

Mary Kaltenbaugh

Interviewer It is January 22, 2020, and we are interviewing Mary Kaltenbach.

Mary I was born in 1959 in Clark County. We've been here forever. My father's family moved to Clark County, I believe, in the 1900's. Not real sure. And my grandfather purchased land, I believe, in the 40s due to a family feud. They had found some land. What I understand is that when they inherited it, they would not let the daughters inherit ground, and that was against Grandpa Fred's thoughts. So he bailed out and bought his own ground. He stood up for the sisters.

That's what I understand. I think it's kind of cool because I'm one of three daughters and I understand. I get that. I believe I'm a third-generation farmer/rancher. Our traditional role in the area-- Dad (Richard Degnan) always called us stockmen, we farmed and ranched. He ranched and farmed with yearlings. He never had cows or calves, he always had yearlings and farmed wheat, mostly.

He tried some irrigation. Mom (Carolyn Degnan) told me the other day that was one of the biggest mistakes they made, they put in an irrigation well and tried that. So I know he raised milo maybe one or two years. Other than that, it was wheat and feed farmed for the cattle. Herefords were the thing then, you were supposed to have Herefords. He always bought his cattle out of the north.

Interviewer Describe how those Herefords looked.

Mary He had stockers, so just red cattle with the white face and stripes. Yeah, they were pretty, something.

It says to describe your land and does any particular topography stand out? No. Just regular Clark County. No. There's hills in the pasture land. The farm ground is flat, mainly. There is one field that they did put terraces on, but it's not extremely rugged or anything.

Interviewer Do you know when they terraced it?

Mary No, I do not know when they terraced it. It was always terraced, as far as I know. So I'm going to assume the 60s, 50s or 60s, is when they terraced it. But other than that, I don't know.

My role in the community hasn't changed. I'm part of the community. That's the way it is.

Interviewer You wear a lot of hats.

Mary Well, yeah.

Interviewer Because you do most of the farming, your husband worked off-farm.

Mary Yes.

Interviewer So you have run the farm. You did the cattle pretty much by yourself? Or you had children so you could have free help?

Mary Yes. That's the main goal of children, is free help! But yeah, due to the economics, somebody has to work off the farm/ranch, and my husband Mark is better at that than I was. He gets along with the public better. I get along with the cattle better. For a long time, we did not farm. We had an opportunity to rent some farm ground, that was what I wanted to do. I grew up farming a little bit and I thought, "Well, let's try it." We farm for cattle. We farm wheat. We have a smidgen of alfalfa and we'll plant some feed. And it's all basically for the cattle.

Interviewer Does that mean you graze out?

Mary Yes.

Interviewer Do you ever cut?

Mary We graze, then we sell our wheat chopped to a neighbor. So, we do not harvest it. It's helped in that when we rented the ground, it had a lot of joint grass. And this, we chopped it before the joint grass could go ahead and seed. And it has helped clean up the ground a lot. Bindweed is a problem. Bindweed will always be a problem. We try and control it. And we do a good job. Our landlords help with that and it's not a problem. It's just a little bit of an issue.

Interviewer Help me out here, because your family is not the Degnan Ranch.

Mary That's correct.

Interviewer It's a different set of people.

Mary Yes. That's the ranch that Grandpa Fred left.

Interviewer Did they sell the ground?

Mary I think he just... That's where they wouldn't let the sisters have it. And I guess he just... I don't know if he sold it and used that money to purchase what that ground is now. That's a good question. I'm going to find that out sometime. Maybe, maybe it's too late to find that out.

Interviewer Your mom might know.

Mary Yeah, she might. But yeah, for a long time I heard of the Degnan Ranch and didn't have a clue what that meant, I guess, but I finally figured it out.

Interviewer So that was the family ground, but it was left.

Mary Yes, and there was another brother that left also, Andy Degnan, Grandpa Fred's brother. He is a great-grandfather to Shayla White and the Cranes. My dad was the only male Degnan born. He was the last Degnan in this bunch. So therefore, as a side note, that's why our grandson's named Degnan. So, yeah, that's kind of cool!

