

## **Vernon Howell**

**Interviewer** This is Cara Vanderree at the Ashland City Library. January 9th, 2020. And we are speaking with Vernon Howell about his ranching and early farming experiences.

Vernon, do you remember when your family first came to Clark County?

**Vernon** My grandfather, my mother's dad, Carlson was their name, bought property down here in 1911. He was Swedish, and they were going to start a Swedish community and they ended up with Carlson, Allison, Kingston, Theander, and Nelson. It never grew any larger than that. That was in the area south east of Ashland, about 10 miles, where my grandfather's property was. They broke it out in 1914, and two of my mother's brothers were living down there. They built a granary and they actually lived in the second floor of the granary until they got a house built some time later.

My grandfolks lived up in Edwards County, north of Kinsley and my father's family lived in Pawnee County, only about four miles away. He was actually working for my Grandfather Carlson, and they sent him down to Clark County to help my mother's brothers. They were batching down there. That's the first of any of my family that were here.

My dad married my mother in 1923 and he moved to Ashland then and bought a blacksmith shop. He ran the blacksmith shop from 1923 until 1946. However, in 1936 we moved from town out to the farm. He farmed and blacksmithed at the same time.

I am the second generation living here.. Well, actually, my grandfather never worked down here, so maybe it's only two generations.

**Interviewer** Did he start working on automobiles or was it mostly...

**Vernon** My father worked on farm equipment, plow shares and stuff like that. It was working behind a forge and welding.

**Interviewer** Hard work. Do you remember where his blacksmith shop was?

**Vernon** I know exactly where it was. I used to have to go in on Saturdays and help after I got old enough to.

**Interviewer** Do you have a street address?

**Vernon** It's on East 8th Street and it's now a vacant lot right across from Mishler's Business straight (south) across the street.

**Interviewer** So that open lot now on the east side of the street was your father's blacksmith's shop, right?

**Vernon** Yes.

**Interviewer** So he left the blacksmith shop in '36 and went to the farm.

**Vernon** He moved out in the country and started farming and blacksmithing both. And then in '46, when I was in the Navy, they found a heart murmur or something. The doctors recommended he get out of the blacksmithing business. So he ended up selling it probably four times.

People couldn't make payments and he'd have to take it back. But he actually never blacksmithed there again. He did have his own little shop out on the farm where he did some work. He had a forge and other equipment out there. It was just personal.

**Interviewer** So your family's traditional role in Clark County was the blacksmith and farming. Is that what your mother's brothers were doing? Primarily farming?

**Vernon** Yes. One of them worked down here until he got married. Then he went off and ended up becoming a lawyer. The other uncle farmed in Ford County, but he didn't farm down here anymore. My dad did all the farming here.

**Interviewer** Did he absorb their land?

**Vernon** When the land was divided among the seven siblings, my mother got the quarter where the house was and we rented the other two portions of one section.

**Interviewer** Do you know what kind of crops your family raised?

**Vernon** Basically sorghum and wheat.

**Interviewer** What did you do with grain sorghum?

**Vernon** Fed it to the cattle. In later years they started raising milo and they used it. But they still had sorghum raised for the cattle too.

**Interviewer** Did you raise anything besides cattle?

**Vernon** No.

**Interviewer** What kind of cattle did you run?

**Vernon** Well, it was beef cattle.

**Interviewer** Angus, Hereford?

**Vernon** Different kinds. There was only about one person in this county that even had Angus cattle at that time. It was shorthorn and Hereford and mostly crossbred cattle. Basically, it was cow/calf operation, but later in time, Dad would end up buying some calves and run them on wheat pasture.

**Interviewer** Did you have them shipped in?

**Vernon** They would get them at the sale barn.

**Interviewer** Where was the sale barn?

**Vernon** The south end of town. That is where Doug Roberts has his welding shop. West of the feed and seed business.

**Interviewer** I didn't know that Ashland had their own sale barn.

**Vernon** Had it for years and years and years.

**Interviewer** Do you have any family stories about the Dirty Thirties?

**Vernon** Well, I remember the Dirty Thirties. I was born in '27, so about '33 when it started getting pretty dry, I can remember when the very first bad dust storm came in. I watched it come in. We moved out to the country in '36, and it was towards the end of that drought area.

Then in '52, we had another one, it was '52 to '57 we had another drought area. But I got married in '51 and in '52 I was working on what we called the Dakin Ranch or the Comstock Ranch north of Ashland. In '53, the price of cattle dropped extensively and I personally had about 45 head of cows and calves that I rented pasture for on the Dakin Ranch. But I decided that I needed another form of income. I had had two years of school at K-State. I went back to K-State and became a geologist. After that, I worked a number of years for the Cities Service Oil Company.

