

**Interviewer** Today is October 3, 2019. We are meeting with local farmer/rancher Mike Harden, and we'll be asking him questions about cattle ranching south of Dodge City. Mike graduated Ashland High School in 1967.

Mr. Harden, do you know when your family first came to Clark County?

**Mike** I think it was 1884 when my great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather moved from Iowa.

**Interviewer** Do you know why they came?

**Mike** I don't, well not specifically. I know my great-grandfather had lost his wife to a tornado and, I believe, one of his sons.

**Interviewer** Was the tornado here or in Iowa.

**Mike** Oh, it was in Iowa.

**Interviewer** Do you know what year the family farm or ranch was established?

**Mike** Well, I would assume it was about that time. Now where they originally homesteaded, they lost that in the 90's with the drought. And so my great grandfather homesteaded down on the creek. He homesteaded a school quarter

**Interviewer** What does that mean?

**Mike** Well, out of every township, the school was given a quarter of land to help with the expenses of the school. Now, on some of those quarters there may have been a building built but I don't know that for sure.

**Interviewer** Does that mean that he paid rent and the rent went to the upkeep of the school?

**Mike** Well, no, he homesteaded on it. It was for sale, so he homesteaded on it, was my understanding.

**Interviewer** And the school district received the money from the sale.

**Mike** I assume so.

**Interviewer** Are you the second, third, or fourth generation relative?

**Mike** It depends upon whether you count my great-great-grandfather or great-grandfather.

**Interviewer** What was your family's traditional role in the area.?

**Mike** Well, I guess they were farmers and stockmen. I guess that was their traditional role.

**Interviewer** Did they ever branch out and do other things?

**Mike** Well, my grandfather had a trucking business in the thirties but outside of that I don't think so.

**Interviewer** What types of crops and livestock did your family run?

**Mike** I think mostly wheat was the main crop that they grew. And I'm not exactly sure what kind of livestock they had. I know my father had a yearling operation. My grandfather, I'm not exactly sure what he had. I never did visit with him about it and I don't know what my great-grandfather had.

**Interviewer** When you were growing up, did your father focus on a specific breed of cattle?

**Mike** No. He would buy calves at the sale barn and background them.

**Interviewer** What does backgrounding mean?

**Mike** Well, it means that you wean the calves off the cows and then for a 30 day period you check them every day and doctor the ones that become sick. After 30 days, you usually can put them on either wheat pasture or grass and don't have to check them every day.

**Interviewer** Is that something you did when you were younger?

**Mike** Yes. That's been a part of my operation for the last forty years. I have backgrounded cattle on wheat pasture and grass. I have owned cows for the last 10 years.

**Interviewer** Which do you enjoy more?

**Mike** Well, it's fun to watch the new calves born and that part I really enjoyed, but I also enjoyed backgrounding the cattle. I enjoyed riding through them and picking out the sick ones and doctoring them. To detect a sick animal, you have to look at its demeanor. How it looks, how it walks, how it comes in to feed. How it holds its head, how its ears look, whether it coughs.

**Interviewer** Describe your land. Is there any special topography? Are you on water. What kind of ground do you have?

**Mike** Well, some of this is on Bluff Creek, which is northeast of Ashland, and some of it is fairly rough patches of ground. It's got some big gorges or canyons in it.

**Interviewer** Is all of your ground in Clark County?

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Do you farm ground that has good water? Has water been an issue for you?

**Mike** What do you mean, "good water"?

**Interviewer** Here in Ashland, the water is so hard that sometimes it's difficult. Is that what you give your animals as well? Has it ever caused any issues for you?

**Mike** Not that I'm aware of.

**Interviewer** You said your grandpa homesteaded the ground, the school ground.

**Mike** My great-grandpa.

**Interviewer** Are you still farming all of his land? Even though you lost some in the nighties.

**Mike** No, I've got brothers that farm some of it.

**Interviewer** How was your family's role in this community changed?

**Mike** I'm not so sure that it has changed. My great-grandfather served on a jury back in 1899 and my grandfather was a county commissioner and so he was involved in and some of the... My grandfather was involved in establishing the museum and I have served on that board myself. So I don't know that our role has really changed in the community.

**Interviewer** So your family is still serving in traditional ways that your grandfathers began.

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Okay. Did you add ground to your original family's holdings then since then? You have two brothers?

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Paul and...

**Mike** Jim.

**Interviewer** Thank you. So it's Jim, Mike and Paul Harden and all three of you are still in farming.

**Mike** Well, Paul retired this year but up until now he was involved in farming.

**Interviewer** That's a lot of continuation. Has your family had to hire outside help?

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** And did you have to pay them in kind? Were they year-round employees? How did you manage that.