Interviewer So your father was Richard Degnan and that would have been his father.

Mary Yes, Fred.

Interviewer And your father married?

Mary Carolyn Gleason Degnan.

Interviewer And she was from...

Mary She's from Offerle. The Offerle/Belfont area.

Interviewer I did transcription for the Kinsley Library and evidently the Gleasons are still very active there.

Mary Yes, I have an uncle that's a big farmer up there.

Interviewer And they like to rodeo.

Mary Yes. Horses are most important in our lives! As I said, I was one of three girls. My sisters are Kelly Hazen and Laurie Carlisle. Kelly lives at Protection and Laurie is in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. It never occurred to us that there were things boys did or girls did. It was just things needed done and you did them. And I am still of that notion. I don't mind being treated like the lady and I don't mind doing work that is supposedly qualified as men's work. It's just stuff that needs to be done. Do it. My mother is was a very good role model for that.

Interviewer How was she?

Mary My mother is a lady and will get out and work like a man.

Interviewer And I have never seen her without makeup.

Mary Yes. Guess I grew up there. Yes. My mother always dresses nice. She sets a very good example that I don't always follow but I should. But she is a very active person. She's 82, still ride her horses, runs barrels. She has quit roping due to her shoulder hurts.

Interviewer Was that after the wreck at the horse tank?

Mary I don't know when she... She had a horse lope down the road and fall down. He was a good one, wasn't he. Now she enjoys watching her great-grand kids run her horses!

So it says here, "How do you think it's changed in the last hundred years? And for instance, you use four wheelers more than horses now." Yes, we do. However, we use horses a lot. We use a Gator, sometimes simply for convenience. We raise and sell bred heifers; I artificially inseminate (AI) heifers. People that buy them need them to be able to be handled gently and usually with four wheelers, so we do it a lot with four wheelers so that people can handle them that way. We also use horses because that seems to gentle them a lot. Dogs, we do not use. Two reasons: I sometimes think it makes cows a little wilder. And the second reason is I'm not smart enough to know how to train a dog to do it. So there we go.

Interviewer Now, when you talk about AIing, I am thinking about how can how horses and cattle were handled a hundred years ago and the differences in the pens and the equipment that we have to handle animals. How has your operation changed in a hundred years? I'm assuming that you still rope and drag, but I'm also assuming that if you AI, you have a good chute and an alleyway.

Mary We haven't. Yes, we are fortunate that we set up a good chute. AI boxes.

Interviewer What is an AI box?

Mary It's simply a little small area that the cow or heifer goes into. You drop a bar behind her. She's not squeezed. It's pretty dark in there. She can kick, has kicked. It hurts, but it gentles them down. You would think you need to squeeze them, but it really and truly... Seldom do you get one that throws a fit.

Interviewer Partly because you've handled them so much?

Mary It is. We kind of take pride in that. We handle them on foot a lot, when we're AIing. We also handle them with a horse. We have our pens set up where you can open and shut gates with your horses and such. So things flow gently, easily. You don't have to do a lot of pressure.

Interviewer Where do you buy your semen?

Mary We buy through the vet clinic here. We take their recommendations. I believe they go through A.B.S., but I'm not sure.

Interviewer Is there a particular breed?

Mary Yes, we're Angus. We breed the Angus, we use Gardiner bulls. It's the market. It's what sells. No sense going upstream, just go with the flow.

Interviewer They have set up such a good system for advertising.

Mary Yeah. So it's been relatively successful for us and that's what we're gonna do. When something else goes to working, we'll change. You have to be flexible.

Interviewer Do you calve out any of your own or do you sell them all bred?

Mary We usually calve out the bull-breds for ourselves, unless somebody buys them. So it's 50/50. Sometimes we do. This year we're going to calve out a few.

Interviewer So you flex with the market.

Mary Yes, if somebody buys them, we'll sell them. If not, we'll calve them out. We know for sure if we're successful or not and see what we should have changed. We do have a hydraulic chute that saves a lot of labor. However, it does not keep you in physical shape. But it's OK. We'll live with it.