In '64, I moved back to the farm. During that time with City Service, I lived in six different states, two of them twice.

**Interviewer** Did you take a family with you when you were moving?

**Vernon** Oh, yeah.

**Interviewer** How many children do you have?

**Vernon** I have three. The first, my daughter was born when I was getting my degree in geology at K-State in Manhattan, Kansas. My second was a son born in Bismarck, North Dakota. The third was the son that was born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

**Interviewer** So if I'm tracking you right, you were a geologist for nine years.

**Vernon** In 1964, my father was ready to quit farming. I moved back to Ashland and took over the farming and then I did do independent oil geology. I would do what was called "well setting". I'd go to a drilling well and look at drilling samples and try to find out where the pay zone might be. And I did that until around '83 when the price of oil dropped.

We ended up buying the place northeast of Ashland near Mt. Jesus where we lived and I leased land that joined it. Then I also leased the land down at what I call the "home place" where I was raised as a kid. I ran my own cattle until probably five years ago, when I sold out and started just taking in cows and calves in the summer.

**Interviewer** Do you have someone who feeds them for you?

**Vernon** No. It was a grazing situation where I looked after the windmills and mineral. It's a cow/calf operation. They'd be in about six months, and then I didn't have to do anything in the winter.

**Interviewer** Good planning. Just to go back for just a second. When we ask how the depression affected your farm? Well, we're talking the 30's and then the 50's. Was that basically is that what caused you to go for off-farm income?

**Vernon** The second depression, the 50's depression is what caused me to go back to school and get a degree in something.

**Interviewer** What happened to your family farm in World War I, World War II? Did some of your young men have to join the war effort? How did it affect your family?

**Vernon** My dad, he went to the army here in 1917 out of Ashland. He was single at that time. And I can't tell you much about that.

**Interviewer** How did World War II affect your farm?

**Vernon** I went into the navy right before the end of World War II, the war was over in August of '45. Then when I came back for the summer of '46, I went to K-State for a couple of years. Then I got married and spent five years either working on the farm for my dad and then went back to school again in '53. But I don't know how WWII affected the land.

**Interviewer** Well, usually you think the men that would have been doing the farm work in some families, those men had to go to the war effort and sometimes the women had to pick up and try to do the job.

**Vernon** Well, I'll tell you what, in the summer of 1944 when we were harvesting, my dad was on a tractor and my older sister was on the combine and he could tell her what to do. My other sister was plowing and I was hauling wheat and scooping wheat into the bin. That's how we handled that that one summer.

**Interviewer** Was this a pull-type combine or self-propelled?

**Vernon** It was before self-propelled. It was a pull-type.

**Interviewer** Did you have an auger? Did you auger into a wagon or a truck or did was it when you had to pull the wagon behind all the time?

**Vernon** We had an auger on our truck and we would auger until it would break down and then I'd end up having to scoop the rest in. And then in between loads of wheat, I'd have to work on the auger and get it working again.

**Interviewer** It was in your best interest for it to work!

**Vernon** Yes, it was.

**Interviewer** How has your role in this community changed? I see your father as a business owner and then a farmer. And you were farm help and then became a professional person?

**Vernon** Well, when I moved back here, I was both. I farmed and I gradually got more equipment and gradually better equipment as the years went by. In the meantime, I did well work for different oil companies while they were drilling wells. I didn't do prospect stuff at all. I was actually working on a drilling rig describing samples that were being brought up, looking through a microscope. And generally, it was on a wildcat well, it was generally on a development well, this offsetting current production that you knew where the main horizon was, you were looking for and it was what you look for any horizons along the way, but you made sure you were arrived and tested the zone you were after.

**Interviewer** What does "horizon" mean?

**Vernon** Well, I'm talking about a geological formation. Here it's either shale or limestone or sandstone or a combination of all the three.

**Interviewer** And you can tell there might be oil because of the how the rocks are formed?

**Vernon** Well, yeah, we were looking through a microscope and you could see if you found a zone that had porosity in it. If, say, a sandstone or limestone, not shale, would have porosity enough to have fluid in it. And if it had a good oil show, you can detect it sometimes in the samples, but you also have other methods that help you find out. And then I did the physical test to see what was in that particular zone. It might be salt water, might be gas, might be oil and gas. Might be nothing.