**Mike** Well, I had year-round employees and if I remember right, my father had year-round employees as well. So he just used some of the farm income to pay payroll. Now my dad did have a house that he allowed some of the employees to live in, so that was part of in kind payment.

**Interviewer** I've heard of people that give half a beef for a family. I didn't know if he did that as well.

**Mike** I'm not sure if my dad did or not, and that's not something that I really did either.

**Interviewer** Tell us about your current operation. Are you still farming and ranching? Are the two combined?

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** So you run cattle on wheat pasture?

**Mike** Yes, if I have it.

**Interviewer** How has the no-till chemical farming affected how you run cattle?

**Mike** Well, if you're a true no till farmer you don't run cattle on it.

**Interviewer** Minimum till, let's say it that way.

**Mike** Okay. You don't run cattle on the farm ground, it compacts it too much.

**Interviewer** Are you still grazing your wheat?

**Mike** Yes, I'm still grazing. I have kind of done a minimum till along with farming. I have found that I need to farm the ground and the weeds are getting to where they are resistant to the spray. So I've had to incorporate farming into my operation. I have gone back to farming.

**Interviewer** How do you think ranching has changed in the last hundred years?

**Mike** For the most part, I think the operations have gotten larger. I think there's fewer small farmers or fewer small ranchers. I think it's consolidated and I see it consolidating even more over the next years.

**Interviewer** Do you know what average sizes were or how much the size of an average ranch has changed?

**Mike** I don't know. I know that I'm... At this present time, I'm probably farming the land that four or five farmers farmed.

**Interviewer** How long ago?

**Mike** Oh, 40 years ago, 50 years ago.

**Interviewer** So you've absorbed...

**Mike** Yes. I've absorbed several operations myself and I'm sure that mine will be absorbed too.

**Interviewer** When we talked about the changes in ranching, you spoke of riding out and checking your weanling calves. Do you still use horses or have four-wheelers changed how you operate?

**Mike** Well, with new calves you about have to have use a horse because you can't... You can't head a calf with a four wheeler, and you can't get as good a look on a four-wheeler as you can on a horse. You can do a lot more on a horse that you can with a four-wheeler. But when it comes to moving the cattle, four-wheelers are the thing. A lot of a lot of individuals have gone to four wheelers. Now another thing that has come into play is a dart gun. You can shoot a sick calf and put it to sleep and then you can doctor it and then give it a counteracting drug and within 10 minutes it'll be back up on its feet. So that saves having to rope him or put him in a catch pen to doctor him

**Interviewer** Are there other ways that modern technology has changed how you take care of your animals?

**Mike** Well one of the biggest changes I've seen is a cakewagon.

**Interviewer** What is a cakewagon?

**Mike** Well, it holds pellets that are made into cubes. The cattle enjoy eating them and those cubes have supplements in them. The biggest supplement is the protein. So I can drive out and check three or four hundred head of cattle right quick and get a good count on them. You just string the cake in a line and turn around and count cattle as they're grazing in a line along the cake line.

**Interviewer** When people say they're "caking their cattle," for somebody that hasn't seen it done, how would you describe that?

**Mike** Well the cake comes out of the side of a big box that has an auger in it and it augers it on the ground in a narrow band. The cattle can graze and pick it up. When you put it in a narrow band, they will automatically run up and down that line and they will get themselves into a line so you can get a good look and count them.

**Interviewer** And I'm assuming that when you go to move cattle to a different patch, you use the cakewagon to entice them.

**Mike** You can lead them with a cakewagon because they'll follow the cakewagon, expecting to get fed.

**Interviewer** Which is easier than chasing them too.

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Do you remember any family stories of natural disasters besides the fire?

**Mike** The only story I know of is the drought in the 30s. My dad talked about it. My grandfather talked about it a little bit.

**Interviewer** How did it affect them?

**Mike** Well they weren't able to get much production off the land. They weren't able to grow crops. And the grass was short, so they had to make do with a lot less. There wasn't much income back during the 30s when it was so dry.

**Interviewer** You remember the drought in the 50s?

**Mike** Vaguely, but we had a bigger drought around 2011 and '12.

**Interviewer** How did that affect your operation?

**Mike** I had to sell off a lot of my cattle; I didn't have anything to feed them.

**Interviewer** Have you built your herd back yet?

**Mike** Well, I'm trying to retire so I have sold off most of my cattle. So, I'm taking in cattle on my grass; I don't own very many cattle anymore.