Interviewer Your husband has now retired.

Mary Yes.

Interviewer Do you work him harder than you used to?

Mary No. He used to come home and work on weekends. He's getting older, so he's slowing down. And as our roles have somewhat changed. I make more decisions, we'd still discuss it, but. Yeah, we're still a team, but lots of times he just... Whatever I want to do or however we want to do it. We have a son and daughter and they help us a lot. They have kids that come and help a lot. When we work calves, the kids all have their own jobs that's appropriate for their age. We have one granddaughter that wants absolutely nothing to do with horses, but she likes to take what we call the ear notch, and that's her little job. She takes that ear notch and puts that in the tube. As a side note, the ear notch tests for BVD-persistently-infected cattle (Bovine Virus Diarrhea). And that's what we do. And that's her job. They brand. We teach them to castrate as they get old enough to handle a knife. It's just ranch life and kids know it.

Interviewer This is one of our questions. "How are you preparing the next generation to take over your operation," and you are very carefully training them from the get go.

Mary Yes, you have to teach them it's fun and work. And you can't quit when it gets hard, but you also can't just shove it down their throat to where they get so tired of it they don't want to do it anymore.

Here's the job. Finish it now. If we've got to do something different later and if you're not age appropriate and we're going to adjust. I do worry that there are ranches and farms I know of that the next generation has gone to town and gotten city jobs and there's no one there to take over. And I fear that farming and ranching is going to become an enterprise for large people, large ranches. And there's nothing, nothing you can do about it. It's just, as they say, the changing times.

So I know of one ranch I thought of the other day that's got, I think, four or five boys, and I bet you not a one of them comes back, and it's large. So I don't know if that opens the door for other young people that want to farm and ranch, but there's very few that want to put in the hours and the time. And I will say this, to me, farming and ranching, people say, "Oh, you work so hard!" Sometimes you do, and then there are times where, no, it's not that hard a work.

The thing I like the most about it is your independence. You can work all day long if you want to or if on Wednesday afternoon you want to take off and go somewhere and do something different. Hey, you got your work done? You can do what you want. It's not a 9:00 to 5:00, gotta be there Monday through Friday. That's what I like about it. It's just who I am.

Interviewer And if you like it and you like what you're doing and it's not miserable even if you're working 14 or 16 hour days.

Mary That's exactly right. When I started farming, of course, you just drove your tractor and hoped to make a straight line and see what you got done. My husband sold farm equipment and he allowed as how we should get a G.P.S.. And I said, "I can drive a tractor without a G.P.S." Well, he finally came home one day and says, "I bought one." I said, "Oh great." But I get it now.

Interviewer Why do you like it?

Mary I like it because I just sit there and read or knit while I'm driving the tractor! You just have to turn. But I understand the economics of it because the line is always straight. You're not wasting fuel, you're not wasting seed. And you can tell how many acres you farmed if you need to. We don't keep the records that I know a lot of people keep on their G.P.S.. We're not that type of farmer. But I get it now.

But yeah, I have people drive by and I'm knitting on there. Holy cow. What's she doing? Well, you know, I have an air conditioner, a radio and my knitting. And I am alone and it's quiet. What more could you want? I'll take a book and read for hours, you know.

Interviewer You do live the life!

Mary Yeah. It's a tough life. But somebody has to do it. (Very sarcastic.).

Interviewer So as long as you don't tear anything up, life is perfect.

Mary Yes, you do hear the horror stories of somebody that fell asleep and woke up as they were going through the ditch. But knock on wood, I haven't done that yet, but yeah.

Interviewer So that's a big change.

Mary That's a huge change. Huge change. You know, they talk about tractors driving themselves now. That's, to me, creepy. But anyway, I think it could take away a lot of employment for a lot of people. They won't need employees like they did. So I worry about that.

Interviewer There's always going to be somebody to fix the G.P.S..

Mary Yeah, there will be some. Yes, but there's nobody to hands-on farm the ground and smell the dirt. That, I think, you're missing some.