**Interviewer** Did your family hire outside help or did you mostly work the kids? How did you do that when you were farming?

**Vernon** The only time I hired any outside help was to combine wheat.

**Interviewer** Did you hire somebody to help you run your equipment or did you hire custom cutters?

**Vernon** I had my kids run my equipment, other than what I did.

**Interviewer** Another question. When you were taking care of all these cattle. Did you do it horseback? Or did you do it with a feed pickup?

**Vernon** Both. I used a horse a lot. I always had a pickup and as time went on, we fed out of sacks or containers. And then we got a caker on the pickup and we got an outfit to pick up bales and that kind of thing. I would like right now to be able to ride a horse and check cattle. You can go places with a horse that you can't with a pickup, especially when you're in canyon country, like mine is.

**Interviewer** Is your ground mostly deep canyon? Describe the topography.

**Vernon** I've got flat land adjacent to canyon country. So, you farm the flatter stuff and run cattle on the other.

**Interviewer** What percentage of your ground would you say is farmland?

**Vernon** It's all back in grass right now. I went into the CRP program, all but about 80 some acres which I hay annually. The other farm ground is in the CRP program.

**Interviewer** What kind of hay do you raise?

**Vernon** It's a form of Old-World Bluestem. I have Old-World Bluestem and an improved variety of Old-World Bluestem.

**Interviewer** How do you think farming has changed in the last hundred years? What would you say are the major changes?

**Vernon** Equipment.

**Interviewer** For better or worse?

**Vernon** Oh, it is way better. Everything's better. They keep improving and the price is getting a lot higher, too. But the equipment is way better. Think about walking behind a walking plow. And then to finally get it where you can use plow shares or something with horses pulling them and they got bigger. And then they invented the tractor and they just get bigger, bigger, and they're still getting bigger. Wider, cover more ground in a little bit of time anymore.

**Interviewer** Do you manage your grass differently now than your dad did?

**Vernon** Probably not. When my dad was farming, it was probably two thirds farm ground and one third grass. So, it would be a lot different than the way mine is now where it's all grass. There's no actual farming other than the haying program. There is no plowing or working the ground or anything like that. So, it has changed quite a bit.

**Interviewer** Down to 80 acres. Another question is, has your fencing changed? I'm assuming you have a lot of new fence the last two years.

**Vernon** I have a lot of new fence. Sure do. Yeah. This county has some of the best fence. It does have the best fences now that it ever has, due to our fire.

**Interviewer** Did you go to all metal? Or did you put in wooden posts?

**Vernon** In my place that I own, which is northeast of Ashland, we have metal and wooden posts. Down south, where I used to live, it's all metal down there. I don't own the land, but we went back with all metal. And they'll be there for years and years and years.

**Interviewer** I've heard there's a generation that won't know how to fix fence.

**Vernon** That's probably right.

**Interviewer** Do you remember any family stories of disasters? Not the fire. Did your family have any stories of things that just went wrong?

**Vernon** The only thing would be drought. No real catastrophes that I can think of. Not really.

**Interviewer** Did your ranch ground have a school quarter? Did you have a school on it?

**Vernon** Actually, the land my granddad bought in 1911, at some time it had a schoolhouse on it in the very northeast corner. I can't tell you the years, but it was in the late teens, I'm sure. It wasn't there in 1936, I can tell you that, because that's when I moved down there.

**Interviewer** Do you know what you called?

**Vernon** I do not know if it had a name or not. I know it might have had a number, but I can't tell you that. We didn't have any records on it.

**Interviewer** Did the Sitka book talk about that school?

**Vernon** No, I just know where it was, there's still some remnants of some foundation there.

**Interviewer** There were a lot of schools. When you look at the cattle that you are feeding now, the cows and calves on your ground, what physical differences would you see between the cattle now and the cattle 80 or 100 years ago? How have they changed?

**Vernon** The size is a lot of the difference. They're a lot bigger. That's one of the main differences that I see. The size is quite a bit bigger.

**Interviewer** What would you say a modern cow usually weighs?

**Vernon** I would guess an average cow would weigh a thousand or twelve hundred pounds.

**Interviewer** What would you say the cattle your dad ran? What would they have weighed?

**Vernon** Eight to nine hundred.

**Interviewer** So they've increased that much.

**Vernon** And the same way with the calves, they're bigger than they used to be.

**Interviewer** Are you running any purebreds now that you're feeding or are they mostly cross?

**Vernon** All the cattle that I'm taking in now are Angus. Angus cows and Angus bulls.

**Interviewer** Black?



**Vernon** Black Angus, not red.

**Interviewer** When you think about how when you first had your 45 pair that were yours and the cattle you're helping now. What has changed in how you medicate?

