voice heard on issues?

PS: Well, New Jersey Farm Bureau is the one that has to jump right out at you because I feel they're the greatest resource that an individual farmer has to be able affect regulations and changes that are associated to us. Your local board of agriculture, which I am a member of, is a voice that we use. I'm also Vice Chairman of the Somerset County Agricultural Development Board, which New Jersey has a program of farmland preservation. We're the county level that administers that program. If a farmer should want to enter into this program, he receives a certain amount of money for deed restricting his property so that houses can't be built on it. But the Ag. Development Board also handles right-to-farm issues. So if a neighbor has a complaint against a farmer or the farmer has a complaint against the township, for instance, say there is zoning that's impacting that farm, it would go before the Ag. Development Board.

SI: Well, without naming specifics, what would be a typical case that you might hear at that board?

PS: There's nothing typical. It can be from one extreme to another, but we've had stuff as, I'm going to say, frivolous, although I'm sure that people involved didn't feel it was frivolous--neighbors complaining about roosters crowing. We've had things like that come before us. The town telling a man he can't park a truck in a certain location, and he came to us claiming it was a farm truck and he should be allowed to park it there. Things like that. But it can [be] very serious, things that would affect a farmer's livelihood to something seemingly silly as chickens making too much noise.

SI: The program, this forever green program, where they have farmers deed restrict land or anyone with a large track of land, what do you think of that program? Do you think it's been beneficial to the industry?

PS: I'm going to hit this one in two different things. From the standpoint of a citizen of the state of New Jersey, it's ensured that they're still going to be able to enjoy seeing open spaces. They're going to still be able to buy produce locally. Nobody will believe this, but it's going to help them tax-wise because when you take a piece of land to farm and you build houses on it, even though each of those houses is taxed, the tax on that property isn't enough to pay for the services that that house is going to require. When that piece of property is a piece of open land, it doesn't require any services. So even though with New Jersey, we have farmland assessment tax, that property is taxed at a lower rate, it's not costing the town anything. To get back to the preservation thing, from the standpoint of a farmer, it's another management tool. It's something else that we can use to protect ourselves and also to generate some income.

JW: In the future, do you anticipate the farm will stay in the family?

PS: I don't know. That's something that we're dealing with right now.

SI: From your own perspective, is passing along the physical farm, but then also the tradition of agriculture, important to you?

PS: I would say yes. We're sitting on a farm right now. It's been in the same family for over two-hundred years, way over two-hundred years. There has to be a certain amount of emotional feelings to that, but it also costs me two-thousand dollars a month to sit here; taxes, insurance and utilities. So you can't disregard that. I can't just [say], "I'm going to be dead. I don't care." [If I] give it to the children, where are they going to come up with two-thousand dollars a month? And that's just to be here. That's not repairs or anything else. It's a hard thing to decide, but from a standpoint--forgetting this farm, but agriculture in general, I just think you have to keep agriculture in this country and definitely in this state to feed all the people. We can't depend on foreign countries and imported stuff for our livelihood.

SI: Do you have other questions? You talked a little bit about being in 4-H as a member. You said you were also a leader for twenty years. What kind of jobs did you hold? What were your goals as a leader or area of interest?

PS: [laughter] The 4-H club that we had was a dairy and beef 4-H club. Our goal was to try to educate children in the care and feeding of dairy and beef cows, and showing also of dairy and beef cows.

SI: What other institutions have you seen change, such as county fairs, other aspects of your year of activities?

PS: I'm seventy-two. So say, at least sixty-five years, I'm aware of what's happening. When I say creamery or dairy, I'm referring to a processing facility, a place where dairy farmers bring their raw milk and it would be processed and bottled and then sold. There were more than I could count of little--the popular phrase--mom and pop dairies. The same thing with meat processing, with slaughterhouses and butchers. Then, as the government put more and more regulations on and the number of farms got smaller, these mom and pop places went away, and they merged in and became bigger and bigger businesses. That's one of the biggest changes I've seen. The same thing for everything; farm machinery dealers, even car and truck dealers getting away from agriculture now. You don't have the small town Ford dealer or Chevy dealer. Now it's the big guy out on the highway multi brands. Same with farm machinery. We used to have farmer machinery dealers all over the place. Now most of our repair work and parts are from Pennsylvania. That's a big change.

Carol Staats: Ask about the borrow a calf program he started for 4-H.

SI: Please.

PS: I forgot about that. Another monster that got out of control. When I was a member, everybody that was in 4-H came from a dairy farm--well, I'm talking about the dairy program--came from a dairy farm or at least had one or two, what they called family cows back in those days, a cow you would keep just for milk your own family. But as time went on, the dairy farms went away, and there were still young children that wanted to learn about dairy animals, wanted to be involved in the program and in showing. I came up with this idea that we ultimately called a "Borrow a Calf." If somebody had a dairy and they were willing to take a non-dairy kid, loan him a calf just for the show season--basically, it went from somewhere around May until the fair, which was in the middle of August back then. That kid would care and feed and train that calf to show at the fair, but not have to have a family that had live on a farm so that they could have the animal there. So it could be a kid from a housing development, which we had a bunch of, would care for this calf for four, five, six months.

SI: Did you ever do that with schools? Would a school have gotten a calf?

PS: No.