**Interviewer** How does that change your day to day life, not owning your cows?

**Mike** Well, I don't have as much to do now.

**Interviewer** When you say "taking in cattle"... For folks that haven't done this, describe what that means.

**Mike** Well, I own some pasture ground and to utilize it, I have someone else bring me their cattle and I put them on the grass and furnish the water and grass and the fence.

**Interviewer** Do you check them daily?

**Mike** No, that's part of the deal I made with the individual. They check them themselves. But you can check them and furnish that as part of the cost of taking in their cattle.

**Interviewer** So you're basically leasing your grass out.

**Mike** I'm leasing my grass out, yes.

**Interviewer** The cattle that you see, now I know you've sold off your cows and you're leasing out your ground. Describe the physical differences in the cattle that you see grazing your ground now and what you had when you first started farming and ranching.

**Mike** Well, the individual that is leasing my grass runs longhorn and Corriente cattle, so they're not the best quality of livestock, but he makes it work for him.

**Interviewer** Are they specialty cattle for roping or showing?

**Mike** No, they're just a lower grade of cattle. He buys them cheap and can afford to take less for them. But there's a lot of money to be made off of cheap cattle. If you can buy 'em right and sell 'em right, you can make a lot of money. Sometimes people pay too much for the better quality the cattle and don't make as much money on them.

**Interviewer** What kind of cattle were you running when you first started?

**Mike** Well, I bought calves at the sale and they were just a mixture of cattle. We used to buy them at the sale and we used to have them shipped in. We had a cattle buyer that would buy them in Texas and ship them to us. Then we got to buying them out of Kentucky and Tennessee.

**Interviewer** So you were buying weanlings, you were not buying bucket calves.

**Mike** No, they were pulled off the cows and taken to the sale and sold, so we had to wean them.

**Interviewer** And do a lot of doctoring and care. How have the methods of feeding cattle and the type of feed that you give then and the medications that we use now, how do those compare to when you first began?

**Mike** Well, one of the biggest changes is the medicine. They have medicines that you give under the skin instead of in the muscle. They last four or five days, so you can give an animal a shot and not have to worry about it for four or five days. Whereas with the old medicines, you had to doctor for three days in a row. So you had to confine them because it was too big of a job to get them up every time. So that meant taking them to the corral and feeding them in the corral so they weren't out on the pasture. I find the new medicines are a lot more friendly to weaning the calves because, well, if the weather is bad, you can give a calf a shot and you don't have to get it up the next day and mess with it.

**Interviewer** And you can leave it on clean grass instead of in the corrals.

**Mike** Instead of in the corral, yes.

**Interviewer** May I ask when you started farming?

**Mike** Oh, about by 1970, 1971.

**Interviewer** OK, and you took over your father's ground or did you have to buy his ground? How did you do that?

**Mike** Well, I was able to rent some other ground and I used some of my dad's equipment to get started. Then once I had some income and I was able to buy some of my own equipment, then I was able to get on my own and not continue to farm with my father. I had enough ground of my own that I had to hire some help. It was a large enough operation that I didn't need to be combined with my father. Of course, my father had some other sons that were farming with him at the time.

**Interviewer** But he gave you the boost with the equipment to help you get going on your own.

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Looking back, what was the smartest thing you ever did?

**Mike** You know, I thought about that and I don't know that there is anything that I can point to that was the smartest thing I did.

**Interviewer** OK. What's something that actually worked?

**Mike** Well, my dad was able to buy some land in 1971 and I was able to partner with him on part of it. In 1972 the price of wheat doubled and the price of cattle doubled and the price of the land doubled, so the income off the land paid for the land.

**Interviewer** See you bought it at the right time.

**Mike** I bought it at the right time, yes. Timing is everything.

**Interviewer** Because I'm trying to remember it seems like '78 or '79. There was \$4 wheat.

**Mike** Yes. In 1970, we got a dollar and a dime for our wheat, then it went to two dollars and fifty cents.

**Interviewer** Doubled.

**Mike** And then in 1973, it went to almost six dollars.

**Interviewer** I'm assuming that you were cutting your own wheat at this time.

**Mike** Well, I'm highly allergic to the wheat dust, so I couldn't run a combine. So I had to hire it done.

**Interviewer** Can you tell me what you had to pay a custom cutter at that time?

**Mike** Back then it was probably ten dollars an acre.

**Interviewer** Three tens? Or did you do a flat rate on the acre?

**Mike** I'm sure it was three tens. Ten dollars for the cutting, ten cents a bushel for the hauling and ten cents an acre for each bushel over 20 bushels to the acre. In a year and a half or so, it had doubled in price.

**Interviewer** Can you tell me what ground averaged back then?

**Mike** We were able to purchase that land for eighty dollars an acre. Within a year and a half or so, it had doubled in price.