Interviewer I did my best thinking behind the windshield.

Mary Oh, yeah, I solve a lot of world's problems behind that tractor windshield. And ours! So, yeah.

Interviewer I can't drive a straight line and several people have commented on that.

Mary Yeah. We had a ship that farmed with us. I told him we weren't farming rainbows. So my OCD would kick in and I'd have to fix it when I got there. And that sure didn't save any fuel.

Mary So how have tractors changed since you began and what you're driving now?

Mary The G.P.S., mainly. When I was a kid, my dad drove a Versatile, a four-wheel drive, Versatile.

Interviewer Do you remember the size?

Mary No. I think it was the big four-wheel drive. I think it was... maybe it was single wheels. I don't remember. But I know that we were very fortunate in that we only drove tractor through a long noon hour, so he had a hired man in the summer to drive the tractor. Because my dad hated farming. He hated it, but that's what he inherited.

And we would have to go out and farm, say, from 11:30 to 2:00. It wasn't big, but we always had the air conditioner. He never wanted the windows open. If the air conditioner didn't work, you stopped, because he did not want to break the seal and get the tractor dirty. That being said, we did have one tractor that they used kind of in the hay field. And I can remember, I got to farm in it one day. And you had to open the windows and it was hot. But as far as an open-air cab, we didn't have that.

And then on another note, as kids, we handled square bales. I can remember bundles. I can remember bundles. He'd throw them.

We had kind of a horse-run pen and they'd load them and throw them in that pen. As kids, we would stand on the fence and jump into the bundles. That was fun. And then chew on them to get the sweet out of them. I can remember those.

And then we had square bales. OK, so funny stories, he had an alfalfa field and he sold some hay to a guy and the guy had a semi came down, I believe it was a cattle trailer... No, I think it was enclosed. I don't know if it was a cattle one or not. And the guy said, "Do you have anybody to help load the hay?" He said, "Well, I've got three girls that can help you." And the guy, several times he had to tell us to slow down and wait for him. One winter, we had to load 32 bales after school. My sister and I, out youngest sister was too little. We thought we were going to die, we had to go down and load 32 bales on a pickup after school. Oh, my gosh. It was horrible and awful. By the end of the winter, we could stand on a stack and throw them on the pickup. So one day we got a brilliant idea: if we just load double, we don't have to come back tomorrow!

It mashed the air out of the tires. So that didn't work. Not a real proud dad in one way and I think in another way he was kind of proud of us for thinking of it. So there you go. And we had a neighbor, who was a bigger farmer, and he also had three daughters. And I promise you, they never did it. He drove by one day and says, "Does your dad know you're down here doing this?" "Yeah, he sent us down here." And I think he jumped Dad next day at the drugstore about why we were working so hard.

It wasn't hard work. Just stuff that needed done.

Interviewer And what would you have been doing otherwise?

Mary Riding our horses or dusting the house. Which was done every day. When you got home from school, you dusted. So anyway, that's what we did. I would sneak off and read.

My youngest sister and I usually got told to shut the light off at night and not to read. Whose mother tells you to stop reading? It may have been two o'clock in the morning and we had go to school, so it was appropriate. Okay.

Interviewer So you were running four-wheel-drive tractors, even when you were young. The tractors you're running now, are they larger or smaller? Same?

Mary I would say, they're basically the same size. We do not run four-wheel drive tractors. Maybe a little bigger, maybe a little more horsepower, but not a lot. No.

Interviewer So you think the size of tractor that is applicable for our country is not huge? Because I'm assuming you still have terraces, you have dog-legs. It's not just...

Mary So actually, what we have is pretty flat. What we farm. We don't have terraces, so it's just pretty flat, pretty up and down, what we rent. And we own a little smidgen and it's just pretty well.

Interviewer Can you tell me where you farm?

Mary Yes, we are north of town is where we live. Three miles north of town. Three and a quarter is where we live. We own a little bit up there. Then what we rent and farm is west of town, about twelve miles and we have some grass that we rent about 17 miles west of town. So we're kind of spread out a little bit. But that's what's available and you do what you can.