SI: Were there other organizations besides two boards you mentioned in 4-H that were important in agricultural life here?

PS: Not that I can think of. I'll probably think of something just when you leave.

CS: Soil conservation?

PS: Yes. Was Soil Conservation Service, now NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service]. That's another one that we've worked closely with over the years. Here comes the grandson.

SI: Let me pause for a second.

[Tape Paused]

SI: Let me put this back on. We talked about the agricultural preservation board, but you're also on the Ag. Board of the county. What kind of things would you do there?

PS: Well, part of it is part of New Jersey Farm Bureau. So, it's the county level of New Jersey Farm Bureau, but it's also where any related organization would come to keep us updated on what they're up to. In other words, extension, a soil conservation service, the Ag. Development Board. There's a bunch of other--I guess the term they use now is stakeholders, a bunch of other organizations that somehow have some relationship to agriculture. Well, this would be their meeting point. This would be where they would be able to blend together whatever it was to agriculture, the sounding board if nothing else.

JW: You mentioned NRCS has helped. How has NRCS been involved with your farm?

PS: Through soil conservation programs. When we were farming on a larger scale and more land, soil conservation programs were used to limit soil erosion and to help improve the soils. Our involvement now is more towards stopping pollution. They've helped us--with the beef cattle we do a rotational grazing, and they helped us set up that program. We've got areas that we have fenced off that would be considered sensitive areas as far as along a stream corridor, for instance. We no longer allow the livestock to be in those areas. That's all stuff that we've worked with soil conservation through them, with them.

SI: Because we've been talking about the farm in different eras, can you describe how it is today physically and the beef cattle you work with, how many you have today?

PS: When we were milking cows and had the dairy farm, we probably farmed in the neighborhood of five-hundred acres, between the hay and grains we were growing and pasture. We milked somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty cows. Milked a few more than that, maybe up to forty, before we were bottling. But from the point that we started bottling and selling our own milk, we were somewhere in the thirty cow neighborhood, plus young stock. So that's probably another fifteen head on top of that. At one point, we rented another farm that we kept dry cows and young stock on. Now we have around twenty-five, twenty-four mama cows, beef cows. We have basically a cow-calf operation where we breed the cows, they have calves, and the calf is our product that we sell. We either sell them as a feeder calf to other farmers or raise them a little longer and sell them to people as freezer meat, as beef to put in their freezer to feed their families. We now farm roughly two-hundred acres, and probably one hundred and fifty of that is in hay, and the rest would be pasture and grazing land.

JW: You've raised both dairy and beef cows. What challenges do they present? What are the contrasts between them that you've dealt with?

PS: The obvious one is the beef cows require much less labor than the dairy cow. Dairy cows need to be milked twice a day, 365 days a year. Well, 305 days technically, if you had them all calve on one day and all dried off on one day, but it doesn't work that way. You're 365 days a year, seven days a week. The manure has to be hauled daily. The cows have to be fed daily. The beef cows don't have to be milked; they have to be fed daily. You have more labor involved with them, but it's seasonally. It's not every day. Say you have a two-month period when you're calving, you have to be right there with those cows all the time then. If you spring calve, for instance, in six or seven months you're going to have a weaning period. That's when you take the young calves away from the mothers. Now you have a little more labor then because now you've got two groups of animals; you've got the mama's over here and you've got the babies. Where they were nursing on their mothers, now you have to feed them. So you have more labor then. But it's a lot less labor than the dairy is. It also allows you to be able to take a day or two off, to go away or whatever you want to do.

SI: How are we on time?

PS: Another ten minutes or so.

SI: Do you have any other questions?

PS: Are you getting pretty close to wrapping it up?

SI: Is there anything you'd like to add or anything we skipped over?

PS: I thought of a couple of things when we were talking, and they're gone now. One example of how things have changed traffic-wise. I can't remember when it was, but we bought two grain bins from a neighboring farm about two miles away. They're fourteen-foot wide and, as you've seen, this is not a very wide road. We put a set of wheels underneath these grain bins, hooked the tractor to them, and brought them home by driving right down the road with them. There's no way we could ever do that today. [laughter] That's just how things have changed.

SI: You mentioned you use mostly family labor here. In general though, from what you know about other farmers, has the labor been mostly local or migrant labor?

PS: Migrant labor is more prevalent with vegetable farms and that kind of thing than with dairy farms and beef farms, although now some of the larger dairy farms, I guess, are using some migrant labor, but again, not seasonal labor. Where migrant labor for a vegetable farm would be seasonal. If there's migrant labor working on a dairy farm, they're going to become permanent. I know of one particular farm that does a lot of vegetables and dairy, and he has certain migrant workers that are there 365 days a year. They have housing on the farm, and in the wintertime, they help with the dairy. Over the winter you do catch up work, cutting brush back on fence rows, and cleaning up, and repair work. The fellows do that kind of work and help him out that way. Once the vegetables start, they get changed over to planting and weeding and harvesting.

SI: Any other final questions?

JW: No.

SI: All right. Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate this.

PS: You're welcome.

SI: It's been a great look how agriculture has changed and is still an important part of the community. Thank you. I appreciate it.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/20/2019

Reviewed by Peter Staats 6/20/2019

Reviewed by Zach Batista 9/9/2019