**Vernon** The main difference would be the antibiotics. For all I can remember, everybody always gave blackleg serum to the calves, and they still do. But then the medication for when they get a disease or to keep them from getting a certain disease has changed and they keep continually changing. I'm clear out of that business right now, so I can't really tell you much better. They still do penicillin. Just like we do on people.

**Interviewer** When you were a kid, did you have a chute? Did you have working corrals? How did you capture this animal to work on it?

**Vernon** Well, you catch them and throw them and work on them. You'd put a rope on and tie them up, the chutes came along later.

**Interviewer** Do you remember when the chutes came?

**Vernon** I would say in the 40s, that I can remember.

**Interviewer** I'm a 60's model and I don't ever remember not having a chute and an alley. So, it's just always been in my background.

**Vernon** Well, I can remember helping guys work calves. And if there were two of you, one of you would throw him down and hold him down, and the other would do whatever you had to do. Now, if you were horseback, you could rope them and one person would do that and then it would take one or two to hold the calf down and work whatever they wanted to do, the branding or whatever had to be done.

And a lot of people are still doing that working calves. The Woolfolks in Protection have gone back to roping and dragging. It's more fun.

**Interviewer** They try to say it's less stress on the animal.

**Vernon** It could be.

**Interviewer** And it's also more fun. Looking back, what is the smartest thing you ever did with your operation? And then on the other side, what would you change if you could?

**Vernon** Well, the smartest thing I ever did was go back to college and get a degree in geology. Maybe the second smartest thing was when I left the company and came back to the farm.

**Interviewer** Why?

**Vernon** Not having to move around. In the nine years that I worked for the oil company, I lived in six states and two of them twice. It was really bothering my oldest, moving from school to school. My kids thought it was wonderful when we lived in one spot.

**Interviewer** So it was hard on them, not to mention your wife who was trying to make a home.

**Vernon** It was really tough on her, probably tougher on her than anybody.

**Interviewer** What would you change? Is there anything that you would have done differently if you had known?

**Vernon** Looking back, I had a pretty good life. I don't know that... I think everything that I did was... In moving around for a few years, we met a lot of different people that are still friends. We lived in and saw a lot of different places. I can just tell you what, when I first went to work for Cities Service, I went to Odessa, Texas, to work on a seismic crew. Moved to Deming, New Mexico, and got on a uranium investigations crew. And then Albuquerque, I worked in the Rocky Mountains with that. Moved to North Dakota, back in the oil patch. In Billings, Montana, in the oil business and in Eldorado, Kansas. I was on nine wells and nine weeks in Eldorado. Then they moved me to Bartlesville, Oklahoma, for a training program, then to San Antonio, Texas for a couple of years and then to Liberal, Kansas, and that's when I decided I'd never get any closer to home than Liberal. That's when I quit. At Liberal, I was strictly on well-site work, where I was on 36 wells in 18 months. I didn't mind not doing that regular.

**Interviewer** Was it better than scooping wheat?

**Vernon** Yeah, a lot easier than scooping wheat. It paid better too.

**Interviewer** Well, this kind of leads to the last question. Are you preparing another generation to run your farm?

**Vernon** I don't think so.

**Interviewer** What do you think will happen to your land?

**Vernon** I'll leave that up to my kids. One of them lives in Colorado, one of them lives in eastern Oklahoma and one lives in southern Mississippi. None of them are going to be coming back to the farm and I'm going to let them decide what to do with it.

I know they can sell it. Somebody always wants a place to hunt deer or something like that. I've been asked about it already, one person out of Florida wanted to buy it just for hunting, and he said, "You can live there as long as you want to." He wanted to be able to hunt. He didn't get it though. I've still got it. No, this is the end of my family in farming.

It sounds kind of sad, but...

**Interviewer** It's just another chapter.

**Vernon** It's another chapter, that's right.

**Interviewer** You know, we're trying to get some things down on paper so that the next generation, when they wish they knew things, could look back at it. Is there anything you wish you could tell the next batch of people here in Clark County about your experiences?

**Vernon** I don't know that I could. I had such good experiences in different phases of it. Everything I did had good experiences. There was some bad along the way, but more good than bad by far. I'm pretty satisfied the way it went.

**Interviewer** Vernon, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us.

**Vernon** You're welcome.