Interviewer Where do you work your cattle?

Mary We have two different bunches. One west of town, there's a set of pens there. We work them there. We rope and drag calves, mainly because that's what our kids like to do, and they're good at it. The other bunch, we work at our house there. When you rope and drag calves, you get, not necessarily neighbors, but the people you know that do the same and you switch. There's still switch in labor. Mark and I are old enough that we don't switch, so we pay. We're not much help on the ground.

Interviewer It's more fun for younger people.

Mary It is more fun. You laugh and joke, you know, you make fun of each other and help people learn how to help each other. It just teaches the camaraderie and the... You learn things from other people, too. You can't ever be afraid to learn. So that's fun.

Farming, my folks used to farm. I can't tell you how many acres, probably around a thousand, 800 to 1,000 acres, they put it all in CRP. They do the management and haying. CRP now, we've found out what's coming up, they're going to pay half of what they have gotten. So I'm going to imagine it's going to be grazed and come out. I worry about how that's going to affect... There's going to be a lot of ground broke back out that should not be broke out. Mom's gonna take it out and graze it. It won't work the other way.

And yet, you don't want to be on what they call "government welfare". We won't get into all that government stuff because I don't think it's appropriate.

Interviewer You can't win.

Mary No. You have to play the game. So now we go.

Interviewer How would you describe the cattle, those beautiful Herefords? Because nobody has a whiter white than a Hereford calf.

Mary Yep.

Interviewer Now look at the frame and how the cattle have changed from when we were young and what we're seeing now, the Herefords of my youth had short little legs and big tummies. Is that your memory?

Mary No. Ours were not that. I remember, Angus was that way. We used to make fun of the Angus because they were short with not much there but belly. They've got those to where that's what we run now.

Interviewer Describe how they changed. What did a cow weigh when you were a kid?

Mary I cannot tell you, as we did not have cows and calves. I gonna say probably nine hundred pounds cows. Cows now weigh eleven or twelve hundred pounds. You can get them bigger, that just takes more feed.

Interviewer You look at the difference in the calves, they drop. When you calve out, what you expect a good healthy calf to weigh?

Mary Seventy to 80 pounds. Heifers, 50 to 60. That's what we want. We want vigor when they hit the ground, getting up and going. They've got the genetics now to where they can tell that that bull throws calves that don't get up. We had that one time with a heifer bull and quit using him. The guys that bought them said, "They don't get up." And so we quit using him, and they said that that's the way he was, and that amazes me that you have genetics that can tell you what the calves will do when they hit the ground. So that's, I think, very, very interesting.

Interviewer That you have so much better control now of your product.

Mary Yes. You know what's coming up.

Interviewer What does a calf weigh now when you sell it and at what age?

Mary Oh, we calve January through March. We sell them usually... The last two years, we've started weaning in September. Now you need to get forty-five days on your weaned calves you sell. They weigh 750, when you sell steers or you can wean on the truck and sell to the... And that's a conundrum. Because part of me says you're not going to get as much as they say you will when you wean, but that's what they want. So. That's on the same roadway as a government, you can argue that to me both ways and I can see both sides. I have a hard time. But we wean 45 to 60 days and then we sell them to a private individual now. It's what we do.

Interviewer So you're set up with somebody that buys your calves. You must have good calves!

Mary We think so. Yeah. You do try and strive to have a good herd. Good bulls, when you start out, you get cheap old cows that somebody got rid of and eventually, slowly, you build up to something good and we've done that. I'm proud of what we have.

Interviewer And you hope to be able to allow your grandkids to have the same lifestyle.

Mary Yes. Yes. I see one or two of them going into agriculture. Two are too young yet to know. But who's to say? Our daughter was never coming back to this part of the world, never going to be on the ranch, never going to do that, and she just loves it. So we grow, yeah, people change, realize that it's a good lifestyle for kids and learn responsibility and respect for each other and respect for animals and understand where your food comes from and how you get it and how to take care of it. I get irritated that people, the public, soccer mom thinks that we're using antibiotics. It's illegal to sell cattle with antibiotics in them and they cannot go to market. So, you do not get cattle or pig or sheep or goats or chickens with antibiotics.