**Interviewer** What were yields averaging back then?

**Mike** If we had a 20-bushel wheat crop, we thought we were doing good because we didn't fertilize at that time.

**Interviewer** When did you start using anhydrous?

**Mike** About 1972 or '73.

**Interviewer** What happened after you started?



**Mike** Well, the yields increased. I can remember when I cut my first 40 bushel wheat crop. Some of the land that I leased in 1972, the wheat made 40 bushel per acre. Well, it was 30 some bushels per acre. And she hadn't had a good crop like that ever.

**Interviewer** And it was because of anhydrous.

**Mike** Yes, because of the fertilizer.

**Interviewer** After anhydrous got a little overdone, how have you changed your fertilization?

**Mike** I'm probably not doing as good a job of fertilizing as I had been because of the cost of the fertilizer.

**Interviewer** Can you tell people how that compares?

**Mike** When I started anhydrous was, if I remember right, was like 60 bucks a ton and diesel fuel was like 10 or 12 cents a gallon. A two wheel drive tractor was eight thousand dollars. Today diesel fuel is two dollars and 40 cents and anhydrous is four hundred and fifty some dollars on a ton and two wheel drive tractor is probably right at one hundred thousand dollars. You could buy a brand new pickup for forty five hundred dollars in one of those today is forty five thousand at least.

I know we sold at some point for a little over four this year, but I don't know what the average price was this year. So you know I'm trying to make it very clear how the prices have changed and the income has changed.

Well, if it wasn't for the good wheat crop this year, we would have lost money because of the price. We had an exceptional yield this year with the best crop that I've ever cut or harvested.

**Interviewer** What was the best yield you had on one patch?

**Mike** 60 some bushels per acre.

**Interviewer** So to go from 20 to 60.

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Do you know what your total average was for everything?

**Mike** I think it was a little over 50 bushel.

**Interviewer** That is going out with a bang, sir.

**Mike** Yes, I should have retired this year.

**Interviewer** May I ask what is leading you to retire?

**Mike** Well, I need to lower my stress level and I'm getting to the age where it's more difficult to put in the time and the hours. So I'm needing to slow down. Then I've got a grandson that's wanting to come back. So I'm trying to turn some over to him.

**Interviewer** You know our next question is, "How are you preparing the next generation to take over the operation."

**Mike** I leased a little bit of ground to my grandson so he could get started, so he could get a farm loan. And if I wasn't so far in debt, I would be turning more of it to him. I need to re-align my debt and maybe then I could turn more of it to him.

**Interviewer** How have you tried to train him to take over something of this size.

**Mike** Just working with me is all I know how to teach him.

**Interviewer** Is he the one that was welding out in front of your shop this morning?

**Mike** No, that's a different one.

**Interviewer** What would you tell somebody that was wanting to get into farming and ranching now?

**Mike** Get you a good education and think about doing something else. It has its ups and downs. You work for nothing, basically. It's a good life. I have enjoyed doing it, but the rewards are not as great as getting a good job and getting a retirement.

**Interviewer** That being said, what do you see happening to farming ranching in the future?

**Mike** I see it consolidating even more.

**Interviewer** What will the results of that be? Will the prices have to go up?

**Mike** I'm not sure. It's a worldwide market now, so you're competing with other countries now. So that opens up a whole new...

**Interviewer** It means that things are going to change even faster for us.

**Mike** Could be.

**Interviewer** Do you see our community ever regaining the population?

**Mike** No, I do not. There's not the jobs here and there's nothing for young people to do here, and I see it made worse. I don't see anything to keep the young people here.

**Interviewer** But at the end of the day, you have enjoyed what you did and how you made it work.

**Mike** Yes. There's a part of it I have enjoyed, but it's a little bit disappointing when you come to the end and there's not much there after working so hard, when you look at someone that's

gotten a good job and a good retirement. And I'd add all the stress. You kind of wonder if it's really worth it.

**Interviewer** Well on that note, I think you have talked about how your family got started farming and ranching in this area. You're one brother retired and you're retiring probably next year or you're trying to ease out. And your other brother is still continuing?

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** And you have one grandson that wants to farm. Your son went off and got an education and is doing other things.

**Mike** I have two sons. One is in the military and he's retiring next year but he's going to get a job somewhere else. He says he's not coming back to the farm. Which is fine. I mean I want him to do what he wants to do. My other son has a good job. So he seems to be content with that. The grandson is taking over the farm.

**Interviewer** Who was his father?

**Mike** Brian, he is my stepson. So this is a step-grandson.

**Interviewer** But he has the bug.

**Mike** Yes.

**Interviewer** Mr. Harden, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

**Mike** You're welcome.