Interviewer And on the other hand, do you want that animal to suffer and not be doctored?

Mary They continually seem to anthropomorphize... Animals are not human. But if you're going to say they are, are you going to doctor your child when he's sick? So why not doctor your animals when they're sick? Are you going to doctor your dog that you think more of than your children? So why not take care of your food animals to have a good quality product that's nutritious?

Interviewer If there's anything that's in our community that we have to be doing, it is spreading that message because people are easily confused when this happens.

Mary Yes. And I think a lot of us, me included, are afraid to put ourselves out there because we cannot... Those people that are arguing against us have their facts all lined up. And we're like, "Well, no, that's not right. But I can't give you any reason. You know, can't give you any specific scientific research in the back of my mind. But I can tell you from experience. You're so wrong."

They don't understand it. They're so far removed from our food source. So how do we fix it? That's the million-dollar question. How do we fix it? And I don't know. That's one of the questions I ponder as I drive back and forth in the tractor meeting is how do you fix it? Social media?

I've got on there and told people stuff and they just won't accept it. Just can't get it through their thick skull. That my research, my "Research" that somebody has made up is right and your fact-based research is wrong. That's a frustration.

Interviewer Maybe the only way is to allow people to see what's really happening, although it's scary to let people come to the farm because they see things you didn't...

Mary They see you work a calf, brand and castrate, and that calf is bawling and squirming. And, you know, they're thinking, "Oh, my lord, you're killing it. You're hurting it and it's suffering." And no, it's not.

Interviewer Did you know that K-State is actually trying to teach the vets that they need to anesthetize the animal before it is castrated?

Mary Yes, I do. OK, so you're working you're out there working 150 head of calves and you're going to anesthetize, each one of them, when it's simply...

Interviewer I don't know what it would cost per animal. Besides the time.

Mary Yes, and that's another drug you're going to pump into them and you don't want to pump drugs into them, my Lord, that's wrong. This is all said with extreme sarcasm. So...

That scares me. Where is soccer mom going to get her food if she isn't accepting of the methods that are tried and true?

Interviewer A chemical veggie-burger.

Interviewer Yes. So, you see a weakness in modern agriculture in that we are not getting the message out to soccer mom or dad or the person who lives in a larger community and does not see agriculture being performed daily.

Mary Yes, I do. I have no problem with vegans. I have no problem with vegetarians. You can eat whatever you want. But let me do the same; respect it all.

Interviewer In the 50-odd years that you have been working, you know that you were not cruel to an animal on purpose.

Mary No. You have no idea how many tears people shed over losing an animal that they have worked and worked to save. And yes, in the end, we're going to eat it, but you still work and work to make it comfortable and healthy. We will harvest it. That's the reality.

Interviewer And on the other side, an animal that is not happy and healthy, loses money. If so, it's a double whammy. You're doing it because for humane reasons and they align perfectly with monetary...

Mary Yes, very. You're not going to make money on that one that is suffering.

Interviewer So that logic works and if you have to wait another month to sell it, fine.

Mary That's why they've done it that way.

Interviewer Now, you know that we're trying to record this for the next generation and perhaps people who are even further removed from farming than they are now. Is there anything that you would like to tell that next generation about your life and what you have done with animals?

Mary It is hard work, it's rewarding work being in agriculture. Frustrating. It's happy, just probably the same as your job in town. However, you're more invested. I believe that people that farm and ranch, it's part of who they are. It's not their job, it's just who you are. It's hard to explain to someone that goes to work 9:00 to 5:00, comes home and they're done.

Because if you think about that cow, when you're calving heifers, you get up in the middle of the night to go check and make sure they're OK. You do everything you can to make your animals comfortable, healthy. And I'm afraid that we're losing respect for each other when you don't learn to do those things, when you don't have an animal. I don't think animals rate above people.

They are, for lack of a better term, tools, companions, but they're not people. Don't forget that.

Thank you.